The Compost Bin

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February Meeting Speaker — Keith Amelung

On Heirloom Tomatoes
Tomatoes which taste like tomatoes...yum!  February’s speaker is Keith Amelung, an heirloom tomato expert!  He made his passion for heirloom tomatoes into a business.  Heirloom Tomatoes of Texas is a web based business (www.heirloomtomatoesoftexas.com) which sells heirloom tomato transplants and a few (“Gulp, he says, I just threw up in my mouth a little”) hybrids.

Expand your knowledge of heirlooms as Keith discusses characteristics of many of the tomato varieties.  He will also share his personal growing tips to increase your chance of obtaining perfect tomatoes by amending the soil, reduce diseases and fungus, spacing and more.

Keith will be taking orders for heirloom tomato transplants after the meeting.  Master Gardeners can have these shipped or picked up from his booth at the Zilker Garden Festival (after you have also shopped at the TCMGA booth, of course).  His nursery and greenhouse are not open for walk-in visitors.
As a nursery owner for five years, Keith specialized in herbs, natives, roses and aquatic plants. There he discovered heirloom veggies, as a way to offer something unique to his customers.

For more than two years, Keith worked for Fertile Garden Supply, a major materials yard in northwest San Antonio, which specialized in soil blends, mulches and strictly organic garden products. During the last year with this company Keith appeared as the in-house “garden-guru” for NBC’s local ‘San Antonio Living’ show. It was Keith’s great pleasure to substitute/guest-host for Bob Webster on the KTSA Garden Show for nearly ten years.

Each spring for the past six years Keith has offered tomato plants for sale via the internet to fellow Texans and has expanded his own appreciation for heirloom/open-pollinated veggies—edible ornamentals.

Born in San Antonio, Keith has lived and gardened in Boerne, Texas since 1991. Although he has received no formal collegiate education in gardening or tomato growing, his self-taught, hands-on approach has earned him the respect of his clients and peers.

Currently, Keith offers his services under the banner of Have Spade, Will Travel Landscape & Consulting. He enjoys speaking to garden clubs throughout the area on a wide variety of subjects such as organic/chemical-free gardening, deer-resistant and native plants, water gardening and of course heirloom vegetables.

**Meeting information:**

**Wednesday, February 3rd, 2010 starting at 7 pm.**

**Zilker Botanical Garden**
Hello Master Gardeners:
A Message From Your President

Recently, while cleaning out a closet, I came across my grandmother’s wooden sewing box and stopped everything to check out the contents. At the bottom, folded and turning brown with age, was a four page letter addressed to my grandmother from a relative who lived in Odessa, Texas. I am told by my relatives that the letter was written sometime right after the turn of the century. It reads,

“My redbud tree is really pretty now, also have a million violets in bloom. Tho’ little violets always remind me of San Saba. Obie and I used to pick them by the basket full there on the river every spring and take them to school. I have had pretty hyacinths and yellow jonquils but they are about bloomed out. Some years a hard freeze or a hard sand storm will get the redbud about the time it starts to bloom but not this year. The trees are all leafing out and so are the roses, in fact, some of the roses have little buds on them. We put out some new roses this year. Also some Sweet William, Snapdragons, Larkspur, annual and perennial Phlox. I am trying a few new plants this year-have a Snowball bush, a Wisteria bush and a yellow Jasmine...”

Needless to say, my heart leaped with joy to read this long ago relative talk about her garden, her hardships and her rewards. She goes on to talk about her brother, Obie, who worked on a ranch, slept out under the stars and had just purchased a new saddle for $90 of hard earned cowboy money!

My grandmother was my first link in the love of gardening. She and my grandfather had a huge yearly veggie garden with plum trees in the back row. They raised chickens
both for the eggs and the free fertilizer. Roses, honeysuckle, snapdragons and Sweet William were carefully tended.

Heirloom gardening is a wonderful way to trace not only who you are, but “why” you are you. I am attempting to do just that in a new garden area and, with the finding of this letter, am able to put one more small piece of our family puzzle together—with gardening, no less.

I hope each of you is able to do the same. Able to trace a “pass along” fern, rose or vegetable variety down your family line. Able to share with your children and grandchildren your love of gardening that forms that bond between you forever. And so, to each of you I send Valentine wishes for ...

