

A close-up photograph of a bowl filled with various types of potatoes, including red-skinned, yellow-skinned, and russet varieties. The bowl has a white base with a green floral pattern. The background is dark and out of focus.

February 2012

The Compost Bin

A Publication of the Travis County Master Gardeners - a volunteer program of Texas AgriLife Extension

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**How to Have a Lovely
Garden and Eat it Too**

Renee Studebaker

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Photo by Becky Waak

February Meeting Speaker — Renee Studebaker March Meeting Speaker — Sandra Taylor

How to Have a Lovely Garden and Eat it Too. Vegetables and herbs add seasonal color and texture to the home landscape -- and extra food for the table.

- Renee Studebaker

Renee Studebaker is the former garden blogger and food columnist at the Austin American-Statesman. She was born into a gardening and farming family in Arkansas, where she learned early on that the best green beans do not come from a can, and the best summertime meals always come with a side of sliced home-grown tomatoes.

Master Gardener Meeting information:
Wednesday, February 1, 2012 starting at 7 pm.
Zilker Botanical Garden

Wildfire Preparedness - Sandra Taylor

Sandra Taylor, Fire Prevention Specialist with the Texas Forest Service, will be speaking to us on the timely topic of "Wildfire Preparedness." With the severe drought still in full effect in Travis County, and several area neighborhoods already ravished by wildfires, we all are concerned about what we can do to better protect our property. Sandra has trained area firefighters on wildfires, and informing residents on wildfire prevention. Spring is a good time to make landscape adjustments to better protect our property. So, attend our March 7 meeting at 7pm, Zilker Botanical Gardens, to learn what you might do to improve the chances of your property surviving a wildfire.

Master Gardener Meeting information:
Wednesday, March 7th, 2012 starting at 7 pm.
Zilker Botanical Garden

Hello Master Gardeners: A Message From Your President

While it's still only January, it's timely to remind everyone of the annual requirements of 24 hours of volunteer time, and 6 hours of continuing education. Rather than having to worry next September or October as to how you're going to meet your 2012 requirements, why not vow to meet these minimum requirements before the end of summer. We've got a number of activities planned where you can put in those hours and have fun, too. Here are some highlights.

Educational Hours

You can easily get your educational hours by attending the monthly meetings, but not everyone can fit those meetings into their busy schedules. One option is attending monthly educational sessions held at either Zilker or the Extension Office. To track those educational sessions, go to <http://www.tcmastergardeners.org/what/edseminars.html>. Look for other appropriate training offered by entities like the City of Austin, i.e., the Grow Green sessions in February. If you have any questions about whether a class will count, contact our Horticulture Agent, Daphne Richards, to ask for approval before attending the session. Also look for email from Daphne announcing different training opportunities that will meet your educational requirement.

In addition, TAMU sponsors a number of opportunities, such as periodic multi-day sessions on landscaping (<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/southerngarden/LDFeb10/AnnouncLDIV2,10.html>), and various specialist classes. You can even get up to three educational hours at no cost by taking the on-line training class on EarthKind gardening offered by TAMU.

Volunteer Hours

It's going to be a busy year, with plenty of projects where you can get your volunteer hours.

Zilker Garden Festival

The greenhouse is already busy with preparations for the Zilker

Garden Festival (March 31 – April 1, 2012). Look for email from Chris Giaraffa announcing special workdays, as well as the monthly workday. On a recent special workday, MGs seeded over 30 flats of vegetables, and soon those seedlings will need to be bumped up to larger containers. There are always plenty of greenhouse tasks needing workers; just let Chris know you want to help. Also, during the Zilker Garden Festival there will be opportunities to work at the TCMGA plant sales booth and plant clinic booth. The Austin Area Garden Council will need volunteers as well, for many different positions. Remember, you can earn up to 4 volunteer hours by completing different AAGC tasks. Bill Woodward, Volunteer Coordinator, will be looking for volunteers to help with both the TCMGA booths and AAGC tasks.

East Austin Garden Fair

Shortly after the Zilker Garden Festival we will have the East Austin Garden Fair - April 14, 2012. Manda Rash is coordinating the fair, and will be looking to all of us to work at many different booths. If you haven't worked at one of our previous EAGFs, you're in for a treat. It's a lot of fun sharing information with the attendees. Again, there will be work at the greenhouse getting donation plants ready for the Fair, and Bill will help Manda find volunteers to help with booths. If you want to help with pre-Fair activities, talk with Manda.

