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Williamson County Master Gardener Journal

CONTENTS

MG's at McCoy Elementary

On Saturday, March 7, 2009, a few of the Master Gardeners went to McCoy Elementary in Georgetown to assist Tina Bertucci, a teacher at McCoy, in building the wonderful gardens she designed for the school. Not only did she design the garden, she wrote and secured a grant to pay for this endeavor.

In addition to the Master Gardeners, Bob Whitney, County Extension Agent, came with a shovel putting the Master Gardeners to shame. Tina secured the help of the Eagle Scouts in building the raised beds for the gardens. There were also other teachers, students and parents helping with the gardens.

Later on in the afternoon the cub scouts came to help. What a turn out.

Patsy Bredahl and Juanita James

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Upcoming Plant Sales

March 13th—at the greenhouse beginning at 9:00 a.m. This sale is for the GHS teachers, MG's and MG interns.

March 14th—10th Annual Georgetown Home and Garden Show at the show barn is in San Gabriel Park off Stadium Drive.… not far from our greenhouse. The show is from 9 until 4. and there will be four MG speakers to give presentations on herbs, ornamental plants, vegetable gardening, etc. These talks occur throughout the day. This is our "educational" contribution to this show.

April 11th—Market Days on the Square in Georgetown opening at 10:00 a.m. and closing at 5:00 p.m. We will need volunteers to tear down the booth and haul the left-over plants back to the greenhouse.

May 9th— Same as April 11th

Master **Gardeners** at work

MG's at McCoy Elementary in pictures

Images by Sally Todd, Patsy Bredahl, and Juanita James

From Bob's Blog

Some Williamson County Master Gardeners may not know that our County Extension Agent, Bob Whitney, has a web log ("blog," sort of an internet diary) at http://theagriculturalist.blogspot.com/ Here are some recent highlights:

Monday, February 16, 2009

Crape Myrtle Cultivars

Crape Myrtles continue to be one of the most popular and widely used landscape trees in Texas. Over the last several years Louisiana State University has evaluated numerous cultivars or varieties for quality, growth habit and susceptibility to diseases. The following list will help you as you select a variety for your landscape.

Natchez is recognized as the top performing crape myrtle in the test. It's white flowers and exfoliating (peeling) bark are characteristics of this cultivar, which reaches a height of 30 feet. It blooms for 110 days starting in June and has very large flowers.

Muskogee was introduced in 1978 and has medium-size, light-lavender flowers. Blooming period is excellent, beginning in mid-June and lasting 110-120 days. It has good tolerance to powdery mildew and leaf spot. Exfoliating bark is grayish tan, tan or medium brown. The bark of this variety exfoliates but not as much so as Natchez and Tuscarora. It reaches a mature height of more than 20 feet.

Tuscarora has coral pink flowers and is less susceptible to powdery mildew disease than many other varieties. It flowers for 70-80 days and reaches 25 feet in height. As this tree matures the bark will exfoliate more and more and is quite pretty.

Tonto is a semi-dwarf to medium height crape myrtle reaching 12 to 14 feet. The flowers are deep red and it flowers well into the fall months. As you can see you should buy crape myrtles by their mature height and not try to keep them pruned back.

Acoma was introduced by the U.S. National Arboretum and reaches a height of 10-14 feet. It is similar in size to Tonto. It has a weeping or cascading growth habit. White flowers appear in mid- to late June and last around 90 days. Its powdery mildew resistance is good. In some years, leaf spot can be found. Defoliation is not a problem. Its light-gray bark exfoliates as the plant nears maturity. It has good cold hardiness.

Sioux was recognized as a Georgia Gold Medal winner in 1996 and a Mississippi Medallion plant in1999. It was found to have good powdery mildew resistance in LSU AgCenter trials. It has some susceptibility to leaf spot. Its flowers are vivid pink and last from June through September. Mature height ranges from 10-15 feet but can vary widely.

Basham's Party Pink is tall growing crape myrtle similar to the Natchez. It has lavender-pink blooms as large as the Natchez. It has good disease tolerance like Muskogee.

Tuskegee has dark pink flowers has an average height of 15 to 20 feet. It has excellent disease resistance.

There is not much you have to do to a crape myrtle to keep it in fine form. If you're growing them like a tree you will have to remove the low growing branches as well as the sprouts from the plants base each year. You do not need to prune the top at all to promote flowering but pruning the old flowers and pods cleans it up. As far as insects go the only problem is aphids, usually in late August and September of some years. Aphids suck the plant juices and cause the honeydew we see when the leaves are real shiny. A rainy period or even a good soaking with the water hose helps to reduce aphid numbers. We really don't have many problems with disease until we put the crape myrtle in a closed in spot with no air drainage. This keeps the leaves wet and so diseases increase.

Native Alternative

A beautiful native alternative to Crape Myrtle is *Malpighia glabra L.*(Barbados Cherry, Manzanita, Wild crapemyrtle which develops into a thick, rounded canopy of fairly delicate foliage. It has small pink flowers that appear periodically from April to October and are followed about one month later by bright red, tart-tasting, 1-inch fruits which are high in vitamin C. Birds and mammals love the berries, butterflies nectar here and the leaves are larval food for several butterflies. Often, in a mild winter, the plant is an evergreen. Oh, and no powdery mildew!