Happy Gardening,

Carolyn Williams,
President


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In The Vegetable Garden
By Patty Leander

We are on the downside of winter, and hopefully the Deep Freeze of January 2010 did not wreak havoc on your vegetable garden. Row cover offers amazing protection to plants threatened by cold weather, and I always try to keep it on hand. It can be purchased through most seed catalogs and can be found at some local nurseries. I ordered a large sheet (12’ x 32’) for $31.88 from the Texas Gardener website recently, which is handy for covering a large garden area or for cutting into smaller sections.

Peas and potatoes are two crops that do best when planted this month. ‘Cascadia’ and ‘Super Sugar Snap’ are two productive edible-podded peas that perform well in my own garden year after year. ‘Cascadia’ is a bush variety, but ‘Super Sugar Snap’ is a vine that can grow to 5’ and beyond, so be sure to train it on a fence, trellis or tall tomato cage. ‘Mr. Big’ is an All America Selections garden pea that yields large pods full of plump, sweet peas, and ‘Dwarf Grey Sugar’ produces snow peas that make a tasty addition to stir-fries and provide a little crunch when
added raw to salads. Its lovely purple blooms are a bonus.

If you have a little room for a potato patch mid-February is a good time to plant. It is best to use seed potatoes from local nurseries, feed stores or mail order sources as they are certified to be disease free. My order from Ronniger’s Potato Farm arrived in late January, and the seed potatoes are spread out in a bin and resting comfortably under my bed until planting time—it’s cool, dry, out of the way and no one will bother them. In fact, Bruce doesn’t even know they are there! If you’d like to learn more about growing potatoes, please join me at the Demonstration Garden on February 13 from 9:00-11:00 for a how-to planting session.

If your garden took a beating in January, take advantage of some warm, sunny February days to clean out your beds, compost the spent plant material, amend the soil and prepare for spring planting. Transplants of broccoli and cauliflower can be planted early this month as well as seeds of cool season veggies, like carrots, lettuce, turnips, radishes, beets and Swiss chard. We must remember that these plants will be taking up space for the next couple of months, so plan carefully to be sure that you still have room for warm season veggies which need to be planted in March and April. We are fortunate to have such a variety of vegetables that can be grown in our gardens, but transitioning from a cool season garden to a warm season garden takes a bit of juggling and decision making, especially when space is at a premium.
Create Good Soil from the Top Down

I began my late winter clean-up this week. It’s the part of gardening that I really don’t like, but I know these native plants will be ready to start their new growth soon. My attention then goes to the soil, or the lack thereof. The amendments I add every year seem to disappear so rapidly. So, I’ve been thinking about how I can have healthy soil and fewer weeds. If you like that idea too, read on.

The first concept is to avoid soil disruption. Untilled soil contains thousands of dormant weed seeds just waiting for light and air. So when you till the soil, you essentially are sowing weeds. Tilling the soil puts so much oxygen into the soil that it burns up organic matter faster than it can be added. Natural soils have a stable amount of organic matter, but once you till them, that amount drops dramatically and stays at a lower level. Over time, soil develops a network of large and small pores. The large pores are important for aeration and the drainage of excess water. The small pores have capillary channels that hold water and can even move water up or sideways to roots. When planting, minimize disruption by making a hole just big enough to fit the root ball. You actually get better water use and fewer weeds in soil that is not tilled.

The second concept is to put the organic material on the top of the old semi-decayed organic material. You leave the organic mulch on top of the soil, and as it breaks down, it gradually filters the nutrients

Right: Don’t disrupt the soil profile.
Image courtesy of the USDA
hints from wolf's garden  

into the top layers. That’s how Mother Nature does it. Now the exception is - all you folks east of I-35 who have clay soil. You will need a one-time digging in of some organic matter like compost, shale, or even sawdust. (With sawdust you’ll need to add some nitrogen too.) Covering the soil with an inch of organic mulch keeps it loose so that water actually gets into the soil where the roots are. Mulch also allows plant roots to develop in a cool, moist environment.

The third concept is to avoid soil compaction. Roots need air to function and when soil is compacted, it drives the air out. The more room you leave around the plants, the more likely the roots will travel out. You probably have pulled old tomato plants out and see how far the roots have traveled just below the surface. This is because of not only the loose soil, but also the mulch, which keeps the soil moist near the surface. By spreading out more than down, roots are getting more oxygen and more nutrients.

What now? I’m going to spread some compost and order some mulch from Molly Clark and Marian Stasney through the Master Gardeners’ Buyer’s Co-Op.

