



Garden Chatter



January 2009

Walker County Master Gardeners Association

President's Message by Mark Short

Happy New Year to all gardeners. I hope everyone is refreshed and ready to start another year of fun and hard work with the Master Gardeners. I feel fortunate to be a part of this great organization. It is going to be challenging to build on all the successes and progress that the Walker County Master Gardeners have made over the past 6 years. Each new class brings more talent and energy to our group. This year I would like to challenge the members to think of new and inventive ways to increase our impact in the community. Serving the community is our main purpose and we must not lose that focus. I know we have a lot of talent in our organization that is not being utilized in this area. Please let me know if you have any ideas or know of any opportunities that would increase our community contact.

One way I think we could increase our community contact is through the use of technology. We are very fortunate to have Bernie Polega, our own in-house expert, to make the web page really work for the Master Gardeners. Bernie has done a great job developing the website, but there is room for more. So next time you are on the internet shopping for plants or information please take a look at the website; it is something to be proud of. Let me know if you have any ideas on ways to improve its effectiveness. I look forward to working with all of you this year. Let's all work together to make this the best year yet.

What to find on the website:

WWW.WalkerCountyMasterGardener.ORG

*Calendar of Events

*Past Newsletter

*Sue Harris' Columns

*Resources

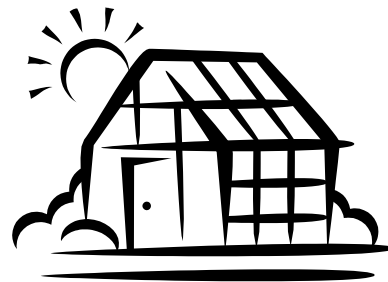
*Fun Projects



INDOOR GARDENER

A February wind blows dismally,
The sky is full of dark clouds hanging low,
The garden lies in numbed frigidity
And waits the falling of another snow.

Today, I planted seeds despite the cold,
For my tomato plants will mind it not-
Their tiny leaves will presently unfold
At my south window; in a flower pot!
-HELEN BATH SWANSON



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Wee Three



2009 Spring Plant Sale -- March 14 by Jenny Covington

Our 2009 Plant Sale Committee is working hard on plans to make the Spring Plant Sale a great success. The sale is planned for 8:00 A.M. Saturday, March 14. Sale preparations will intensify as the sale date approaches including work days for the entire week of the sale. All volunteers are welcome. We will have a broad selection of vegetables, herbs, berries, annuals, perennials and other plants from which to choose. We'll be featuring heirloom tomatoes such as Box Car Willie, Brandywine OTV, Eva Purple Ball, Red and Yellow Pear, Matina and more. There will be a selection of hot and mild peppers including an heirloom pepper called Lemon Drop.

In addition, we will have a great selection of herbs including basil, rosemary, chives, lemon balm, and many more. Due to their popularity, we will have Arapahoe and Brazos blackberries and the blueberries Tifblue, Climax and Premier.

In the week prior to the sale, our Master Gardeners will conduct 2 seminars: one called Backyard Habitat on Tuesday, March 10 at 6:00 P.M.; and, the second called Herbs and Heirloom Vegetables on Thursday, March 12 at 6:00 P.M. Both seminars will be held in the classroom at the Agri-Life Extension Office.



Master Gardener Vineyard Tour

By: Billie Lee, Peggy Bennett & Linda Roberts

The Master Gardeners enjoyed a tour of the Oscar Gutierrez Vineyard on Thursday, last July 10, 2008. A group of twenty-seven attended a tour and lecture on the four varieties of grapes growing successfully in Walker County. Mr. Gutierrez explained the methods used to keep his vineyard free from fungus and from the moth that plagues and destroys the grapes. He also told the group how the vines are planted and pruned until they reach maturity and how the grapes are tested for sugar content.

Mr. Gutierrez currently has four varieties of grapes, but plans to cut back to only three – Champlel, Black Spanish and Blanc du Bois. The Blanc du Bois grapes were covered with netting to protect them from the birds since they were almost ready for harvest.

He explained that the Grape Berry Moth is about the only major pest in relation to crop damage, except of course, for the birds. Another concern, Pierce's disease, a lethal disease of grapevine, is caused by the bacterium *Xylella fastidiosa* and is spread by certain kinds of leafhoppers known as sharpshooters. In the southeastern states, from Florida through Texas, PD is the single most formidable obstacle to the growing of European-type (*Vinifera*) grapes.