Extension Office Demonstration Garden

The Demo Garden Team has many plans for upgrading the demonstration garden and adding new features. Monthly workdays are announced via TCMGA Yahoo email – watch for those notices. If you have any questions, contact Richard Moline, Rosalie Russell or Joe Posern. Also, the Demo Garden Team and Roz Garrett need help with the JMG/Campfire USA children's project.

Help Desk

There are many opportunities each month to answer the phone at the Help Desk. The schedule is sent out at the end of each month for the following month. It's a good way to get in some volunteer time, while helping neighbors who are struggling with gardening issues.

Hello Master Gardeners: A Message From Your President

If you are hesitant because you haven't worked the help desk in some time, you can get reacquainted by signing up for a time slot with another MG.

Plant Clinics

Eleanor Pratt is the project leader for plant clinics. You'll see messages from her requesting help with planned plant clinic dates. The plant clinics are held at many events around Travis County.

Inside Austin Garden Tour

Although the garden tour won't be until October 20, 2012, the planning committee will soon be working on the many tasks it takes to pull off such a large event. Link Davidson will chair the planning committee again this year. Consider joining one of the tour workgroups. You'll have great fun. And don't forget that Link will need many volunteers in the days before, and during the tour, to deliver materials, work at the gardens, and deliver educational sessions.

Speakers Bureau

I don't want to forget the ongoing requests for MG presentations across Travis County. Vicki Blachman coordinates the Speakers Bureau. Vicki has challenging goals for increasing the number of presentations delivered by MGs in 2012. So if you're interested in helping with the Speakers Bureau, let Vicki know. Even if you aren't comfortable delivering a presentation, there may be other ways you can help a presenter. Contact Vicki at: speakerbureau2011-tcmga@yahoo.com.

And, of course, there are many other tasks, including delivering publications to area nurseries (Elaine Dill), helping with publicity of events (Bonnie Martin), and writing for the Compost Bin (Liath Appleton). If you have ideas for education topics, contact JaNet Booher and Cher Groody. They're always looking for topics for the monthly meetings and educational sessions. Better yet, if you have a subject that you can share with the rest of the MGs, let us know!

Whew!! It's going to be a busy year, and TCMGA is going to need everyone's involvement to get all of this done. So, when someone asks for volunteers, just jump right in, possibly learn something new, or share your knowledge. We're all in this together!

See you at the next meeting on February 1. Have a great and wonderful February.

- Jackie

In The Vegetable Garden

by Patty Leander

February is the calm before the storm as we anticipate the upcoming spring season. The mild, almost balmy, days of January may lull us into thinking that the cold weather is behind us, but February usually brings enough cold days and nights that planting warm weather crops this month is not prudent. February is ideal for planting a few rows of hardy root crops, or transplants of broccoli, lettuce, spinach and Asian greens, but the spring garden truly kicks into high gear after our last freeze, which usually occurs in early to mid March. Of course this is an average date, and there are always exceptions. In 2005 the last freeze in my Oak Hill garden was early February. In 2006 we had a freeze in late March. In 2007 we had a near-freezing cold front in April, and last year we experienced a deep freeze and "snow event" in early February. This was promptly followed by temperatures in the 40s, 50s and 60s. Wish I had a crystal ball for this year..

Many anxious gardeners try to get a jump on the season by planting their tomatoes in late February. If you are such a gambler, be sure to protect your tomatoes by wrapping cages with row cover, plastic or old bed sheets. Also, experiment with varieties that are tolerant of cool weather, such as "Legend", "Early Girl" or "Stupice". If sub-freezing temperatures threaten, place some Christmas lights inside the cage to provide warmth to your plants, and/or fill milk jugs with water, and place one inside each wrapped tomato cage, right next to a tomato plant. The water will absorb heat from the sun during the day, and will release that warmth during the night, raising the ambient temperature around your tomatoes enough to withstand a freeze.

Remember to keep the overall layout of your garden in mind as you plan your spring plantings. Maximize your available space by planting a single line of low-growing vegetables along the edge row, such as radishes, lettuce or carrots, while leaving the center open for planting tomatoes, squash, peppers or okra once it warms up. The carrots and lettuce won't take up much room, and by the time the plant in the center gets large enough to reach the edge of the row, the other plants will be ready to harvest.