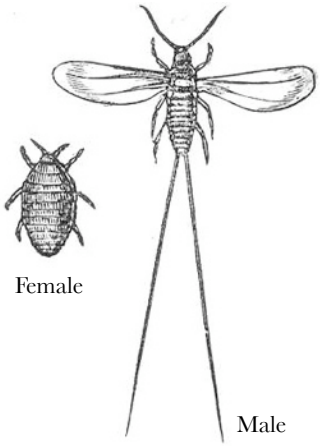
Master Gardener Meeting

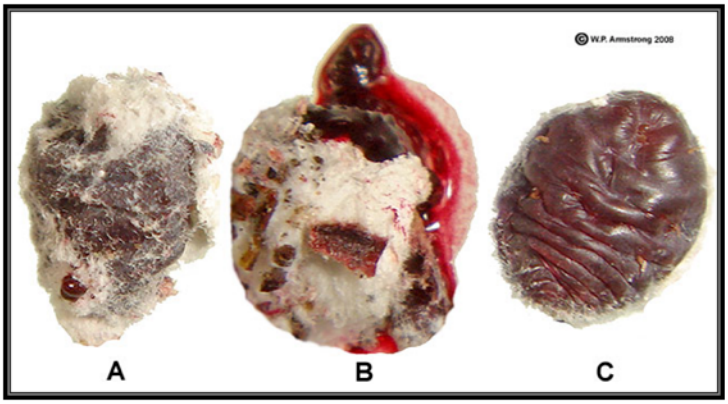
Pioneer uses of Native Plants

Wayne Rhoden

Our program on February 9th was given by Wayne Rhoden and was entitled "Pioneer Uses of Native Plants." Many of the pioneers used lore from the Native American Indians. They gained knowledge of the uses of the plants for medicine, dyes and shelter. I am sure they also tried some of the plants themselves during their time as well as teaching the Native Americans about the plants they brought with them that have now adapted to this country and are hard to distinguish from our native plants.

Wayne discussed many plants and their uses but one particular plant and the insect that calls that plant home was the *Dactylopius coccus* and the *Opuntia*. Found in South Texas and Mexico, the scale insect more commonly known as cochineal feeds on the moisture and nutrients of the pads of the prickly pear cacti. The insect produces carminic acid which deters predation from other insects. This acid can be extracted from the cochineals body and eggs to make carmine dye (also called cohineal). Nowadays, carmine is primarily used as a food coloring and in cosmetics. Yes Ladies, that's right, you are wearing "beetle juice" on your lips! The pictures show the insect on the prickly pear pad and the other pictures shows the insect itself.





You Can Help — Save Our Pollinators Now

As gardeners we all know how important pollinators are but did you know they are in serious danger of disappearing? Habitat loss, pesticide use and disease have taken a heavy toll on the creatures that pollinate our flowers and edible crops. We can help just by making our yards pollinator friendly. This is often just an easy task like leaving an small area unmulched so solitary bees can build their nests, or leaving a weedy area as a refuge for pollinators to shelter. If we all created our owe small wildlife area we could help immensely with a very dire situation.

A volunteer organization called www.polinator.org is in the process of creation free "Pollinator Friendly Planting Guides." The one for our area isn't ready yet but just type in your zip code and they will email it to you as soon as it is ready.

To learn more go to http://www.pollinator.org/

Raised Beds

Christine Powell

We seem to have a theme this issue so I thought some of you might like to see what they have been doing in San Francisco. After ten days of incredible action—sod removal, bed and ground preparation, installation of irrigation lines and fencing, the building of a fantastic soap box—the lawn in front of San Francisco's City Hall was transformed into the Slow Food Nation Victory Garden. It was a perfect planting day as 150 volunteers helped moved nearly 4,000

Scott Chernis

Leigh Farris

plants into their new homes. Teams divided into zones with their leaders and peacefully planted lettuce, tomatoes, beans, herbs, flowers and so much more. The day was glorious in its simplicity: take an urban plot of land and make it green. Meet your neighbor and do good. Grow food for people in need. These are all part of the vision and mission of Slow Food Nation to bring good, clean and fair food to all. What I found so fascinating, other that the removal of the lawn ofcourse, was how they made the raised beds. They used California rice straw in sack cloth and formed them into circular planting beds—totally sustainable and recyclable!

It goes to show that you can use virtually anything as a border for a raisedbed. Think outside of the box and let your imagination run wild.

How to build the four square food garden

George Whiting

1) Get 10 concrete blocks (Home Depo under $2 each)
2) arrange in a square (put in sunny area)
3) Fill the Square interior with compost, soil and Vegetable Potting soil
4) Fill each hole with the same.
5) Plant tight rows of favorite vegetables
6) Water twice a day.
7) Fertilize, once each 20 days.

Look how many things I got into a 6 sq ft area. From Left to Right: Radishes, Ridiccio, Red Onions, Chinese Cabbage, and Snow Peas(not up yet-far right). Just ten concrete blocks. Each well of each block has something growing in it. The upper left well has Simpson Lettuce.

A Master **Gardeners** Walks

...along the trails

Annette Banks

The promise of spring… mountain laurel buds, beckoning blossoms of the redbuds, and agarita shooting out shades of yellow.

On the last weekend of February, nine traveling friends and I marveled over them; I was intrigued by the abundant agarita in the wilds. Abundant it was: on the hikes to the canyon scenic overlooks, along the rugged paths, and beside the Frio River. It often melded with the mountain laurels, providing a centerpiece within the plant. I so wished that both were abloom to be able to view the purple and yellow mix and smell the two blended fragrances.

The agarita is known also as agarito, algerita, agritos, currant-of-texas, wild currant, chaparral berry. Other names used may be laredo mahonia, laredo oregon-grape, and trifoliate barberry.

Agarita is one of our first native plants to show color in early spring. It develops clusters of fragrant yellow flowers among its gray-green leaves that appear in groups of three and resemble holly leaves. The stiff evergreen leaves have spines along the edges of the needle-sharp points, which allows for wildlife covers or souvenir scratches from a close encounter with the agarita scrubs.