Mr. Gutierrez told the group that the high humidity in Walker County can be a challenge as well, and that the grape leaves must be treated with fungicides.

I read in the August 2008 issue of *Texas Highways* magazine that, "According to a 2007 Texas Wine and Grape Growers Association report, the number of wineries in Texas grew from 40 to 113 between 2000 and 2005. Today, Texas is the fifth-largest grape and wine producer in the United States, with 160 wineries and 220 family vineyards covering 3700 acres. Currently, the wine and grape industry contributes more than \$1 billion annually to Texas' economy."



Following the vineyard tour, Sue Gutierrez, Oscar's lovely wife, invited the MGs to her patio area where she had iced water and freshly-baked cookies for us all to enjoy!

Mr. Gutierrez invited the Master Gardeners on the tour to assist him with harvesting the Blanc du Bois grapes the following Saturday. Four MGs and two of their spouses attended the harvest. Linda Roberts reports that they were furnished knives and shown how to properly cut the grape clusters from the vines. While it was a hot, still morning, she said it was a lot of fun and that she would happily participate again!

The vineyard tour was extremely informative and very enjoyable.

*Go, little book,
and wish to all
Flowers in the garden,
meat in the hall,
A bin of wine,
a spice of wit,
A house with lawns enclosing it,
A living river by the door,
A nightingale in the sycamore!*
Robert Louis Stevenson
(1850-1894)



Aunt Tuke's Fruit Salad (Yummy fruit salad/dessert)

Layer fruit (cut into chunks) in this order into large bowl with 1-2 tsp sugar sprinkled between each layer:

- *Apples (2)
- *Oranges (2)
- *Grapes (20 to 30 red & white seedless)
- *Cherries (one small jar, drained, cut in half)
- *Pineapple (15 oz chunks, drained)
- *Bananas (3)

Beat two small cartons whipping cream with sugar to sweeten until stiff. Fold into fruit. Chill for several hours. Can be halved.



We all enjoy the beauty of spring and summer blooms and many of us notice when a few hummingbirds buzz around our garden areas. These little guys are acrobats, magnificently colored, fierce protectors of their terrain, and greatly appreciative of a little effort on our part.

They are able to fly forward, backward, sideways and upside down. They can fly up to 50 MPH and their wings beat up to 200 times per second. As gardeners, we can make them regular visitors to our homes by planting their favorite natives – plants that evolved with hummers and bloom just when they need them.

Red and orange flowers are their favorites; it's a good idea to plant a continuous display of blooms from April through October so they have a steady food source. A mix of perennials and annuals insures that we will be able to offer these "jewels of the bird kingdom" treats for many months.

Among their favorite perennials are bee balm, coral bells, foxglove, hollyhock, salvia, phlox, columbine and milkweed. Annuals include petunias, lantana, nasturtium, Mexican sunflower, sage and zinnias. Additional favorites include butterfly weed, delphiniums, geraniums, hostas, impatiens, iris, lupine, honeysuckle and more.

When we were at our daughter and son-in-law's home, we really enjoyed watching the hummers go after the blooms of their tremendously healthy stand of Carolina jasmine. These little guys also enjoy the numerous shrimp plants that they have placed throughout their back yard. Neither of these plants require much care (other than pruning the jasmine) and you'll get countless hours of pleasure from them.

Hummingbirds are truly an American treasure as they are found nowhere else in the world. Their nests are diminutive works of art; built with spider web and plant down on horizontal tree branches, they are just large enough to contain a few small (jelly-bean sized) eggs and the warming breast of the mama hummer. The nests are normally decorated with lichen which provides the necessary camouflage. Hummers love water – they are really fond of mists and sprays, so if you plant a garden with a combination of their favorite native nectar sources and a misty fountain, they will entertain you all summer!

Let's not forget the hummingbird feeders; they come in many sizes, shapes and colors. I recently saw a rather attractive feeder; it was red, the bottle was wine-shaped and it would be quite easy to fill since the top closure was a cork. Oops, we've had so many problems with raccoons destroying our feeders that I think a cork would give them carte blanche! The feeders are an important element in the hummingbird garden. They not only provide sugar water as an alternative but also supplement their natural food sources. The recipe for nectar and care of the feeders follows: Bring water to a boil and stir in sugar until dissolved (4 parts water to 1 part sugar). Boil the sugar water for 3-4 minutes. Cool to room temperature and fill your feeders. NOTE: I normally make this in large quantities once a week, and store in the refrigerator in Mason jars; be sure to allow the nectar to come to room temperature before hanging the feeders. Once the temperature reaches 80 degrees, the feeders should be cleaned every two days. Denture tablets work wonderfully in hard to clean feeders; once a month, they should be soaked in a mixture of ¼ cup bleach to a gallon of water. Be certain to rinse thoroughly before refilling. Red food coloring is NOT necessary; the jury is still out on whether or not it may be harmful, so why take the chance?