Valentine's Day is the traditional date for planting potatoes in Central Texas. Prepare your soil a week or two before planting by mixing a layer of compost into the soil, along with 1 ½- 2 cups of organic fertilizer per 10 feet of row. To ensure that you receive disease free potatoes, look for certified seed potatoes from a reputable feed store or nursery. A few days before planting, cut the potatoes into pieces about the size of an egg, and allow them to cure in a cool, dry place. When you are ready to plant, dig a furrow about 8-10" deep, place the potato pieces one foot apart in the furrow, and cover with 4" of soil. When the plants are 4-6" tall, it is time to "dirt" them by pulling soil (or mulch) up and around the base of the plant, leaving about 1" of leafy growth at the top. Do this again in 3-4 weeks. Ultimately, you want to have at least 6-8" of soil or mulch above the seed piece so that the tubers will develop below the soil, and will not be exposed to sunlight (which causes them to turn green). Potatoes can be grown in rows, raised beds and even open ended containers, like bushel baskets or tomato cages lined with burlap. Reliable producers for Central Texas include "Kennebec", "Red La Soda" and "Yukon Gold". It is fun to experiment with other types, like fingerlings and colored potatoes; these may not be as productive as our old stand-bys but they still make a delicious home-grown accompaniment to any meal.



A New Year and New Garden Opportunities

by Bob Beyer

Gardeners, get out of your beds (pun fully intended), and into your study! A new gardening year awaits your attention. What are your gardening intentions for the New Year? What gets created, should be planned before, and maintained afterward – not just enjoyed when in prime time. So get your thinking hats on, and think out of the box (you know that old rut that says, “Follow me, and I will lead you nowhere new”). Here are some ideas for your new garden year.

Use reliable internet resources to learn about new plants, and about gardening in your specific area. Get to know what you grow. Once you’ve done your homework, grow plants that you have never had experience with in the past (especially natives and adaptives). Plan your gardens to succeed within the environmental, and climatic realities, rather than your preferences. Learn when is the proper time to make changes.

Break a few pencil leads, and wear down a few erasers to put ideas on paper first. Then analyze, revise, and improvise until you are satisfied. There is never one correct or best answer to any garden question.

Develop a gardening strategy for years into the future, not just the coming year. For example, intentionally make changes so that your garden will have a new look from year-to-year. Those changes can be in things like hardscape area design, choice of plants etc. A garden is always a work in process, and never completed!

Become active with other gardener groups, networks, and organizations to learn and share experiences that will be mutually beneficial. Share and swap plants with other gardeners. Make gardening a social activity in your life. Share what you have learned as a Master Gardener with as many other gardeners as possible.

Resolve to be an environmentally friendly gardener – no use of chemical pesticides, fungicides, and chemical fertilizers. You can go organic, use more compost, and learn how to be a water saving gardener.

Resolve to enjoy your garden more, and in new ways, such as photographing the beauty of it, learning how to propagate more plants, adding artistry to the garden, adding plants to attract wildlife, or by developing new ways to reduce maintenance needs.

Winter is an excellent time to do structural changes to your garden, e.g. add new hardscaping, develop and nurture new beds, and any other preparatory work needed to ensure garden and landscaping success during the upcoming growing season. I think the planning process is as exciting and inspirational as actual gardening.

Thinking out of the box will be my goal for 2012. My gardening has always been focused on perennials and ornamentals, and I have resisted seasonal gardening such as growing veggies. I have now redeveloped my gardening space to allow for a vegetable garden this year – a new experience for an old gardener.

In view of the harsh summer of 2011, I have been gradually shifting my choice of plants from tender, tropical, and special care plants, to native, adaptable, and tough plants that will endure our climatic extremes in Central Texas. We have completed the front yard phase, and are continuing to completely redevelop the rest of our yard to be xeriphytic. I find this to be quite liberating in terms of reducing personal stress, as well as reducing physical stress on our plants.

The most important thing is to garden “intentionally”, not impulsively, or haphazardly, and there is no better time to begin the process of planning for the new garden season than during the dormant winter months, where physical gardening activity comes to a standstill. Use this time to plant some new thoughts (yes pun intended again) before it’s time to plant new plants for the coming garden season. So take those new ideas from your study, and jump back into that garden bed! 2012 will be a great gardening year – right?

How to Prune a Climbing Rose

by Becky Waak

Why Prune? The subject of pruning roses seems to strike fear into the heart of new rose growers, but it need not be so if we remember that first and foremost the goal of all pruning is to help the plant provide new growth. This encourages blooms and keeps it healthy by making it possible for air and light to filter onto the plant. As you are guided by these two principles, you will find that pruning roses is fairly common sense, and not nearly as complex as you once may have thought.