Call to Arms! We need donations for the upcoming Get Growing, Keep Going teachers’ seminar on Saturday, February 6. We're going to give each teacher who attends the propagation class a "soda bottle propagator."
Here’s what we need: 2 liter Coke or Pepsi bottles, labels removed, washed clean WITH cap. (Need at least 50 total, will take more.)
If you can bring these to our next TCMGA meeting Wednesday, February 3, that would be great or you can drop them off at the Extension Office, Master Gardener Desk - by February 3.
Many thanks from Tommie Clayton & Susan Jung - TMG Propagation Specialists
A New Pest in Central Texas

Rover ants seem to be picking up speed as a new pest in the Central Texas area. They have been here for many years, but seem to be noticed more frequently than in the past.

Rover ants are tiny (~1/16” long) and brownish-black. They have 9 antennal segments which differentiates them from many other ants, but you’ll need a good hand lens or microscope to count antennal segments. The abdomen of rover ants is pudgy and the ants have a “humpbacked” appearance.

For great photos you can go to the following site:

Colonies, or nests, are small and have a single queen. They can occur inside structures in places such as wall voids usually in areas of moisture- kitchen, bathrooms and near plumbing leaks. Outdoors, people often find the ants nesting under and/or inside flower pots, under stones and landscape timbers or running quickly up and down patio furniture or other vertical surfaces.

Worker ants will often be seen foraging on plants, and are often mistakenly identified as damaging the plant. The workers are tending honeydew excreted by insects such as aphids, mealybugs, whiteflies and scale insects. Controlling the honeydew-producing insects in the landscape can help cut down on ant problems.

The ants can be somewhat difficult to manage since they don’t respond well to most baits. They do appear to take liquid baits fairly well. Sprays should not be used to treat for
rover ants since this can split the colony up making the ants more difficult to manage.

For more information or help with identification, contact Wizzie Brown, Texas AgriLife Extension Service Program IPM Specialist at 512.854.9600. Also check out www.urban-ipm.blogspot.com

Images of Brachymyrmex patagonicus - The Rover Ant

Images courtesy of AntWeb (www.antweb.org) under the Share Alike Creative Commons License

Left: Freshly harvested ‘Mr. Big’ garden peas.

Right: Pods ready for harvesting on ‘Cascadia’ sugar snap peas.
Propagator’s Toolbox
By Tommie Clayton

Seedling Heat Mats & Thermostats

The (seedling) heat mat is a very useful propagation tool; couple it with a (seedling) heat mat thermostat for a “dynamic duo” - a great investment! Now I say this cause a single flat heat mat and thermostat will cost about $65 - as the heat mat size increases so does the price; upgrade to commercial greenhouse heat mats and now you’re talking big bucks.

Your choice will depend on your propagation set up. Do you have a greenhouse with space for a heated propagation bench for starting seeds and giving cuttings a boost, or do you start small quantities of seeds or cuttings indoors or outside on a protected porch?

Heat mats are basically an electrical wire grid encased in a tough waterproof body designed to radiate heat evenly through the mat raising the rooting area (flat bottom) temperature from 10-20 degrees above ambient air temperature. A thermostat gives one the ability to “set” the temperature more precisely by placing a probe in the flat’s potting soil; the thermostat operation is triggered by the probe’s temperature measurement vs. the degree setting on the thermostat regulator dial.

Where do you find them? Some local nurseries carry them, as do local hydroponic supply stores, and seasonally at local box stores. Check with our TCMGA Buyer’s Coop contact for availability. You can find them on the web at greenhouse supply sites, at on-line auction sites, and high volume sellers such as Amazon. Shop around to find the best price option.
The most readily available brand is Hydrofarm (1, 2 & 4 flat sizes) heat mats and thermostats. They will last for years, are easy to set up, and easy to store when not in use, and they have “instructions” printed right on the mat!

Park, Burpee and other seed suppliers also have their own brand of similar heat mats.

If you have a greenhouse and need larger mats, say, 17” x 60” or 22” x 60”, or larger, now you’re talking commercial grade and big bucks! Master Gardener, Marian Stasney, told me the Ft. Worth Botanical Garden greenhouse folks use Redi-Heat propagation mats and thermostats. I’ve seen the Pro-Gro 22” x 60” (PGPM-9A) mat in use at the Austin Community College greenhouse when I took a propagation course there. Keep in mind these have electrical service requirements you need to consider for your safety and the efficient operation the mat.

So...add a heat mat to your toolbox!