The brightest show of flowering is achieved in mid-spring. The flowering is followed by berry production. The scarlet berries ripen in summer, and the sweet/tart berries are used in jelly making. The flowers and berries make the agarita attractive to insects, butterflies, and birds, but it is deer-resistant.

The rounded agarita shrub grows up to six feet. It seems to anchor itself well in high and low spots, hilly or smooth areas; and it is low maintenance. It is extremely drought and heat tolerant; can withstand temperatures to 15 degrees F.; grows in full or partial sun, and survives in most soils, even in limestone beds. Agarita can be seen along the sloping limestone hills and within the flat areas of the western half of Texas, through Arizona, and into northern Mexico.

Today its primary use is in jelly and wine making. The early settlers used the wood for yellow dye. During World War II, the agarita roots were used for yellow dye that was used as one of the hues in the color-coded parachutes.

Propagation: the agarita is rather difficult to propagate from semi-hardwood cuttings. A more desirable method may be from seeds sown indoors before the last frost, or from seeds directly sown into the soil after the last freeze. If seeding, the seeds must be from fruit that is unblemished and overripe before harvesting. Be sure to clean and dry the seeds before planting.

As you follow the trails in Texas, follow your nose to the fragrant agarita. Some people compare it to the fragrance of narcissus.

Native Plants

Surprises After a Rain

Jim and Lynne Weber


Michael Dana

Magical things happen when it rains in the Texas hill country! Historically, spring and fall generally bring the most amount of precipitation to our area, and the flora and fauna respond accordingly. Exotic-looking rain lilies pop up and bloom a few days after a good rain, but what you might not know is that there are two species of this delicate plant that are native to central Texas.

Cooperia pedunculata, or hill country rain lily (top right), tends to have a main spring bloom season after significant rains occurring March through early August, although it can bloom sporadically over the rest of the growing season. These lilies begin to open slowly at dusk and are fully opened the next morning. An all white bloom with three petals and three sepals, the flower is trumpet-shaped, roughly two inches across, and is at the top of a single unbranched blue-green stem about five to nine inches high. The leaves are thin, long, and branch away from the stem at the base. The slightly fragrant bloom lasts only a day or two, turning from white to light pink as it fades.


Joseph S. Marcus

Often found in groups in meadows, open woodlands, and even roadsides, these lilies can be grown easily from seeds or bulbs and combine well with groundcovers or plants that have naturally short foliage. They are native to east and southwest Texas as well as adjacent Mexico, and have since spread east to Louisiana.

Cooperia drummondii, or evening rain lily (center right), tends to have a slightly later bloom season, occurring from late May through September, with the most frequent flowering in late summer and fall after a substantial rain. The solitary, fragrant, and ephemeral white flower is made up of six petals and tops a leafless, twelve inch stem. It too opens in the evening, and after two to four days the flower turns pink and withers. After it fades, the smooth, gray-green, grass-like leaves elongate. The bloom is quite similar to the hill country rain lily, but slightly smaller in terms of size.

Originally native to northern Mexico, the western two-thirds of Texas to New Mexico, and southeast Kansas and Louisiana, the evening rain lily has expanded its range to Oklahoma, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Alabama. It gets its species name from Thomas Drummond, a naturalist born in Scotland that arrived in Weslaco, Texas in 1833. He spent twenty-one months working the area between Galveston Island and the Edwards Plateau, focusing on plants and birds along the Brazos, Guadalupe, and Colorado rivers, and contributing extensively to natural history collections for museums and scientific institutions around the world.

The next time you see some of these elegant beauties gracing an open field or a grassy area on the side of a road, think of them as a treasured gift given to you by a recent rain and a reminder that rain brings more than just rainbows!


R.A. Howard @ USDA-NRCS

Master Gardener Basics

Back to the Basics

Winola VanArtsdalen

The Back to the Basics series continues this month with a discussion of layering, an easy, low-risk type of propagation that can give you many new plants for your flower beds or garden.

LAYERING

Layering is a rewarding type of asexual, vegetative propagation which gives new plants with the same characteristics as the parent plant. It is a "secure" way to start new plants, because the new plant is not deprived of the nourishment and water from the mother plant while getting established. A flexible stem is partially buried so that nodes that usually produce shoots above ground will produce roots under the ground. This happens naturally in nature with such plants as forsythia and ground covers.

To use the layering method to propagate plants, in mid-late spring choose young, vigorously growing plants with flexible stems. Just pinch off leaves in the middle of a branch of last year's growth with at least one node in the soil and bury 1" to 3" deep. Anchor with leaf tip exposed. You may cut a "wound" in the stem with a sharp, clean blade and use a little root hormone, or you can just break the branch a little. Be sure that the stem is well-anchored, or it will pop right back up! From this point on, the plant needs very little attention. This procedure is so easy, that you are tempted to totally forget about the plant until the next fall when it is time to transplant. Actually, you do need to check once in awhile that the node is still buried and that the ground is kept evenly moist. With our dry summer this past year, I totally forgot about the pictured rosebush and that buried stem. When I remembered, late in the summer, I started watering consistently, and it was well rooted when it was time for winter transplanting. (With an herbaceous plant, I would have transplanted in the fall, but, with roses, I wait until winter after a good freeze.) In the layering procedure just described, you bury the middle of a branch. Another type of simple layering is tip layering. It differs in that you only bury the tip of a branch. This method is commonly used with raspberries and trailing blackberries.

