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Cover Photo: Kim Yarbrough

June Meeting Speaker — Nickey Bishop

Tree Care and Drought Recovery

A tree-hugger from way back, Nickey Bishop decided to make his love of trees his occupation. Nickey is a Certified Arborist and a Certified Oak Wilt Specialist, a skilled tree climber and the owner/operator of The Tree Tender. He studies trees “every day, both through academics and through experience.” He likes to be considered a tree doctor. Nickey will speak to the TCMGA on June 6, 2012, about “Tree Care, Including Drought Recovery.” He employs a down-to-earth speaking style to impart practical information every gardener and tree owner can use. So, bring your questions for an informative evening.

Master Gardener Meeting information:
Wednesday, June 6, 2012 starting at 7 pm.
Zilker Botanical Garden
Eleanor Pratt, a Master Gardener since 2004, passed away following heart surgery on April 27, 2012. A memorial service was held Saturday, May 19th, at her lovely garden in North Austin.

If you attended the Inside Austin Gardens tour in spring 2011, you saw Eleanor’s handiwork in person. Her drought-resistant garden featured many native and adapted plants, as well as her favorite roses. There was always something in bloom, and Eleanor was always willing to share cuttings and seeds with other gardeners.

Her four raised vegetable beds provided lots of goodies for her family and friends. She was also attentive to providing habitat for wildlife, especially during last year’s drought. And when she wasn’t gardening or caring for her grandchildren, Eleanor blogged about her gardening experiences with the local gardening blog gurus.

Eleanor took her Master Gardener membership seriously. Under her guidance, the Plant Clinic program provided helpful information at numerous venues, and she was careful to keep the publications bins well stocked and ready for the next educational opportunity. She prepared a landscape design program for the Speakers Bureau, and cheerfully presented it for gardening clubs and senior groups. For several years Eleanor helped with the production of the annual Christmas party. It was an unexpected pleasure and well-deserved recognition for her to receive the Peggy Steward Award at the 2011 event.

The Downtown Farmers’ Market was another of Eleanor’s favorite volunteer opportunities. Many Saturday mornings—hot, cold, rainy or windy—Eleanor worked the Sustainable Food Center’s information table, and made many friends in the process.

If there is a Rainbow Bridge for gardeners, Eleanor will certainly take her place there in anticipation of future gardening adventures with her friends in the great beyond. Eleanor, we miss you and dedicate ourselves to be even better gardeners in your memory.
In The Vegetable Garden
by Patty Leander

Vegetable gardeners, let’s give ourselves permission to slack off a bit this month. The prepping, planting and mulching is done, and June is “relax and enjoy the harvest” time. With summer’s arrival, the pace slows as gardens and gardeners slip into heat-induced dormancy. And that’s ok. Many of our spring planted vegetables succumb to heat, pests or disease pressure by the end of the month, and water restrictions make it especially difficult to keep a full garden in production.

If, like me, you want to keep a few edibles growing through the summer, I suggest you coddle your okra. Not that it needs much coddling, but give it a smile and an admiring glance when you walk by, and let it know that you appreciate its continuous gift of delectable pods. Along with okra, our mainstays of the summer season include cowpeas, sweetpotatoes, peppers (especially the hot ones), pumpkins, melons and eggplant. Lettuce and spinach are by now a cool-season memory, but Malabar spinach, molokhia, purslane and vegetable amaranth can be planted to provide a source of greens for the summer.

Cowpeas are not only edible and tasty, but they can also be grown as a cover crop to enrich the soil. For the greatest benefit allow the peas to flower but cut them down, and turn them under before they produce seed. If you don’t have the luxury of growing a non-edible crop, then go ahead and let them produce pods then cut them down after harvest. Either way the green material and the roots that you incorporate into the soil will increase microbial activity, and as the plant material is broken down, the nutrients are gradually released and made available for the following crop. Unless you have a heavy duty tiller or a tractor, turning under a cover crop by hand is hard work, but very satisfying. It may be best to approach the work in stages: cut down and chop the stems and leaves first, then turn under one manageable section at a time. Once green matter is turned in, the microbes take over and do the rest of the work for you. Incorporating a cover crop by hand has its benefits – it maintains soil structure, does little damage to earthworms, and is also good exercise. Buckwheat is another cover crop that can be grown in the summer. Johnny’s Seeds (www.johnnyseeds.com) is a great online source for both warm season greens and cover crops.

If your tomato plants are healthy, and you can keep them that way, you might be able to carry them through the summer for a fall crop. Give them a fresh layer of mulch, continue to fertilize every 3-4 weeks, and give them at least 1½” of water each week. If you would rather grow your own transplants for fall sow those tomato seeds soon so you’ll have decent size transplants by late July or early August. It takes 6-8 weeks to grow a good size tomato transplant.
Spider mites have been especially bad this year – on tomatoes, on squash and on beans. It is amazing how many teeny tiny mites can be on the back of a leaf, they are just near impossible to see without magnification. Mites can cause severe damage to plants, so keep them under control with alternating weekly sprays of insecticidal soap and neem oil products that are labeled as a miticide. Continue to wash the undersides of leaves every 3-5 days with a strong spray of water.

