

The Magnolia Chronicle

The newsletter for Pulaski County Master Gardeners



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**DIVISION OF AGRICULTURE
RESEARCH & EXTENSION**

University of Arkansas System

Iris and peonies – an explosion of colors

April 2019



Presidents Corner

William Wordsworth *"I wandered lonely as a cloud that floats on high o'er vale and hills, when all at once I saw a crowd, a host of golden daffodils..."*

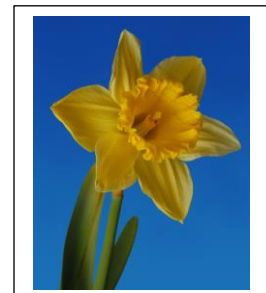
Daffodils bloomed several weeks ago in our area, but I recently had a second chance to enjoy these harbingers of Spring. Having just returned from a trip to the UK and especially Wales, we saw daffodils everywhere—growing wild along the train tracks, in massive plantings in city parks, on tables in restaurants and even in a vase in the hotel room.

Daffodils are the national flower of Wales. They belong to the Narcissus family and are sometimes called jonquils. The English have long referred to them as "Lent Lilies". In Wales, it is said that if you are the first to spot a daffodil in the Spring, your next 12 months will be filled with wealth. Also, legend has it that although a gift of daffodils is said to ensure happiness, this cheerful flower of good fortune should never be given as a single flower, as one daffodil can foretell misfortune.

Happy Spring!

Suzanne Potts

PCMG President



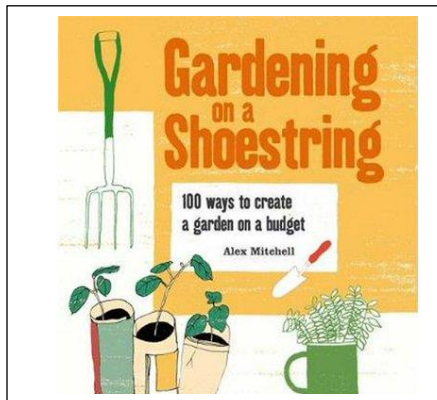
Gardening on a Shoestring

By Susan Rose

Many gardeners have heard that phrase in our lives over the years. There are several books on the subject. One most recently published in 2015 by Alex Mitchell is worth reading.

She details 100 incentive methods to achieve the garden you want on a budget. Here are some of her methods to save money.

1. Check your soil. (Our Pulaski County Extension office will do this for you for no cost).
2. Plant the plant in the right place. Always check your plant label – don't put "sun" plants in the shade or vice versa.
3. Check to see what plants are thriving in your neighborhood. If they grow in that area – then most likely you can plant them in your garden.
4. Prune before you pulverize. Prune only when needed. If you move into a new house with an extensive garden already – wait a year before you start pruning plants or digging. Most likely the plants were there for a reason. Most overgrown plants just need a little rehabbing not butchering.
5. Beg before you buy – ask neighbors for cuttings of their plants, extra seeds, or dividing mature plants. Sometimes this can give you pretty much an instant flower bed for "nothing".
6. Seed savings – most plants can easily be planted by seeds. A package containing 100 seeds can cost 1/5 the price of one plant. The costs add up quickly! Nasturtium, sweet peas, cosmos, sunflower, morning glory, marigold, coneflower and zinnia are several plants that grow well from seed.
7. If you do end up purchasing from a catalog – order from just one and then ask neighbors, friends, and relatives if they want to order with you and split the shipping and handling costs.
8. Think ahead – don't forget plants can grow fairly quickly. Smaller specimens will be cheaper to purchase and will catch up with the larger ones soon. A larger root ball is more vulnerable to drying out than a small one.



Note: This can be purchased online as a "used" book for a small amount of money as well. She also has a book on 100 ways to create garden projects on a budget.

Fascinating Figs By Phyllis Barrier

My beautiful fig trees are just now putting on new leaves and are covered with figs about the size of the end of my finger. It is a wonderful event to watch each year, but the best is yet to come when I start picking figs later this summer. If you don't have a fig tree, you might want to consider getting one.

