Getting Ready for Spring

Patty is a native Texan who is passionate about home-grown vegetables. She is an active member of the Travis County Master Gardener Association and contributes monthly articles on vegetable gardening to the Travis County Master Gardener newsletter and to Texas Gardener magazine. She has a BS degree in Food and Nutrition from Texas Tech University, loves to grow and eat vegetables and encourages others to do the same, using sound horticultural principles that will lead to success in the vegetable garden.

Patty will be talking to us about warm season vegetable gardening. She will provide information on what to plant, and the problems you might have, and the solutions that have worked best for her.

Also be aware that her husband Bruce will be teaching a class on PowerPoint later in the year. Patty invites questions on how she developed her presentation, so please take notice and ask.
Patty is an active ambassador of the Master Gardeners association speaking often to various groups. This will be her first time to speak to fellow Master Gardeners, so please join us on Wednesday, February 4th at 7 PM and welcome Patty Leander as our speaker for February.

Jerry Naiser  
Vice President, Programs
The President’s Message

I love this time of year. And yes, I know that we have not had any significant rainfall and it feels more like spring than winter on many days. But I enjoy studying the deciduous trees and appreciating their beauty. It’s also the time of year when I can find some of last year’s bird and squirrel nests. I found one this year in a Vitex tree very close to my front door and I never knew it was there until the leaves disappeared. Then there is the hawk’s nest several hundred yards away from my property in a tall tree in the woods behind my house.

But this is also the time of year when perennials are at rest. I’m one of those gardeners who are reluctant to cut back the brown sticks. I think they add a certain dimension and structure to the winter garden. And, it keeps me from trying to plant bulbs on top of them or from setting out yard art in the wrong spot or from planting a tree too close to a favorite sun-loving plant.

And on those occasional dreary, cold and windy days I like to sit down with a good gardening book. A group of women that I garden with (all Master Gardeners, of course!) have added a book discussion to our workdays. We work for a few hours and then have lunch together and discuss our book. We are currently reading *Noah’s Garden—Restoring the Ecology of Our Own Backyards* by Sara Stein. It’s an excellent book that describes how the countryside was turned into barren subdivisions and what we can do to restore the ecology of our small spaces. Pacific Horticulture says about this book “Reconciling the needs of nature and of gardeners leaves old gardening concepts in shambles. A superb book—enjoyable and thought-provoking.” So far, I agree.

So enjoy this season and take advantage of if to gain some knowledge about your property or from the pages of a good gardening book.

Before very long we’ll be into a very busy spring full of Master Gardener activities including Zilker Garden Festival, East Austin Garden Fair, plant clinics, and work in the Demonstration Garden just to name a few. And don’t forget about the state Master Gardener Conference. If you have never been, I hope that you will consider attending this year. You can’t imagine how much fun it is to be among 500+ like-minded people...not to mention the knowledge you will gain and then share with our community of gardeners. Check out the website at [http://tcaaa.tamu.edu/09statemeeting.htm](http://tcaaa.tamu.edu/09statemeeting.htm) to see a copy of the schedule and to register.

I look forward to seeing you on February 4th.

Manda Rash, President
Glowing with a vivid metallic purple iridescence that doesn’t look quite natural, but very aptly named, Persian Shield is a tropical shrub that adds pizzazz to the garden in a unique way. Also called Royal Purple Plant and botanically known as Strobilanthes dyerianus (stro-bih-LAN-thez dy-err-ee-AY-nus). This plant is not from Persia but hails from Myanmar (Burma) where it grows groundcover-like on the tropical jungle floor. Here in its native land it is the host food plant for the larvae of some butterflies and is very tolerant of sweltering heat and humidity.

Persian Shield, a member of the Acanthaceae (Acanthus family) is an evergreen shrub (in warmer climates) with flexible, squarish stems. It’s main attraction are entrancing, lance shaped leaves (up to 8” long) that are variegated dark green with dark purple veins and magenta purple interveinal areas. The metallic sheen and bands of silver-metallic purple on the lower leaves—shimmering iridescently adds to the allure of this plant. Leaves are dark purple underneath.