To root plants with flexible stems, you can use compound layering. As in the method described in the preceding paragraph, you bury a part of the stem to cause rooting at a node, but you can alternately bury and expose sections of the stem to root several nodes at the same time. Anchor each wounded, buried part of the stem with a stone. You still have the secure procedure where the new plants are able to use nourishment and water from the mother plant, and you will have several new plants. In the second picture shown, I used compound layering last year in early summer to start four new rose bushes of "Green Ice," a vigorous, flexible-stemmed miniature rose, for a new flower bed. I also rooted one stem cutting which was ready to be planted in the fall. By January, these other four plants from compound layering were ready to join that one started from a stem cutting in the space "reserved" for them in the flowerbed. A few weeks before planting, I scratched the ground to be sure roots were formed and then cut the sections apart, severing them from each other and the mother plant. I then left them a few weeks to form additional roots. By mid-January when I was ready to transplant them, they were strong and self-sufficient, ready for their new home, so I can enjoy my grouping of five miniature rose bushes.

The above layering methods discussed a "secure" way to start new plants, because the new plant is not deprived of the nourishment and water from the mother plant while getting established. This method did, however, require plants with a flexible stem. If you would like to try layering, but have a plant with an inflexible stem, you can air layer it. You can improve the appearance of a "leggy" mother plant and have a new plant as well! See next month's "Back to the Basics" section of the newsletter for step-by-step instructions using air-layering, an easy, rewarding and exciting technique of propagation.

It's Not Too Late!

Sow Now for Summer Blooms

When we think about growing wildflowers, we typically plan to sow seeds in autumn for spring flowers. Yes, it is too late to start Texas bluebonnets and Indian paintbrush for this spring; however, it is just the right time to throw out seed for summer and fall wildflowers. As the weather warms, the seeds will germinate and continue to grow, giving us cheerful color later in the season. Methods for sowing now are the same as for spring: seeds need good soil contact, water (irrigate if necessary to ensure a good show), and, for the most part, full sun. Here are a few easy late-season wildflowers to try now. For more information about Texas native plants, visit the Wildflower Center's website at: www.wildflower.org.

Prairie agalinis *(Agalinis heterophylla)* left—this lovely little annual grows in the prairies and plains, grasslands and fallow fields, sometimes on rocky soils or in open woodlands, usually somewhat moist soil in a line from Grayson to Cameron counties eastward; MO and OK to LA and TX.

Partridge pea *(Chamaecrista fasiculata)* right — This wildflower provides bright summer color, and the flowers attract bees and butterflies. Seed pods are eaten by gamebirds and songbirds, and the plant provides excellent cover for gamebirds and browse for deer. Leaves collapse when touched, giving rise to the common name Sensitive-plant. Like other members of the pea family, Partridge-pea requires the presense of microorganisms that inhabit nodules on the plants root system and produce nitrogen compounds necessary for the plants survival.

Goldenwave (*Coreopsis basalis*) or (*Coreopsis tinctoria*) left—This prevailingly western annual has escaped from cultivation in the East. It is widespread in the West and the South in disturbed areas, such as moist ditches. Because of its showiness, the flower is cultivated extensively, hence its common name.

Eryngo (*Eryngium leavanworthii*) right — The eryngos are not true thistles and are often confused with thistles, due to similarity in both appearance and habitat preference. Splashing fields a brilliant purple, it provides an excellent source for late summer and early fall color.

Snow-on-the-mountain (*Euphorbia marginata*) left — Grown as much for its foliage as for its flowers, snow-on-the-mountain's small but showy leaves may be light green, variegated or entirely white. They clasp erect, many-branched stems which grow 1-3 ft. tall. Tiny flowers, each with whitish, petal-like bracts, are borne in clusters atop the stems. Please be aware that all parts of this plant is poisonous.

Indian blanket (*Gaillardia pulchella*) right — Frequent along roadsides in the Southwest, these wildflowers stand like hundreds of showy Fourth of July pinwheels at the top of slender stalks. Varieties are popular in cultivation, for they tolerate heat and dryness. Among several species in the Southwest, some flowers are entirely yellow.

Common sunflower (*Helianthus annuus L.)* left —The state flower of Kansas. The heads follow the sun each day, facing eastward in the morning, westward at sunset; the name in Spanish means looks at the sun. The plant has been cultivated in Central North America since pre-Columbian times; yellow dye obtained from the flowers, and a black or dull blue dye from the seeds, were once important in Native American basketry and weaving. Native Americans also ground the seeds for flour and used its oil for cooking and dressing hair. In the 19th century it was believed that plants growing near a home would protect from malaria. In the United States and Eurasia seeds from cultivated strains are now used for cooking oil and livestock feed. Many variants have been developed, some with one huge head topping a stalk 9-16 (3-5 m) tall, others with maroon rays. Prairie Sunflower (*H. petiolaris*), found throughout the Great Plains and similar to the wild forms of Common Sunflower, has scales on the disk in the center of the head tipped by white hairs, easily visible when the central flowers are spread apart. Developed in a single large head variety by Russians.

Tahoka daisy *(Machaeranthera tanacetifolia)* left — Tahoka-daisy is a low, spreading, 6-12 in. annual with delicate but showy, aster-like flowers. Numerous lavender rays surround a yellow center. The stems are densely covered with sharp-pointed, deeply cut leaves which appear fern-like. Plants often form clumps or mounds.

Clammyweed *(Polanisia dodecandra)* right — Sticky short hairs cover this strong-smelling, branched plant which has palmately compound leaves and racemes of white or cream flowers. The common name, Clammyweed, refers to the sticky, moist glands on the surface of this plant.

Scarlet sage, tropical sage *(Salvia coccinea)* left— This showy southern native is characterized by the loose, widely spaced nature of the flowering spike. It is found in the hot sands of the South. The flamboyant, cultivated member of this group, Scarlet Sage (S. splendens), was introduced from Brazil.

Taken from Neil Sperry's e-newsletter, images courtesy of the LBJWC.