I just ran across an interesting article (<http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20170116-the-tree-that-shaped-human-history>) about a book by Mike Shanahan, a freelance writer with a doctorate in rainforest ecology. Shanahan proclaims, "Over millions of years, fig trees have shaped our world, influenced evolution, nourished our bodies and fed our imaginations." The Central Arkansas Library System doesn't own this book, but I've suggested they buy it. If you click on the URL above, you will find an interesting abstract of the book. Shanahan's book: *Gods, Wasps and Stranglers*, weaves together the mythology, history and ecology of one of the world's most fascinating – and diverse – groups of plants, from their starring role in every major religion to their potential to restore rainforests, halt the loss of endangered species, and even limit climate change. It's a story about humanity's relationship with nature, one that is as relevant to our future as it is to our past.

Let's start with the strangler fig trees that grow from seeds dropped high on other trees by passing birds and mammals. By starting out high in the forest canopy, the strangler seedlings get the light they need to grow. As they do, they send down aerial roots that become thick and woody, encasing their host trees in a living mesh. They can smother and kill giant trees. Here's a picture of a strangler tree I took last December in the Everglades National Park. Buddhists and Hindus have revered this species for more than two millennia, and figs are mentioned throughout the Old and New Testaments of the Bible.



Fig trees grew in Africa, West Asia and South Asia probably 80 to 100 million years ago in the time of the dinosaurs. Figs spread with the Greeks and Romans throughout the Mediterranean region. Spanish Franciscan missionaries brought figs to southern California, leading to the Mission fig, which is still popular today. Evidence shows that the fig was in abundance in China and England by this time as well.

Figs sweetened all types of dessert before widespread use of sugar. Fig Newtons cookies have been around since 1891, my grandmother's favorite cookie. Figs are high in potassium, iron, fiber, and calcium and are used for medicinal purposes, as a diuretic and a laxative. It is speculated that monkeys eat the leaves and bark for medicinal purposes also.

Two crops of figs can be produced each year. The first or breba crop develops in the spring on last year's shoot growth. The main fig crop develops on the current year's shoot growth and ripens in the late summer. The main crop is generally superior in quantity and quality, but some cultivars produce good breba crops.

There are three types of edible figs, but the common fig is what we grow in Arkansas. It has all-female flowers that do not need to be pollinated to bear fruit. Brown Turkey, Black Mission, Brunswick, Kadota and Celeste are some of the representative cultivars. Janet Carson says there is quite a lot of name confusion amongst fig cultivars so don't be surprised to see the same plant grown with several names. I bought my fig tree from a vendor from the Buffalo River area. He said he didn't know what kind of fig tree it was, but I'd love it. He was right – I do love it.

Figs are a member of the mulberry family and are related to many houseplants – weeping fig, rubber tree, and fiddleleaf fig.

The two most common figs you see in Arkansas are Celeste and Brown Turkey. Celeste is the most cold hardy of the figs we grow here. Planting on the east side with a wall or house at its back to block the winds and radiate heat offers protection from cold weather. Fig trees need a minimum of 6-8 hours of sunlight to produce fruit.



Figs have very few pests and don't require spraying. I grow mine "organically" and I've had great crops most years. The one problem I've experienced was fruit cracking and souring when we had a wet August in 2016. Fruit souring is caused when rain gets into the eye of the fruit. Here's a photo from August 2016 of souring figs on my tree.