Cucumbers should be producing like crazy by now. We are growing our favorite ‘Suyo’ along with a new hybrid pickler from Renee’s Garden Seeds (www.reneesgarden.com) called ‘Endeavor’. The package said 53 days to harvest; I planted seed on March 30 and had my first harvest on May 18 – only 50 days.

Watch for signs of powdery mildew on cucumbers and squash, and treat with an approved fungicide. Remove infected leaves, but remember that the disease spores travel by wind, soil, insects, tools and people, so it can quickly spread to adjacent leaves or neighboring plants. Affected plants usually require spraying on a weekly basis to keep the disease from taking over.

**Sweet and Sour Cucumbers**

This is a quick and tasty recipe for the cucumber bounty:

2-3 medium cucumbers, sliced very thin  
½ cup white vinegar  
¼ cup chopped dill  
2-3 Tbsp sugar  
½ - 1 tsp kosher salt  
½ tsp black pepper  

Stir the dressing ingredients together and toss with cucumbers. Chill 30 minutes.
Austin Water Utility is still working on revising the local water restrictions, but they have heard the pleas of food gardeners throughout the city, and it sounds like they will exempt hand watering, drip irrigation and soaker hoses for vegetable gardens, as well as bubblers for trees, unless we reach Stage 4. To read more about the water conservation code revision process, check out the following links from the City of Austin website:

http://www.austintexas.gov/sites/default/files/files/Water/Conservation/You_said-We_did.pdf


‘Zephyr’ squash – pretty and productive

Photos: Bruce Leander
Bark Lice

by Wizzy Brown

Barklice are small, soft-bodied insects with long, filamentous antennae. Some may have wings, others may not, but when they are winged, the wings are held tent-like over the body. These insects have chewing mouthparts and feed on fungi, algae, lichens and plant debris.

Barklice can be gregarious, gathering in large groups on the bark of trees. Clusters usually are seen in the spring along with webbing created by the insects. Some people find the webbing unsightly and may feel they need to do something to rid the tree of the insects. They do not harm the tree, and some consider them beneficial - in that they “clean” the bark. Treatment is unnecessary.

For more information and photos:
http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston/beneficials/beneficial-41_barklice2_Cerastipscus_sp.htm

The Chinese Medicinal Herb Farm is the first cultivation guide of its kind, and presents information for growers interested in producing high-quality efficacious herb in all climates, with the historical connectedness of ancient practitioners. It is becoming increasingly important that we transition to local and domestic medicinal cultivation, and author Peg Schafer, a longtime grower and teacher, has put together this manual of valuable information about the propagation, cultivation and harvesting of 79 Chinese medicinal herbs. Peg Schafer is recognized as one of the pioneers and leaders in the field of the cultivation of Asian herbs. Now eating your medicine is more accessible than ever.

Cultivating “Wild-Quality” Herbs

It’s an intern day at the Chinese Medicinal Herb Farm, and Peg Schafer is sitting down just long enough to share a short lunch with her interns and explain the process of growing herbs. She repeats the terms “cultivating wild quality” and “farming with the wild” like mantras. The terms, she says describe the method of re-creating natural, semi-wild conditions for cultivated plants. Primarily, this means growing herbs that are not “pushed,” or grown with a lot of fertilizer. This yields smaller plants but, according to Schafer, higher concentrations and diversity of active medicinal components.

The technique also means not growing herbs too lushly or deflowering plants in order to artificially increase root size. The grower allows natural pressures, even if those pressures include insect pests and hungry herbivores. “I let deer browse on some herbs, as long as they don’t take all of it!” Schafer laughs. All of this helps create herbs that are closer to what is found in the wild.

Learning how to reliably grow medicinal herbs naturally and organically has been the biggest challenge of Schafer’s endeavor: there are few experts and fewer books, even from sources in China. “I do a lot of thinking outside the box,” she says. “For example, there’s nothing written about harvest methods and processing for many of these herbs. So I experiment, run trials, grow something out, then I talk with my connections, researchers, botanists, herbalists from China. Finally, I look closely at the finished product.” After a decade of farming, experimenting, networking, researching, and educating, Peg says, “I’m still very much a beginner — it is a more-you-know the less-you-know kind of thing.”
Excerpts from the book ...