"Bug" of the month

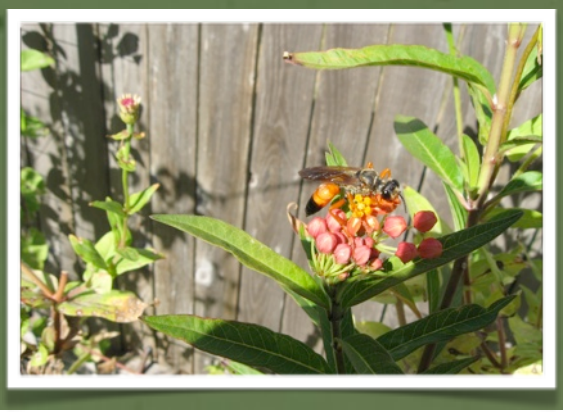
This month's "bug" is the paper wasp. These insects are often maligned and killed without regard to the good that they do. I know it is hard when one is building a nest on your porch to ignore them and I do the same since I have been stung several times even though I did not provoke them. Simply walking by the nest will sometimes make them attack you.

Paper wasps are 3/4 to 1 inch long, slender, narrow-waisted wasps with smoky black wings that are folded lengthwise when at rest. Body coloration varies with species: *Polistes exclamans* is brown with yellow markings on the head, thorax and bands on the abdomen; Polistes carolina is overall reddish-brown. Paper wasps should not be confused with yellowjackets (*Vespula squamosa Drury*) and baldfaced hornets (*Dolichovespa maculata (Linnaeus)*). Paper wasp nests are open and cells are not covered with a cap (in an envelope).

Life Cycle: Paper wasps are semi-social insects and colonies contain three castes: workers, queens and males. Fertilized queens, which appear similar to workers, overwinter in protected habitats such as cracks and crevices in structures or under tree bark. In the spring they select a nesting site and begin to build a nest. Eggs are laid singly in cells and hatch into legless grub-like larvae that develop through several stages (instars) before pupating. Cells remain open until developing larvae pupate. Sterile worker wasps assist in building the nest, feeding young and defending the nest. A mature paper wasp nest may have 20 to 30 adults. In late summer, queens stop laying eggs and the colony soon begins to decline. In the fall, mated female offspring of the queen seek overwintering sites. The remainder of the colony does not survive the winter.

Pest Status: Nests commonly occur around the home underneath eaves, in or on structures and plants; wasps attack when the nest is disturbed and each can sting repeatedly; stings typically cause localized pain and swelling, but in sensitive individuals or when many stings occur (as with most arthropod stings) whole body (systemic) effects can occur including allergic reactions that may result in death; males are incapable of stinging because the stinger on the females is a modified egg-laying structure (ovipositor) and it is not present in males; wasps feed on insects, including caterpillar pests, and thus are considered to be beneficial insects by many gardeners.

Wayne Rhoden
Entmologist Specialist



Master Gardener Basics

Who Needs 100 Onions?

Patty Hoenigman

This had been my first winter garden in Texas. It's been interesting watching it progress. The raised beds my husband built will last forever, made of 2 x 12 wood, anchored with enormous bolts through 4 x 4's in the corners. Not even a Texas Tornado could blow them away! Then we had twelve cubic yards of soil delivered from Gardenville. Oh my goodness...that was a whole lot of dirt!!! It took several weeks and the help of a kind friend for the three of us to get it to the back yard. We filled all of the six raised beds, and had a huge pile left over. But the delivery charge was the same weather we ordered one yard or twelve, so we got the mother load.

Then the fun began. A trip out to the Natural Gardener found us taking two of this and three of that. At $1.49 a pot, who could resist? So I tried a red chard, a yellow chard and a white one. Two cauliflowers, some variegated Pok Choi...different than the Bok Choy, so of course I had to try it! And many other irresistibles. Then the winter fun began.

We used to live in San Diego where the weather report was inconsequential...it was always seventy-four degrees and sunny. But here in Austin, we have the weather station on speed dial ! So every time the weather man said FREEZE we realized we had to protect our babies from the frost, which meant running outside when winds were whipping around and we were half frozen, to drape sheets over the beds. That's when those extra lengths of PVC pipe came in handy to quick tuck the edges in so the winds wouldn't turn the sheets into sails. We didn't lose a single plant! But those expensive bags of pre-cleaned spinach at the grocery store started sounding really cheap when I began doing a mental tally of all that we'd spent and the hours of hard work to grow two dozen plants.

Overall, I'd give the chard a low grade...they just didn't produce well and the bugs seem to like them just as much as I do! The flat and curly parsleys are both a rich green and those plants have continued to grow very happily despite the radical shifts in temperature. We had a dinner party and served kohlrabi, much to everyone's delight...it's as innocuous as jicama and perfect fresh from the garden without having to cook it or garnish it with anything!

Well, then some space became available in the garden, so a trip to Lowe's found me checking out with a hundred onion sets. Now I ask you, who needs 100 onions??? But that's the only way they were sold. So I planted fifty and gave the rest to a neighbor. That means I can't give her the grown ones because she'll have plenty of her own...so will have to find another happy recipient in 120 days! So far they're sprouting taller and taller and looking very happy with minimal effort.

And the only way I could buy Brussels Sprouts was in a 9-pack. And who needs nine of those? I'm the only one in our household who's going to eat them, so I planted two and gave seven away. But I just love watching how they grow on that tall stem with the little cabbages sprouting off the sides. That's a very cool plant!

There is something about the economy of having a home garden that reminds me a lot of the way our government is run these days. The costs keep mounting higher and higher, and yet we keep spending! Perhaps the concept of a $50 tomato has become the new American way. But at least I can sit down to dinner and know that what I spent my money on is good for me!