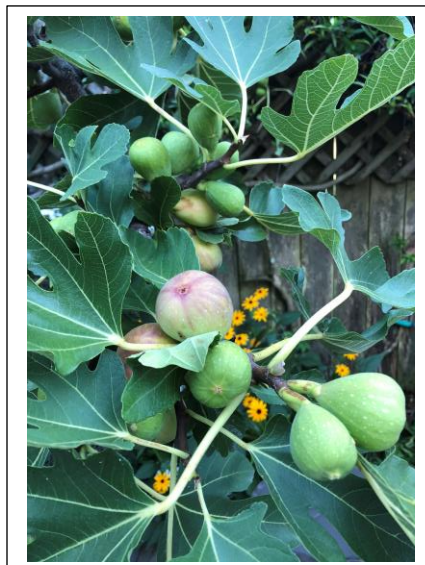
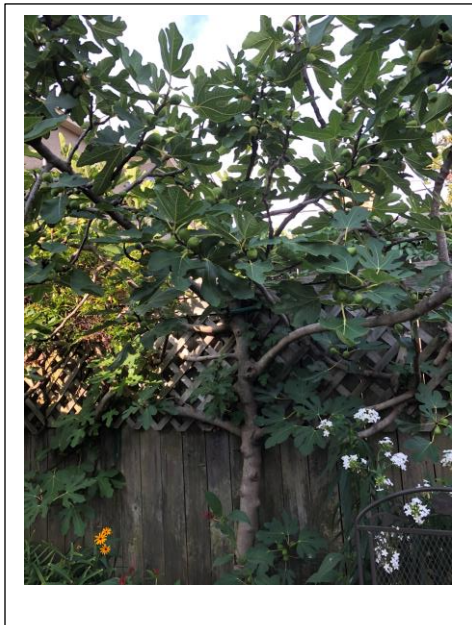
April 2019

When fig trees are producing lots of fruit, we pick daily first thing in the morning. We pick when the fig feels soft and is changing color – maybe a day or so before it is fully ripe. We do this to get ahead of the birds and squirrels that also love figs. We’ve tried bird netting, but it makes it hard for us to pick the figs. Our philosophy is to “live and let live” and share our abundance.

Fig trees produce a white latex sap that can cause skin irritation. My husband has a latex allergy and always wears latex-free gloves when he picks.

Figs are perishable, but they will keep a day or so stored in the refrigerator. If I want to make a fig tart, fig focaccia, fig preserves, fig chutney, or a fig pizza, I save them for a day or so until I have enough. But they are also over the moon wrapped in prosciutto and grilled or cut up on a bowl of cereal or a salad. You can find great recipes for figs on the internet. I recommend searching for Deborah Madison’s Fresh Fig Tart; her recipe is quite easy to locate. Perhaps you heard her speak at the Master Gardener Farm to Table Dinner at the Peabody Hotel in February 2011. Deborah was selling her book, *Seasonal Fruit Desserts*. I own a signed copy and follow her easy idea for a cheese board with goat cheese, pecans and fresh figs. Don’t forget to use those beautiful fig leaves to decorate your board or tray.

Figs can be propagated by cuttings or layering branches of a fig tree in the soil. If you want a cutting, send me an email.



Where Is Your Feeder?

By Jeffrey McKinley

The Greater Little Rock Council of Garden Clubs recently presented a program at the Hillcrest House – “*The Love of Hummingbirds*”. The featured speaker was Tana Beasley. She is the Facility Manager at Potlatch Conversation Education Center operated by the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission and located at Cook’s Lake in Casscoe. Her topic was that mysterious and intriguing hummingbird. She shared some truly amazing information about this bird and its life.

Prevalent in Arkansas is the Ruby-Throated Hummingbird which migrates twice per year across the Gulf of Mexico and is the only species which nests in Arkansas. However, the throat is not really “ruby” as the feathers are actually gray. The composition of the feather reflects RED when the light hits them. The male has the “red throat”, an iridescent green color and black tips on the tail. The female has longer wings than the male and also has white tips on their tail.

Properly feeding the hummingbird is very important. The mixture should always be 1-part white table sugar (not brown, honey, etc.) to 4-parts water. The feeder should be cleaned at least every 3 days to prevent tipsy birds from fermented feed. Some wonder why and grimace at the birds as they “battle” at the feeder. This is just a natural event for establishment and protection of a food source. The hummingbird will feed on 1000 – 2000 flowers per day and has the natural sense to know if nectar is replenished by the seeing the ultraviolet light of the flower. A hummingbird’s diet consists of about equal parts nectar and protein.

The female builds a nest usually about 100 yards from a feeder so to avoid the pesky males. She uses fresh spider web (some of nature’s strongest fiber) to wrap and strengthen the nest (and may nab an insect from the web for protein). The lining is soft. e.g. mimosa blooms. Eggs, generally two, hatch in about 15-18 days. The babies, which eat only protein, double in size daily for the first few days and are basically mature when they leave the nest. Interestingly, the hummingbird has no feathers on its breast. So, the female cannot use her down to line the nest. This also exposes the heart and breast of the bird.