**Small-Scale Composting**

Good quality composting can be achieved in a space as small as four cubic feet. That is the smallest a compost pile should be to allow for enough volume to generate enough heat to pasteurize the compost. On-site non-woody green waste, kitchen scraps, and coffee grounds are high in nitrogen; these ingredients, along with a larger portion of dry material and frequent turning, will help keep the compost pile at the desired temperature of at least 150 degrees. If the compost pile smells bad it may be either too wet or have too much nitrogenous material. A less active process that still yields quality compost is a cold technique where the aforementioned ingredients are simply layered and not turned; make sure to bury kitchen waste into the pile to avoid attracting rodents. This method takes longer to obtain usable material but will speed up — with added nutrients as well — with the addition of red composting worms. These red wrigglers are often available at home and garden stores, garden centers, or by mail order. I do not recommend putting weeds with maturing seed heads into a cold compost pile as they oftentimes do not rot and may return to the garden along with finished compost. It is helpful to have two bins, both protected from precipitation — one for active composting and the other ready to use. Simple wire hardware mesh with half-inch holes wire in a circle or shipping pallets wired together are, in my opinion, better then the expensive, plastic, hand-turned unites commercially available.

**Chinese Medicinal Herb Farm’s Basic Bark-based Media Mix**

Some nurseries use separate germinating and transplant medias but we use this recipe for both applications. This time-tested nursery potting media recipe can be mixed in a large wheelbarrow using a shovel, or you can increase the whole recipe and mix the materials in a pit or on a tarp. Some people use an old small cement mixer to mix media.

You’ll find the ingredients available bagged in small amounts in garden centers and farm supply businesses. If you need larger quantities, arrange to pick up materials or have them delivered from landscape supply companies.

5 gallons compost (homegrown and screened to a ½ inch)
5 gallons coir, thoroughly leached of salt and fluffed
5 gallons perlite (premoistened)
5 gallons sifted fir bark (screened to a ¼ or ½ inch)
½ cup granite dust/rock powder
½ cup balanced slow release organic fertilizer
¼ cup oyster shell
¼ cup kelp meal
Dash of mycorrhizal fungal powder
**Tips for Seed-Saving Success**

- The best quality seed is collected from as large a population of plants as is feasible, contributing a wide spectrum of genetics. I have found that of the crops we grow, 200 plants will produce better quality seed than 20 plants (though sometimes this may be all that one has to work with). Larger plantings bestow the best opportunities not only for healthy vigor but species survival.
- If you notice a drop in vitality in a population of seed that you’ve been saving for a while, especially from a small population, you may need to reinvigorate it with fresh genetics. Intentional crosses, which increase gene flow, keep stock strong. Be certain to keep track of these crosses.
- Grow open pollinated seed, as hybrid offspring will have unknown genetics — not a good idea when growing medicine.
- When growing plants for seed, rogue out any weak-looking, diseased, or pest-affected plants before they have a chance to contribute their genetics during pollination.

Peg Schafer is a longtime grower and teacher. She is recognized as one of the pioneers and leaders in the field of the cultivation of Asian herbs. After more than 15 years of commercial herb cultivation and research at the Chinese Medicinal Herb Farm in Petaluma, California, Peg Schafer has distilled her findings into a guide for growers and practitioners of Chinese medicine.

The Chinese Medicinal Herb Farm

By Peg Schafer

Chelsea Green Publishing

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Soft cover, 336 pages, $34.95
Help your gardening by knowing more about the insects which live there. First, hear more about friend and foe in the insect world, and then learn the less toxic and usually less expensive methods to control harmful insects. You’ll leave armed with insect identification literature to help improve your gardening.

A retired expert in the field of biotechnology, Bruce Leander concentrates now on his love of fine art nature photography - macro and landscape. His work with the Wildflower Center has produced a series of stunning plant studies which highlights the fine work being done there. He will share with us the tools and methods he recommends to get started in this fascinating aspect of horticulture.

This seminar is free and open to the public, but seating is limited. Reservations are not required, but are recommended. Signup at: http://travis-tx.tamu.edu/horticulture/ and click on seminar registration.

Empty, reserved seats will become open seating at 9:50 am. This seminar is free and open to the public.
I’m very excited to announce that we’ve finally hired a new horticulture program assistant! Lindsay Razzaz is an enthusiastic new member of the Agrilife Extension team. In this position, she will apply years of experience working in planning, evaluation, and organizational capacity-building with nonprofit and governmental service providers. Lindsay holds a Masters in Public Affairs from the LBJ School at UT Austin, and Bachelors in both Communications and International Development from Tulane University. After two years working as a consultant in New Orleans, Lindsay moved with her husband (Mehrang) and pup (Vegas) to settle in East Austin. When not at work, Lindsay enjoys gardening (of course!), all manners of travel, Bikram Yoga, brass bands, and early morning walks with her pup.
Acknowledgements
Special Message from Anne Van Nest

Thanks to all who contributed...

Special thanks are extended to the following Travis County Master Gardeners who contributed to The Compost Bin during 2011 and helped create our award-winning newsletter.


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Special thanks are given to the authors, photographers and editors who helped create our award-winning book, *Creating a Drought-Resistant Garden in Central Texas*.

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Visit the websites: www.tcmastergardeners.org and http://travis-tx.tamu.edu

The End...

Time to Get Gardening!