First JMG Meeting Held

Monday, February 2, 2009, at 6 P.M. We had the first JMG committee meeting at the home of Juanita James. In attendance were Patsy Bredahl, Grace Bulgerin, Nancy Moore, Anne Siems, Joan Adams, Jane Williamson, George Whiting, Carey Thornell with two junior master gardeners, Lauren and Scarlett, Tina Bertucci and Juanita James. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss our future plans with JMG and to get ideas of where everyone wanted to see JMG programs happen. Below are pictures of some of the Committee Members in attendance.

Juanita James and Patsy Bredahl

Amaranth, Crop of the Future?

Grace Bryce

Recently, a friend of mine returned from a trip to Belize, raving about a wonderful vegetable she had eaten there. Her hostess had sauteed amaranth leaves with basil and garlic. She asked if I knew where she could find it, so she could plant it in her garden. I also had a curiosity about amaranth, so the research began. The name amaranth, comes from the Greek word *amarantos*, meaning everlasting or unfading, which describes the blooms.

Amaranth is also known as Chinese spinach. The genus, Amaranthus, is mother to about 60 to 70 species with the inflorescences and foliage ranging from purple to red to gold. The seed head blooms can look like dreadlocks or like a big feather, depending on the species. Some species are primarily ornamental and some are primarily edible. *A. tricolor* (Joseph's Coat) is a vegetable amaranth used in Asian cuisine. *A. caudatus* (Love-Lies-Bleeding), *A. Hydochondriacus* (Prince's Feather) and *A. cruentus* (pictured right) are three species that are commonly grown for grain, but the leaves are also edible. So, this wonderful plant can be cooked as a vegetable, as it is in many countries, tender leaves can be added to a salad or soup, or grain can be harvested from it. The grain doesn't have a husk, so it is easily cleaned. The grain or seeds can be cooked as a cereal, ground for a gluten-free flour, or oddly enough, popped like miniature popcorn and used as a garnish. The popped seeds can also be made into a candy bar with chocolate and honey. In Mexico, they make a treat called alegría. It is considered by the Global Faction Unit as an under-utilized crop. In Nigeria it is called "efo tete or arowo jeja", which means, "we have money left over for fish". Maybe the other name, "pigweed", has put people off in this country.

Amaranth could be our "crop of the future", since it is inexpensive to grow, is easily harvested, produces a great quantity of seeds (used as grain), is drought tolerant and can stand the heat, and grows fast. A typical yield is 1200 pounds of grain per acre. Grain amaranth grows to a height of 4 - 6 feet. The growing season is from May through the fall. Young tender leaves can be harvested 4-6 weeks after sowing. Larger leaves can be cooked in a variety of ways. The grain crop is harvested during a dry day after the first frost. The plant material must be dry enough to harvest. Harvest time can be tricky, since the seeds are so small and many can be lost. They also must be properly cleaned and dried to prevent mold.

For more information about growing amaranth see:
www.underutilized-species.org
http://www.jeffersoninstitute.org/pubs/amaranth.shtml
attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/PDF/amaranth.pdf
www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/afcm/amaranth.html

Amaranth has many beneficial health characteristics in that it is high in calcium, iron, magnesium, phosphorus, copper and manganese. Amaranth, also known as a pseudo-cereal, is 30% higher in protein than other cereals and is also rich in lysine. It is a good source of fiber. Studies have shown that regular consumption of amaranth seed or oil may be beneficial for people with high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease, improving antioxidant status, immunity and lowering cholesterol levels. Amaranth is recommended for people with a low red cell count, in traditional medicine.

Amaranth was used by many ancient cultures for food, medicine and ceremonies. Among the ancient people it was a symbol of immortality. The Hopi use Red Dye Amaranth to make red cornbread. The Maya use it to treat anemia, tiredness, constipation and poor nutrition. The entire plant can be boiled in water and used for cleaning wounds and sores. The leaves can be juiced in the blender and consumed for anemia and the chewed pulp can be applied to scrapes to stop bleeding. (Rainforest Remedies, Arvigo) The Aztecs used amaranth ceremonially by making images of their gods with amaranth and honey, then after worship, they would cut up the images and the people would eat them. This looked too much like Christian communion to the Spanish friars and the use of amaranth was banned for centuries. Interest in amaranth was renewed in the 1970's and it was recovered from wild varieties in Mexico.

Amaranth is currently grown in the Mexico, many of the Central American, South American and African countries, India, Nepal and China. In the U.S., the Amaranth Institute, made up of growers, researchers and marketers, promotes and supports amaranth production, science and marketing. The Jefferson Institute in Missouri, provides information and technical assistance for farmers and will even make farm visits. The University of Nebraska has produced an Amaranth Production Manual for the Central United States, which is full of information on growing amaranth. There is a lot of cultivation information available, unfortunately the word isn't out to consumers about the wonderful healthy vegetable and grain, amaranth. Fortunately, it fits into my garden.

Meet Your Master Gardeners

John Papich

Each month we will be spotlighting one of the Master Gardeners in our group. Getting to know each other is something that we don't really seem to have time to do, so hopefully, this will be a way to make some more "connections" with the people in our group.— Sandra Rosen

Like most of us, John's experiences as a young gardener nearly guaranteed that someday he would come back to gardening. When John was eleven, his family moved to Florida from Philadelphia—a new house with little landscaping. John's father let John fix up the yard. "Knock yourself out," he said and John did. He planted palm trees and foundation plants—not a landscape designer's dream—but for John, at eleven years old, it was an exciting accomplishment.