Below: Three-day-old sunflower seedlings

"Take thy plastic spade,
It is thy pencil; take thy seeds, thy plants,
They are thy colours."
~William Mason, The English Garden, 1782
Designing Small Garden Spaces (Part One)
By Anne Van Nest

Gardening in a small space, be it an Austin city garden or just a small lot, does not have to be a prison sentence. There are plenty of ways to make a small space into an exciting, challenging garden that fulfills many dreams. One of the misconceptions about designing for small spaces is that people believe that garden design rules can be used just for large gardens. Not true! All of the design principles used for larger gardens are perfectly suitable for gardens of any size. Smaller sizes mean keeping things to a smaller scale and using fewer of them.

The challenges of small gardens are quite straightforward. First and foremost, there’s not enough space to grow all we want to grow. Secondly, there’s not enough time to do all that we want to do (but that’s another issue). The third greatest challenge is that the scale of a small garden is often out of proportion. Large buildings often turn the garden into a courtyard-like space and create huge towering vertical goliaths that dwarf everything at their feet.

To overcome the challenges of space-challenged gardening, try some of the following tips.

**Think Simple Elegance - Not the KISS principle but “Less is More”**
Resist the strong urge to put too much into the design of a garden. Many gardeners design gardens with everything they like in it. Stop and save some of your “wish list” for the next garden. It is very rare that anyone stays in one place for 40-50 (or even 10) years of his or her gardening life anymore.

Make accents work for you in the garden and not compete with each other. Accents can be outstanding plants – like a beautiful Mexican Persimmon tree or striking Salvia clump. Using colors or sculpture can also work as accents. A small yard with too many
accents is very visually confusing. Your eyes will continually be on the move looking for somewhere to rest. Take a lot of the choices away and make your accents very evident and work for you.

**Create intimate areas and private rooms**

Design a garden so that it has enclosures creates an opportunity for very special small areas of mystery or romance. Tuck a small birdbath or fountain into a back corner with a bench just big enough for two. Surround this with a lattice fence covered with climbing roses and a very intimate area is created.

Consider structures that limit the space overhead and create a roof for your garden. Several different types of materials such as an arbor or even fence lattice can be used to make a roof for a garden room. Many city gardens have to deal with an out of proportioned scale created by large buildings. These strong vertical lines and hard building materials are ever-present. How can we deal with these very limiting design constraints?

Creating a secluded garden room (with a ceiling) is the answer. Humans feel more secure if they have solid structures around them. Julie Moir Meservy, author of *The Inward Garden*, says that a view of the outside world from the protection of an enclosed “cave” is a comforting position for most.

A garden roof does not have to be solid (or even real in some cases). Just the illusion created by a couple of I-beams and wisteria vines growing on them will make you think that there’s a roof overhead.
Go for the details
An advantage of small space gardens is the opportunity to have interesting and exquisite details in the garden. Small gardens mean that every last detail can be noticed and appreciated. Some ideas are to include unique patio stones with original designs, bird feeder collections, statues, colored glass balls, the list is only limited by the designer’s imagination.

Use vertical accents
Because small gardens have limited ground area, to maximize this space, gardeners have to start thinking vertical. This vertical effect also breaks the bonds with the earth and sends the eye to the infinity of the sky where space is much freer. A fun way to add interest to the garden is to do the unexpected like using a planter raised vertically on four stacks of old clay pots. Much more impact is gained by this vertical height (instead of placing the metal planter on the ground).

There are many fastigiated forms of trees and shrubs, perfect for the smaller garden that have been bred to grow tall and narrow. The ornamental pears, pyramidal oaks, and columnar olives are suggestions for this purpose.

Design principles know no bounds
Sound design principles can be used for all sizes of garden - not just for larger properties. There’s no reason to throw all the techniques of good garden design out the window just because the space is small. In fact they are easier to use on a smaller scale. Good garden design means thinking about unity, repetition, variety, balance, emphasis, sequence, and scale no matter what the size.
Get Growing & Keep Going (GGKG) Symposium

February 6th, 8:00 am to 4:00 pm

Gonzalo Garza Independence High School, Austin, Texas

Get Growing & Keep Going (GGKG), is a symposium that will provide teachers, administrators and parents with the tools to integrate gardens and nature areas into the school environment, will take place February 6th, 2010 from 8 am-4 pm at Gonzalo Garza Independence High School (located at 1600 Chicon St., Austin Texas, 78702). The symposium is themed "Greening Our Schools", and features keynote speaker Kevin Coyle, National Wildlife Federation Vice President of Education. Field experts will lead a variety of sectionals on topics including rainwater harvesting, vermiculture, double digging, schoolyard habitats, entomology, composting, propagation, environmental stewardship, fundraising, and building a garden community. Teachers will receive seven continuing education credits (through Texas AgriLife Extension Service) for participating in this event.