The metallic purple color combines extremely well with excesses of silver white color (such as dusty miller, Artemisia or Dichondra ‘Silver Falls’), the bold chartreuse of ‘Margerite’ sweet potato vine, fiery orange or scarlet cannas, yellow coleus, lush ferns, golden Alocasia or even variegated Brugmansia.

Persian Shield is not frost tolerant and only hardy to Zone 10 - so grow it as an annual shrub in containers and replant it every year. Or try it outdoors in Austin but mulch it well and let it die down to the ground in a protected spot during the winter. With enough protection and a mild winter it just might come back in the spring.

A small shrub, the plant grows to about 3 ft high and wide. The long, weak stems can be pinched to make the plant denser and branches sturdier when young. The stems do get woody as it ages.

Grow Persian shield in part shade in Austin as it droops quickly under the scorching sun, it can take full sun in much cooler summer locations. The best foliage color occurs when it is in part shade and as a young, vigorous plant. Foliage color fades as it ages. Take cuttings in the fall or winter to rejuvenate the plant and keep the vivid color.
The plant has a medium water requirement and likes rich, organic soil that is consistently medium moist and well-drained.

Spikes of somewhat insignificant funnel-shaped blooms infrequently appear on cone-shaped inflorescences on plants overwintered in greenhouses. Pests include spider mites and mealybugs on overwintered or container plants.

No Cultivars available.

Anne Van Nest
Have you heard? It’s time for the backyard vegetable garden to make a comeback – and 2009 is the year to make your move! Start thinking about the upcoming warm season and what you want to grow in your garden. What are your favorite warm season vegetables? How much space do you have to dedicate to a veggie patch? Do you have a spot that gets 6-8 hours of sun? If vegetable gardening is new to you it is best to start small. Perform a soil test and amend your planting area according to the recommendations. Along with the fertilizer, mix in a 2-3” layer of compost. Then let it rest and mellow for a couple of weeks before you start to plant. Warm season vegetables that are easy to grow include green beans, cucumbers, squash, eggplant, peppers, okra, Southern peas and tomatoes. Remember that timing is critical for success. If you wait to plant tomatoes in June, they will fizzle out in our heat or be attacked by leaf-footed bugs before they ever have a chance to bear; and if you plant tomatoes in February they may meet an unfortunate demise in that last, late killing freeze of the year. Consult regional garden books and planting guides for recommended varieties and planting dates.

If you have the space you can still put in transplants of cole crops, spinach and lettuce this month. Potatoes also need to be planted in mid-February, but spring planting for most warm season crops in Central Texas begins in early March.

Leaves make an excellent mulch in the vegetable garden. They help moderate soil temperature, help conserve water, and as they slowly break down they enrich the soil. This would be a good time to stockpile leaves as they will be hard to come by in the hot summer months. February is also a good time to beat the rush and pick up or order a load of compost from your local soil yard – they will be very busy when March rolls around!

Here’s to a bountiful harvest,
Patty Leander
Activity in the greenhouse is gearing up and fast approaching the busiest time of the year. Thanks are extended to Holly Plotner for inviting interns and certified master gardeners to spend time in the greenhouse on several Monday mornings for week day workdays. This included a great group who spent three hours in the greenhouse on Columbus Day seeding, taking cuttings, and grooming plants. Thanks to everyone who helped.

Flats and flats of seeds have been sown for the East Austin Passion for Plants and Zilker Garden Festival. 2,100 tomato (7 types), pepper (11 types), fennel, parsley, cardoon, Tithonia, and eggplant seeds have been sown - and this is just the beginning! Look for some very exciting and different tomato and pepper varieties this year (as well as our favorites). In addition to the 20+ flats of seedlings that fill up bench 4, the mist system is full of cuttings being propagated to make new plants for sale at Zilker Garden Festival.

One of the four small air circulating fans in the roof purlin was replaced with a shiny new model. These fans provide much needed air circulation when the temperatures are below 70 degrees and the large exhaust fans aren’t on. They also help distribute the heat better throughout the greenhouse on cold nights.