Later John was drafted into the army and then spent many years in Maryland - not an area conducive to gardening. In 1980, he left the cold, long winters of Maryland for San Jose, California. San Jose is sixty miles south of San Francisco, the exciting area of the high tech world, and, of course, glorious weather! (They seldom, seldom used air conditioning.) John's love of landscape gardening came back. There were fern trees and tropical plants with many spots of color in his yard. During these years—1980 to 2004—John worked as the instructor for an insurance company's training programs. In his administrative job, he set up and taught classes dealing with "how to" issues for incoming employees.

In California, the Master Gardener program was taught through the local community colleges and was a one to two year program, so when John moved to Texas, one of the first things he did was to take the Travis County Master Gardener program. Lucky for us, of course, he moved his membership to Williamson County as soon as possible. John's earlier work experience and his desire to help make him a very valuable asset in our program. He spends quite a bit of time each day helping to set up the Master Gardener programs and also does most of the record keeping. (This is not a paid position—we thank you John!)

John enjoys landscape gardening in Sun City and finds especially challenging, as we all do, the deer problem. He appreciates the physical labor of gardening and also the end results that for him are meditative and esthetically satisfying. He believes that soil preparation and maintenance are the keys to successful gardening.

John rides ten miles a day on his bicycle and likes reading a good mystery. He also volunteers with the Georgetown Symphony. John Papich is a very good man and another "true" gardener.

2009 Texas Master Gardener State Conference
April 23-24 & 25, 2009
Marshall, Texas.

Make plans to join us for the 2009 Texas Master Gardener State Conference that will be held in beautiful East Texas.
For more information:
Harrison County Master Gardener Association
c/o Extension Office, 102 West Houston
Marshall, TX. 75670
(903) 935-8413
See this link for more information:
http://tcaaa.tamu.edu/09statemeeting.htm

Treats from the Master Garden

Spring. Asparagus. What more can you want?

Margaret Seals

My Grandmother who was a new bride in the early 1900s thought that white, sliced bread was the pinnacle of the slippery slope toward instant gratification, but as soon as it came to her neck of the woods, she bought it with relish and banned her wooden bread dough bowl to the sewing room to store buttons. (What fun I had playing in that collection as a child!) In the age of microwaves and toaster waffles, it seems quaint that sliced bread was such a leap forward, but so it was. This is all by way of thinking about my spring garden, if you can believe it, for as I thought about my favorite spring vegetable, I was reminded once more that few of today's gardeners (me included) can bear the three year wait for asparagus to produce a crop, and opt instead for radishes! I wonder why the gurus over at Aggie land haven't managed to give us an asparagus plant that pops up fruit ready to eat like a toaster waffle for instant gratification. There is just no other vegetable, as far as I'm concerned, that I'd like to be harvesting NOW.

Alice Waters, chef of the famous Chez Panisse restaurant who started the "eat fresh, eat seasonally, eat locally" movement in California all those years ago, writing in her 2007 book (which should be titled "Recipe Heaven"), *The Art of Simple Food, Notes, Lessons and Recipes from a Delicious Revolution*, devotes a whole page to asparagus and the cooking of same. She covers it all: thick, thin, the snapping and peeling, boiling, steaming, and roasting; asparagus hot and asparagus cold in all of its colors: green, purple and white. Then she furnishes what I consider to be the most delicious asparagus side dish ever tasted (with the exception of plain old steamed asparagus, no seasoning): **Asparagus and Lemon Risotto** (For 4 Servings):

1 lb fresh asparagus
1 lemon
2 T butter, plus 1 T butter
1 small onion, diced fine
1 ½ C Risotto Rice
5 C chicken broth (or use water for a vegetarian version)
½ C dry white wine
½ C grated Parmesan cheese

Snap off the ends of 1 lb of fresh asparagus. Cut the spears on a diagonal into ¼ inch pieces. Remove the zest from 1 lemon. Cut the lemon in half and squeeze the juice. Melt in a heavy-bottomed 2 ½ qt to 3 qt saucepan over medium heat, 2 T butter. Add 1 small onion, diced fine. Cook until the onion is translucent, about 10 min. Add 1 ½ C risotto rice (Arborio, Carnaroli, Baldo or Vialone Nano) Cook the rice, stirring now and then, until translucent, about 4 min. Do not let it brown.

(Meanwhile, in another pan, bring to a boil and then turn off, 5 C chicken broth.)

Stir the lemon zest into the sautéed rice, and then pour in ½ C dry white wine. Cook stirring fairly often until the wine is absorbed. Add 1 C of the heated chicken broth at first, and then add ½ C at a time to the rice, cooking at a vigorous simmer and stirring occasionally until the rice starts to get thick. Keep adding the broth in this manner being sure to not let the rice dry out. After 12 minutes, stir in the asparagus. Cook until the rice is tender, about 20-30 min. in all. When the rice is just about done, stir in half the lemon juice and add 1 T butter and ½ C grated Parmesan cheese. Stir vigorously to develop the creamy starch. Taste for salt and lemon juice, adding more if needed. Turn off the heat, let the risotto sit uncovered for 2 minutes, and serve. Add a splash of broth if the rice becomes too thick.

I am also partial to asparagus in soup and love this **Creamed Asparagus Soup** from James Patterson, the food columnist for the *New York Times*, in Vegetables (Serves 8-12 C soup):

3 T butter
1 large Idaho potato (12 oz), peeled and cut into ¼ inch thick slices
2 lb fresh asparagus, 4-5 inch tips only, cut into 1 inch segments
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
1 med onion or whites from 4 med leeks, minced
6 C whole milk, or chicken broth or a combination
¼ C to 1 C heavy cream

In a separate pot, boil the asparagus tips for 3 min in salted water. Drain in a colander, and rinse with cold water. Set aside. Reserve a few for garnishing your soup. Heat the butter in a 4 qt heavy, non aluminum saucepan over med heat. Add the onion and cook, stirring, until it turns translucent, about 8 min. Add the prepared asparagus tips and potato slices and the milk or broth and bring to a gentle simmer. Simmer for about 20 min, or until the potato and vegetables have completely softened and are easy to crush against the side of the pot with the back of a fork. Remove from the heat, and puree in a blender in small batches. (Take care that the hot liquid does not splash out of the blender. Hold a cloth over the top as you turn it on.) Return the soup to the pan, add the cream to the consistency you like, and reheat carefully. Add salt and pepper to taste, and garnish with a fresh cooked asparagus tip before serving.