Registration is $30 until January 29th. For more information, contact Lisa Anhaiser at LAAnhaiser@ag.tamu.edu or call 512-854-9600. To register for the Get Growing & Keep Going symposium, visit: http://online.nwf.org/GGKG.

Coming Events

Everything's Coming up Roses

Saturday, February 27, 9:30-11:30 am

Demonstration Garden at AgriLife Extension Office of Travis County

1600B Smith Rd., Austin TX 78721

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 on selecting, planting and caring for roses in your garden. Following the presentation portion of the seminar, a hands-on
demonstration of pruning roses in the Extension Demonstration Garden will take place. We will discuss site selection, soil amendments, and bed preparations plus showcase a number of Earth Kind Roses worthy of consideration in your garden. Earth Kind is a designation given to select roses by the Texas A&M Agriculture program, indicating the variety has been through rigorous testing and found to possess a high level of landscape performance and outstanding disease and insect tolerance/resistance.

This seminar is free and open to the public. Space is limited so please call the Travis County Master Gardener’s desk at (512) 854-9600 to reserve a spot. It is presented by the Travis County Master Gardeners Association, a volunteer arm of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service in Travis County. http://www.tcmastergardeners.org.

**Spring Vegetable Gardening**

**Saturday, March 13, 10 am-noon**

Zilker Botanical Garden

2220 Barton Springs Rd., Austin TX

Enjoy juicy tomatoes, crisp cucumbers, and delectable green beans straight from your garden. Learn how to plant and maintain a spring vegetable garden from Master Gardener Vegetable Specialist Patty Leander, who will share her expertise on vegetable varieties that perform well in Central Texas, recommended planting times, and composting. This seminar is loaded with basic facts and helpful ideas, useful to both new and experienced vegetable gardeners. This seminar is free and open to the public. This is one of our most popular seminars, so please come early to get a seat. Presented by the Travis County Master Gardeners Association, a volunteer arm of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service in Travis County. For information, go to www.tcmastergardeners.org or call the Master Gardeners desk at (512) 854-9600.
East Austin Garden Fair  
Saturday, March 20, 10 am-4 pm

Susan Decker is looking for coordinators or volunteers to do the following:

- 2-3 people to help Eleanor with donations
- food and water for fair-goers
- flyer distribution/advertising
- media appearances including TV and radio
- keeping track of media announcements/flyer distribution
- volunteer coordination
- recruiting more non-profit groups to have booths
- tables for booths
- handout coordinator
- greeters and evaluations
- photographer, translators or transportation

Cool Plants for the Shade Garden  
Friday, April 9, 9-11 am

Demonstration Garden at AgriLife Extension Office of Travis County
1600B Smith Rd., Austin TX  78721

Cool Plants for the Shade Garden is a free in-the-garden discussion. See some of the shade loving plants growing and learn about other perennials and annuals which require limited sun. This seminar is free and open to the public. It is presented by the Travis County Master Gardeners Association, a volunteer arm of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service in Travis County. For information, see http://www.tcmastergardeners.org or call the Travis County Master Gardener’s help desk at (512) 854-9600.
Heart O' Texas Orchid Society's 39th Annual Orchid Show & Sale,
"Easter Orchids"
April 3rd & 4th, 2010
Zilker Botanical Gardens Center
2220 Barton Springs Road, Austin, TX 78746 (512) 477-8672
Show & Plant Sale: 10:00 am - 5:00 pm Saturday & 10:00 am - 4:00 pm Sunday.

This year we are very proud to present the 39th Annual Orchid Show here in Austin. Orchids are Mother Nature at her best, so come join us and check out all the beautiful orchids that will be on display. There will also be hundreds of blooming orchids for sale, as well as helpful information for growing these beautiful plants from vendors and society members. Need flowers for Easter...orchids are becoming one of the most popular flowers in the U.S., so why not get an orchid this year for that special occasion. Admission to the event is free and the public is encouraged to attend.

For a complete schedule of events, or for more information, please contact: Geoffrey Frost, 1011 Strickland Drive. Austin, TX 78748-4847
Telephone (512) 413-3199; e-mail geoffreyfrost@yahoo.com), or visit our web-site: http://www.hotos.org/
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Visit the websites: www.tcmastergardeners.org and http://travis-tx.tamu.edu

The End...

Time to Get Gardening!