A new heat mat was installed in 8 feet of the mist bench recently to provide bottom heat to some of the cuttings. This new heat mat has a thermostat to regulate the temperature and will aid in faster rooting during the winter months. Presently the thermostat is set to a comfortable 70 degrees. The mat will raise the temperature of soil or rooting mediums 20 degrees above the ambient temperature. A good benefit for our seed and cutting trays. Now we need to devise a way to afford and plug in many more of these heat mats!

See you in the Greenhouse!...Anne Van Nest, Marian Stasney and Molly Clark
Public Seminars

Everything’s Coming Up Roses
February 21, 2009, 10am-Noon
Sunset Valley City Hall, 3205 Jones Rd., Sunset Valley, TX  78745

Roses aren’t just for Valentine’s Day - they can bring color and sweet smells to your garden year round! Come attend this free seminar presented by the Travis County Master Gardeners Association on selecting and planting roses in your garden. We will be discussing Earth Kind Roses, a designation indicating high performance and outstanding disease and insect tolerance, as well as the basics of pruning and rose care.

Earth Kind is an important designation given to select roses by the Texas A&M University Agriculture program. Earth Kind Roses have been through rigorous statewide testing and evaluation by a team of horticultural experts and found to possess a high level of landscape performance and outstanding disease and insect tolerance/resistance. We will include illustrations of a number of Earth Kind Roses plus information on site selection, soil amendments, and bed preparations.

And just as important as selection is care for your roses. Pruning rose bushes is intimidating to many gardeners, but actually very good for the plants. Becoming an accomplished rose pruner takes time and practice. Learn about properly pruning plus the basics of rose care.

This FREE seminar is sponsored by the Travis County Master Gardeners Association in partnership with the AgriLife Extension, Travis County. For more information call (512)854-9600 and ask for the Master Gardeners desk or visit http://www.tcmastergardeners.org

No reservations necessary, just come!

Getting Ready for Spring Gardening
February 26, 2009, 6:30-8:30pm, Yarborough Branch, Austin Public Library
2200 Hancock Dr., Austin TX  78756

The 2009 Gardening Series continues with discussion of how to start your garden and lawn off strong in spring. Learn how a little planning now results in healthier and more beautiful gardens all year, what makes plants thrive, and pruning and fertilization techniques to get perennials, trees and shrubs off to a strong start. We’ll also cover lawn care, including the how and when of fertilization. Do your plants a favor and don’t miss this great kick-off to spring gardening. This seminar is free and does not require reservations.

This seminar is presented by the Travis County Master Gardeners Association, a volunteer arm of the Texas A&M and Travis County AgriLife Extension Service. For more details, see http://www.tcmastergardeners.org.
How to Grow a Great Lawn
Saturday, March 14, 2009, 10am-Noon, Zilker Botanical Garden

With Spring just around the corner, it’s a great time to learn about growing a healthy lawn. Master Gardener Susan Decker teams up with Denise Delaney from the City of Austin’s GrowGreen program to give you the latest information on the care and feeding of your lawn. Topics will include choosing the right turf for your site, irrigation, fertilization, proper mowing technique, and disease diagnosis and treatment. This class is free and does not require reservations.

This seminar is presented by the Travis County Master Gardeners Association, a volunteer arm of the Texas A&M and Travis County AgriLife Extension Service. For more details, see http://www.tcmastergardeners.org.
IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD
THEY GROW GARDENERS, DON’T THEY?
BY SUSAN CASHIN

In 1973, county extension agents in the state of Washington found themselves drowning in a sea of questions and cries for help from urban dwellers wanting to learn how to garden. To satisfy this demand, the state developed a curriculum and training program for a volunteer force called the “master gardeners.” Little did the agents know that their program would quickly take root in most land-grant colleges across the United States, as well as in several Canadian provinces.

The first master-gardener class in Texas was held in Montgomery County in 1979. Within a decade, the Texas Cooperative Extension Service (now called the Texas AgriLife Extension Service) had hired a full-time state coordinator, and, soon a statewide, nonprofit organization was established and christened the Texas Master Gardener Association. In 1991, the first master gardener class was taught in Austin, and by 1993 the Travis County Master Gardeners Association (TCMGA) was incorporated.