The next recipe comes from those famous chefs at (of all places) *The Reader's Digest Eat to Beat High Blood Pressure*. They state that asparagus contains (among other good things) rutin, a phyto-chemical that is an antioxidant flavoniod working hand -in -hand with vitamin C to maintain blood vessel health. They also point out that this dish contains 37 mg Magnesium, 475 mg Potassium, 27 mg vitamin C and 48 mg calcium for those of you who are counting. What I think it contains beside all that is a very nice twist of flavors for asparagus, and one that you will want to serve over and over: Sesame Stir-Fried Asparagus and Peas (Serves 4):

2 teaspoons hulled sesame seeds
1 ¼ lb fresh asparagus
1 teaspoon olive oil
½ C minced red onion
1 clove garlic, slivered
1 C fresh or frozen green peas
Salt to taste

Toast sesame seeds in a small, heavy skillet over low heat stirring frequently until golden brown, about 3 min. Transfer to plate to prevent further cooking.

Cut asparagus on diagonal into 2 inch lengths. Spray large non stick skillet or wok with nonstick cooking spray. (The olive oil type is good.) Add the olive oil and heat over med heat. Add onion and garlic, and stir fry until onion is tender, about 5 min.

Add asparagus, peas and salt to pan and stir fry until asparagus is crisp/tender and peas are heated through, about 5 min.

Sprinkle sesame seeds over asparagus, peas and toss to combine.

This dish can be served directly or served over cooked pasta (penne is good). Add a dollop of fat-free sour cream, and you have a party dish! If you have some asparagus growing in your garden, lucky you! Want to share your crop? Call me. I'll be right over with some radishes to trade.

"New Frontiers" in horticulture and gardening

March 22-26, 2009

The Las Vegas International Master Gardener Conference will address issues that gardeners everywhere face—water conservation, proper plant selection, soil enrichment, pest control -- while also presenting new concepts in environmental stewardship and "green" technologies. Since what is old has become new again, we will also explore historical and traditional plants and methods.

September 28 – October 2, 2009 Master Volunteer Entomology Specialist Training

Texas AgriLife Extension Service Montgomery County Office, Conroe, TX

Hosted by Dr. Paul R. Nester, Extension Program Specialist, Houston/Metro area, and the Montgomery County Master Gardeners.

- Registration fee of $300.00 includes collecting kit with lots of goodies; lectures; Extension bulletins; 3 lunches, 1 dinner, snacks & drinks
- Transportation and lodging is on your own
- Course is limited to 25 applicants; deadline is July 18, 2009

Contact Paul Nester at PNester@ag.tamu.edu or 281-855-5639 with any questions.

Registration material

President's Column

Time to start Mowing...

Wayne Rhoden

Hello Master Gardeners!

It is almost time to start mowing grass again and go through the weekly cycle in the heat of the summer. If you have Bermuda grass or Buffalo grass you can smile at the rest of us who have St. Augustine grass because you do not have to do as much as we to get the lawn started this year. However we all must be wise in the use of water when we irrigate our lawn whether it is any of the above grasses. Since we are still in a severe drought we need to water and fertilize wisely to avoid runoff of the water and fertilizer into our streams and lakes. We need to water deeply at least once a week to provide the water needed to maintain a healthy lawn. Frequent, shallow watering causes the roots of the grass to be shallow and to need water more frequently. If you have an irrigation system, you may have to use two or three cycles on your system to prevent water runoff. There are many publications at the Extension Office dealing with cutting, fertilization and watering specific types of grasses and you should pick up one of those for your particular type of grass.

I have been busy cutting back my roses and other perennials and have the scars to show for it. I love my roses but they seem to resist any effort to trim them back and to seize every opportunity to sink a thorn into my arm. I am sure they will give me a good show later this year.

Do not forget that we will be having a plant sale at the Georgetown Home and Garden Show on March 14th , starting at 9:00 am and that several of your members will be giving programs during the show. Even if you do not need to buy plants (unbelievable) come out to support your fellow members while they are giving presentations on vegetable gardening, herbs, butterfly gardening and ornamental plants. We hope to see you there.

Seed Cleaning Parties

Seed cleaning parties are starting again. The next party will be on Saturday March 14, 10 am—2pm. The usual pizza and gossip will be available! So pass the word.

Let Flo (oxley@wildflower.org) know if you are going to attend so she can make sure there is space for you and seed to clean.

Submissions?

If you would like to contribute to the *Williamson County Master Gardeners Journal* please send your articles, item, and photographs to Christine Powell at xtinepowell@verizon.net by the 25th of the month. Remember to include captions and attribution details. The Editor is grateful to all those who have submitted items in the past and would like to thank those who would like to send things in the future. Thank you!

Williamson County Master Gardener Association Officers for 2008

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Mailing address: 3151 Inner Loop Road, Suite A, Georgetown, TX 78626

Monthly Meetings

Williamson County Master Gardeners hold monthly meetings at the Williamson County Extension Office, 3151 SE Innerloop Road, Suite A, Georgetown on the second Monday of each month at 6:00pm. Master Gardeners and the public are welcome to attend.