So, why we want to and how do we attract the Ruby-Throated Hummingbirds?

What role does this Bird play in the environment? In addition to bees, butterflies, and bats, this bird is one of the four major pollinators. 167 plants in the U.S. depend on the hummingbird for pollination.

Does the red color really attract? Yes. The Hummingbird sees ultra violet light and can detects red up to ¾ mile away. But, don’t put red food coloring in the food!

Do hummingbirds need a water source? Absolutely! You would too if you ate and flew around sugar all day long!! This should be a shallow or gentle sprinkling source.

What are the predators? These include the yellow garden spider and the praying mantis. Watch for the latter on or near your feed and flick it away!

Should I leave my feeder out during the winter? Yes. Reports of the Rufus Hummingbird over-wintering in Arkansas are reported. Make sure to keep the feed warm in freezing temperatures. Ms. Beasley showed how the coffee cup desk warmer had been used for this purpose.

So, what do I plant?

- **Red Buckeye
- **Salvia Coccinea
- **Lantana – not for the nectar but for the insects that live on it.
- **Jewel Weed
- **Cardinal Flower
- **Bee Balm
- **Crocsmia Lucifer
- **Turks Cap
- **Hibiscus

Ms. Beasley is the only person in the State with the Migratory Bird permit to band hummingbirds. The Potlach Center has a Hummingbird Banding Program which you can attend with a reservation (set dates in May – September). For information, call 870-241-3373. The attendees actually participate in the banding and release. And, if you want to see these creatures, just know that the Center uses 5 gallons of nectar per day to feed their Ruby-Throated guests!

And, so where is your feeder? It should be out and ready for the arrival of the Ruby-Throated Hummingbird!



APRIL CHECKLIST

By Carol Randle

A TIME TO SOW

Sow these seeds: early asters, basil, canterbury bells, celosia, columbine, cosmos, foxglove, gomphrena, grasses, hollyhock, marigolds, melampodium, morning glories, petunias, sunflowers, sweet peas, sweet william and zinnia.

SPRING IS HERE!

We are welcoming spring with open arms! The blooming trees, shrubs, and plants are renewing our spirits. The white of the Bradford pear with the pink of the flowering fruit trees, the yellow of the daffodils (think Wye Mountain) and forsythia, the red and pink of the camellias, these all make us want to head to the yard and work in the flower beds. Many of our plants are growing now. Pruning after our spring blooming plants have finished their bloom is the best way to go. Hydrangeas should be growing from the old wood, not from the base if you expect flowers this summer. Know what kind of hydrangeas you are growing, so you will know when to prune. If you grow forsythia, remove one third of the older canes at the soil line now to rejuvenate the plant for better flowering next spring. Azaleas that need pruning should have it done as soon after flowering as possible. Then fertilize all spring bloomers with a slow release fertilizer. On established plants, one application a year is all that is needed.

VEGETABLES

Plant warm season vegetables (tomatoes and peppers) inside until the chance of frost has passed. April is the best month for vegetable gardening. You have until mid-month to plant or replant all the cool season crops. Rotate vegetable crops to help control pests. Combining flower plants with vegetables helps deter most insects. Examples are henbit, geranium, asters, calendulas, chrysanthemums and marigolds. You can still plant cool season vegetables (lettuce, broccoli, cabbage, radishes and spinach). Edible gardening has never been as popular as it is now, but use caution with the size of your garden, especially if you are a beginning gardener. Start small and build on success. A large garden may seem like a good idea this month, but it may be a challenge by late June or July. All vegetables and herbs can be grown in containers. If you live in an apartment or condo, or simply have a yard with all shade, find a sunny spot on the patio and plant your garden there. When starting a vegetable garden, choose a site that gets plenty of sunlight and is well drained, but near a water source. Gardens in Arkansas won't survive without supplemental water, and if it is difficult to do, many gardeners either don't have the time or the energy to make it work. Raised beds are an excellent way to deal with rocky soils. Perhaps our cities' names give us a clue (Little ROCK and North Little ROCK). Sherwood does not have the word "rock" in it, but we have just as many. You bring in the compost and soil yourself. Plant perennial plants such as asparagus and strawberries on the edge of the garden to keep them undisturbed. Divide the garden into fourths and practice crop rotation: not planting in the same quadrant with the same vegetable for at least three years. You have until mid-month to plant even the cool season crops. Hold off on tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant until mid to late April, giving the soil time to warm up. Plant corn in several short rows versus one long row to aid in pollination.