Today, the TCMGA is one of the most active and forward-thinking of the 115 Texas Master Gardener programs. During the 14-week fall training, program attendees—called “master gardener interns”—learn everything from botany to xeriscaping, with a heavy emphasis on environmental protection, sustainability and organic practice. To attain the master gardener certification, interns must perform at least 50 hours of volunteer services within a year of graduation (plant clinics, speaker’s bureau, school garden projects, and so on).

When asked why one would want to become a master gardener, Manda Rash, the current president of the TCMGA, points to the aim of ‘making a difference.’ “In the beginning, I was only thinking about what I could learn about Central Texas gardening,” she says. “Once I began to see what an impact the organization can have on the community, I was hooked!”

“The intensive course and the subsequent volunteering opportunities changed my life,” agrees past TCMGA president, Susan Decker. “Master gardeners help make a difference in the community by reconnecting children to nature, creating a clean environment, reducing the strain on our water supply, supporting wildlife and bringing the health benefits of gardening to those in the greatest need.”

Recently honored as one of the top master gardeners in the state, Patty Leander understands the importance of fostering horticultural stewardship and facilitating it through the program. During her training 20 years ago, she met George and Mary Stewart, avid gardeners then in their eighties and still going strong. “They possessed a lifetime of gardening knowledge which they graciously and generously shared with me and so many others,” recalls Leander. “I’ve gone from being a nervous, stammering public speaker with sweaty hands and a racing heart, to one who can’t wait for the next opportunity to talk about vegetable gardening! I owe all this to the support and encouragement I’ve received from my fellow master gardeners.”

Robert “Skip” Richter, director of the Travis County AgriLife Extension office and well-known local garden celebrity, praises the TCMGA. “We began with a few dozen members and have grown to approximately 200,” he notes. And he’s excited about the future of the association. “I see the master gardeners making even greater contributions to the community by promoting environmentally sound gardening practices and helping underprivileged residents improve their lives thorough gardening and horticulture-related education programs.”

The TCMGA offers a myriad of fun, innovative and interesting community-based programs, most of them free to the public. Diagnosis and treatment of plant diseases, wise use of water, cultivation of cool-weather vegetables and plant photography are just a few of the topics scheduled for fall. For more information visit the TCMGA website at tcmastergardeners.org.

Susan M. Cashin is a freelance writer, accredited sommelier, certified master gardener and grows olives on her farm in the wine country of South Africa.
Since February is the month of love I want to declare my love of gardening. Which I’m sure all of you share this sentiment or you probably wouldn't be reading this. I love everything about gardening, even the tasks that seem impossible. Which brings me to my latest garden project -- trying once again to rid my yard of Asian Jasmine. Since my next door neighbors seem to love the stuff I have a constant battle trying to keep it out of my yard. It comes between the fence, under the fence, around the fence and over the fence. It also is now covering the woods behind my house since they don’t bother to keep it in check. I think it must be related to Bermuda grass or perhaps Kudzu since it has the same “I will never die” tenacity. So this time I am trying the newspaper approach once again but instead of just using around 9 -10 sheets of newspaper I put down 30 - 40 sheets with landscape fabric on top of that. I plan to put a water feature where this devil vine used to be (wishful thinking) so I’m hoping this will smother it once and for all. Now I still have to get out in the woods and try to do some control there before it chokes out all the trees. Wish me luck!

Happy Valentine’s Day!

Rebecca Matthews

Garden Trivia

California produces 60 percent of American roses, but the vast number sold on Valentine's Day in the United States are imported, mostly from South America. Approximately 110 million roses, the majority red, will be sold and delivered within a three-day time period.

And I loved this one.

Some people used to believe that if a woman saw a robin flying overhead on Valentine's Day, it meant she would marry a sailor. If she saw a sparrow, she would marry a poor man and be very happy. If she saw a goldfinch, she would marry a millionaire.

In Closing

If I had a single flower for every time I think about you, I could walk forever in my garden.
~Attributed to Claudia Ghandi
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