The high metabolism of the hummingbird dictates that they feed almost constantly. They can consume up to 50 percent of their weight in sugar (nectar solution) each day; they usually feed on nectar and insects, and lap up the nectar with their tongues.

Many people are concerned about ants and wasps at the hummingbird feeders; we've all noticed them competing for the nectar but gratefully, hummers almost always win out. I hear many suggestions for solutions to this problem to include using Vaseline and/or vegetable oil at the mouth of the feeders; however, Wild Birds Unlimited discourages these practices because it is too likely that the grease could get on the birds and make it difficult for them to clean their feathers properly. Again, why take the chance? There are 383 species of hummingbirds in the Americas, 16 of which reside in the U.S. Aren't we fortunate to see so many of them here?

Plant your gardens with hummer-friendly nectar bearing plants, put up feeders (the more you have, the more hummingbirds you'll have), and enjoy these little "jewels of the bird kingdom". Remember, if you hope to attract wildlife such as hummingbirds to your garden, it's imperative to practice environmentally friendly landscape management. Before using a pesticide or herbicide, evaluate whether or not you really need to use it or if you can find a viable "Earth Kind" alternative that won't potentially harm butterflies or hummingbirds.





In the middle of winter in southeast Texas, we often have teaser spring times. But this season, the winter snaps have breezed in one after the other causing the wind chimes to twinkle their music more often, and the trees to drop leaves that one would think finished months ago. I have been constantly shivering with cold even though it's warm inside -- must be a mind over matter thing when you know it's cold out. So in the mornings I cuddle on the sofa with abundant fleece and a hot cup of coffee, preparing myself for whatever the day brings. With the really cool temps, and no need to go out, a chick flick or a good book settle me just fine -- thank you very much! But spring is always on my mind.

Very recently the weather was almost balmy, such a nice respite from the cooler temps we've had this winter. Being a warm weather person, I've always enjoyed those kinds of days. That's when I go out and wander in my yard. I drink in the air, touch the crepe myrtle, smell the pine, and I look for little peepers.

Little peepers to me are a variety of things. They are the birds joyously relishing in the sunny weather, and having a mighty good time. They are the African Daisies still strutting their tall stalks and yellow blooms despite the below freezing temps a few days past. Even the Trailing Verbena, poking its little purple flower heads out here and there, are a real treat for winter. But I get a little concerned when I notice a peeper such as the hyacinth seed vines trying to lift out of the soil by the black wrought iron fence. I'm thinking, *not yet, pretty thing.*

A couple of days ago I saw a flock of little birds flitting all over my sun-filled backyard. There must have been dozens of them, various brown patchy ones, and black and white ones -- all very small -- perhaps nuthatches, titmice, or chickadees. I am not certain. They were flying in and out of the tree branches so quickly I couldn't capture them in my binoculars fast enough to know for sure what they were. Some were even creeping up the sides of trees. The sing-song twitters they made was like music to my ears. So cute to watch and wonder over and so sweet to listen to -- like seeing little laughing kids playing catch-me-if-you-can.

The very next day it was warm enough to move my plants out of the back porch greenhouse to give them some attention. While watering them out on the bright deck, I could almost hear their giggles of delight. A few short hours later their leaves rose up like kittens on their haunches, or puppies learning to shake with their paw. A couple of the pots revealed thumbnail-sized peepers ... newbie plants, so small they might have just been left there from fall waiting to show themselves this spring.

Since the past few days have been lovely, and a few more are promised, I am getting out of that winter funk. I'm feeling anxious and excited. This time, the warmth of spring has lasted long enough for birds to want to get out singing and playing. And the blue skies and sunshine seem to be teasing the plants into thinking, *spring time is near.* But Alas! I have to remind myself that spring is not quite here yet. There will be a few more cool snaps. But soon, very soon, I'll be raring to go with spade in hand in the flowerbeds and gardens, or just wandering around in awe of this great patch of earth God has created. Ah~~ springtime!