INDOORS

Keep your houseplants indoors until the middle or end of the month. Then, slowly acclimate them to the sun. Otherwise, they can sunburn. As you move tropical flowers like hibiscus, mandevilla and bougainvillea outside, repot them and prune them back by at least one third if not more. These summer tropical plants bloom on new growth, and you need to encourage that by alleviating root-bound conditions and encouraging rapid new growth. If you don't repot or prune, you will see limited new growth. Limited new growth means fewer flowers as well. Start fertilizing every three to four weeks, and your plants should be blooming again in no time. Or, if you buy new plants every year, start shopping. New colors, new plants and old favorites are all available now and will continue to arrive in nurseries and garden centers on a regular basis.

ANNUALS AND PERENNIALS

It seems that many pansies and violas are just now hitting their prime, and it is almost time to replace them with summer color. If your winter annuals are doing well, enjoy them for another month and plant then. There are plenty of options to choose from. Perennials that are blooming now include bleeding heart, foxglove, verbena, peonies and dianthus. Annuals that can take a petunias, calibrachoa, geraniums, and begonias. Hold off on the heat-loving plants such as impatiens, lantana and zinnias until late April or even into May. Planting in cool soil won't spur them on to growth, so don't get too anxious. For annuals, we want to push the plants as much as we can to encourage rapid growth and plenty of flowers. Good soil, plus regular watering and fertilization should give you large, flowering plants. Harden off summer bedding plants. Slowly acclimate to outside conditions. Plant water plants now. Plant snapdragons and dianthus now. Leave foliage on spring bulbs at least six weeks or until they die back. They need to replenish their strength for next year. Check for thrips on your daffodils. If you find infestation, remove and destroy the infested part. If you are shopping garden centers for young perennial plants this time of the year, look for the ones that have the fullest, sturdiest growth and the best foliage color. You will find either division or spring-sown seedlings. The divisions may be more expensive, but they do produce larger plants the first year. Apply bone meal to crocus as the flowers fade. Don't tie the greenery back as the flowers fade for it will weaken the bulbs. Allow the leaves to remain for six weeks. Plant new lily of the valley pips. Mulch well with compost to protect against cold spells.

ROSES

Prune established roses that only bloom in the spring after they finish blooming. Do not plant dormant roses after April 15th or potted roses after May 15th. Lightly feed roses with cottonseed meal or commercial rose food. Use a complete rose food. Begin chemical control of black spot as foliage starts to expand and continue every 7 to 10 days through the growing season. The best fungicides for black spot control are Funginex or Bayer Advanced. If you are looking for a plant that will give you several seasons of color, look at some of the earth kind roses. From the series of Knock-Outs, to Home Run and the Flower Carpet series, there are some fabulous plants that will bloom from late April until frost with little care.



LAWNS

Lawns are greening up all over and some of it is still winter weeds, but the lawn grasses are also almost all actively growing as well. It is during the transition period between dormancy and growth that you need to use caution when applying herbicides. Wait for your lawn grass to be totally green before you apply your first application of fertilizer. Mow any remaining winter weeds to prevent seed set and start monitoring for summer weeds. Clip back established ground cover. Repair dead patches in ground cover by tearing them out. Add compost and peat moss into the soil, then replant bare areas with divisions taken from outer areas.

GENERAL YARD CARE

Check trellis and support wires for climbers before the plants are fully developed. During the winter these supports often become dislodged. Check the brackets used for hanging baskets to ensure they will support the baskets full of moist soil. Dig in compost, manure and other amendments in planting areas when the soil is dry enough. If you have planted cover crops for the winter, turn them under now. Water new plants and early blooming plants regularly.



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