Committee Chair Information

On Thursday, January 15, the first class of the 2009 Training Session met at the Extension Office. The class, consisting of 25 members, received educational information on "Botany." During the next 14 weeks, Interns will experience classes on various horticultural topics as well as attending tours at A & M and Mercer Arboretum. The final class, held at Jean Marsh's home, will be on "Herbs." In addition to attending the educational training programs, Interns will complete at least 50 hours of volunteer service. Upon completion, members will receive Master Gardener certification. Billie Lee

Oliver Wendell Holmes:

On every stem, on every leaf ... and at the root of everything that grew, was a professional specialist in the shape of grub, caterpillar, aphid, or other expert, whose business it was to devour that particular part.



Just wanted to thank everyone for the successful start of the 2009 class. The Steering Committee works hard on the smooth running of the class and it shows! Many of the mentors and other MGs were present for support. We also had very good attendance at the seminar that evening on garden preparation by Dr. Bobby Lane of SHSU. He was very informative as usual. I want to remind everyone that dues are due for 2009 (Rowe will gladly accept the dues), and to check out the web page calendar for upcoming events. Thank you all. Mark

Committee Chair Information (con't)

The hospitality committee is comprised of eleven volunteers so far and our first meeting is Wed. Jan 21 to discuss plans for 2009. I know we will enjoy putting our events together and I will get the information out later as it is decided. Jean McLaren

The class schedule is on the Web. It is in the members only section. Also I have created a "training id" for interns to use to access this info. Bernie Polega

Check the website calendar regularly as there are special events coming soon! For example a Tree Planting class is February 5 at 6PM just before the Walker County Proud Tree Sale on February 14. Check for more information. Participation gives you recertification points for training and volunteerism. FYI: A new form is coming soon to use in submitting volunteer hours. These hours need

Helen Hayes:

All through the long winter, I dream of my garden. On the first day of spring, I dig my fingers deep into the soft earth. I can feel its energy, and my spirits soar.



Wee Three by Marion Czaja



The chipping sparrow, the pine siskin, and the American goldfinch are three small feathered friends who are out and about Huntsville this winter. These feathered friends look for friendly backyards with various feeders, plantings and even brush piles. The “wee three” are about 5 inches in length. The chipping sparrow, with its longer tail, stretches that to 5 ½ inches. The three mingle around the feeders and sometimes seem like “ants” moving around on the ground by the hundreds.

Each bird is distinctly colored. The chipping sparrow sports a thin black line through the eye. Beside that is a broad white eyebrow stripe. On top of the head is a rusty-brown cap. The belly is a grey-white. This sparrow is the most abundant of our small sparrows. They prefer pine-oak forests such as we have around Huntsville. The pine siskin is heavily streaked with chocolate marks. A patch of gold can be seen on the wing and at the base of the tail. This bird is irruptive. That means it wanders each winter and does not always follow a pattern. For some reason, this year the pine siskin is around Huntsville in great numbers. The last little one is the American goldfinch, certainly one of the most popular “feeder” birds. It has been called the “avian barometer” because we can judge the season by the color changes in this bird. Watch and see the dull colors of the males moving into bright gold as we move into and through February and March. Now you see the dull brown of the male and dull olive of the female. Each has black wings with two white wing bars. American goldfinches are drawn to feeders with sunflower seeds and/or niger seed.

Consider the pine siskin waking from a nighttime roost in your dense cedar/evergreen. They wait for the sun to warm the earth before venturing about to restore body fat lost in the cold overnight. With a distinctive call “wee-zee” or “shree” they lift off to your feeder or your plantings to build the fat layer again for the next night. The same experience is occurring with the chipping sparrow and the American goldfinch. These birds are survivalists. They search out seeds and complete a circuit each day. You can help these wee three find their fill by keeping your feeders clean and full now. In the spring and summer you can sew the seeds to yield grasses or flowers, such as sunflowers, that provide seed for these hungry birds. Stalks of plants with dead heads help keep these little jewels moving.

Shelter is also important to each species. Trees, shrubs and brush piles become important roosting and hiding places. If you complete some late fall/early winter pruning, create a pile to provide shelter from predators as well as the weather. I have watched these birds scramble into a pile as a hawk swooped towards a feeder. The smaller birds remained hidden as the hawk perched on top of the pile glaring.

Water is the last part of the triangle of needs for all birds—food, shelter and water. Because we do not have frequent freezes, it remains easy for us to keep a bird bath available to the wee three. Consider your backyard. Consider the wee three and enjoy the winter bird life as we move into spring.



Walker County Master Gardener Association

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