I love my climbing roses, because they grow abundantly with little care. I grow "old roses", or roses that are growing on their own roots (not a hybrid). I have an extended Monet arch walkway that connects the two areas of my backyard, where I grow New Dawn, Old Blush, Don Juan and Peggy Martin climbers. They take our heat and cold in stride, and most will bloom both in the spring and fall, and even offer a random flower in between. Old roses don't require the stringent and careful pruning that is expected of the modern or hybrid tea roses, but with some judicious and timely pruning, the climbing rose will reward you with an amazing display of flowers. Please note that a newly planted climbing rose will probably not need any pruning, or only some minimal shaping, for the first couple of years. I offer the following as a guide for when and how to prune a climbing rose that is at least two to three years old.

When do I Prune? It's important to know that when we cut back a rose bush, it responds by putting on a spurt of growth. This new growth encourages new blooms. In order to encourage blooms, the best time to prune is either late winter, or around Valentine's Day. If you miss this window, wait until after the spring bloom, so you don't cut off all the new buds. In our area we can lightly prune, or "groom" our roses year round. We can prune diseased or dead growth anytime as well, to ensure the overall health of the plant. You may also want to cut back an unruly climber that is attacking you every time you walk by. A light cut won't hurt your rose.

How do I Prune? The essential thing I want you to know when pruning a climbing rose is the difference between main canes and laterals (side shoots). A main cane is a cane that grows up from the base of the plant, or at least from the bottom twelve inches. It is the most vigorous, and the thickest part of the rose. The main cane grows to the full height of the plant. Depending on the size of your plant, and how much space you have allotted, there may be two, three or many more main canes. Think of them as the trunks of the rose, just like the trunks of a tree. Because the main canes provide the structure, you should never prune them back. At most, you can nip the ends by about $\frac{1}{4}$ of their length, but never, ever, ever hard prune down to two feet or less.

The laterals grow off of the main canes. They are usually thinner, have more foliage, and bear the blooms at their tips. You can prune the laterals as often as you want. The object of pruning and supporting the laterals is to ensure the most sun exposure. The more exposure, the more blooms.

Prune the roses to match your structure. Most climbing roses are trained to provide a classic form compatible with your garden. Trim the plant with a framework in mind. On a wide, horizontal surface, roses bloom most profusely when their canes run horizontally. So climbers trained onto walls, fences, or trellises perform best when a number of long branches fan across the face of their support in broad arches.



How to Prune a Climbing Rose

Continued...



On narrow trellises or walls, or if space is limited, I prefer to train roses in a zigzag pattern to keep as much of the cane as possible horizontal. If the canes billow above the arch, and are left untied, they will naturally form a lateral layer of canes.

leaving too much dead wood above the bud can lead to disease, but too little can damage the bud. And finally, horizontal canes mean more flowers. The uppermost bud on a branch secretes hormones to repress the growth of those below. If a cane is horizontal, no bud has dominance, so all the buds grow and bloom.

We have several rose experts in the Master Gardener organization. You may have attended one of their wonderful demonstrations, or attended a seminar. Learning the basics of pruning by reading books and magazines, and watching demonstrations, will teach you only so much. Experience is the best teacher; the more pruning you do, the more confident you will become. Even mistakes can teach us what not to do next year!

On posts and pillars, roses usually look best with just two or three canes wrapped in gentle spirals around the support. Again, if the supports lead to a "ceiling", then the canes can billow above the posts, and even begin to cascade back down the sides of the archway.



Prune the lateral canes to maximize health of the plant. Old canes become less productive, and produce fewer and smaller blooms, so target these first. Crossing branches should be removed. If you have to make a choice, keep the younger more vigorous branch. Lateral branches should be cut back to two to five buds. Cut about ¼ inch above the bud. Keep in mind that

Insect Mouthparts and Plant Damage

by Wizzie Brown

Insects and other arthropods are found in numerous habitats, and eat a wide variety of foods. This requires specialization of body parts, including mouthparts, to help them with their specific requirements. By knowing common types of mouthparts, you can put on a detective hat and use the information to narrow what might be causing damage in your garden.



Figure 1. Mandibulate mouthparts on a grub.

Mandibulate, or chewing mouthparts (Figure 1), bite and chew just like we do. They have hardened structures on the outside of the mouth with jagged edges. This type of mouthpart occurs in possibly damaging insects such as caterpillars, grasshoppers, crickets, termites, walking sticks, leaf beetles, grubs (immature beetles) and some types of immature wasps.

Damage for mandibulate mouthparts may depend on the size of the actual insect, because size can affect the strength of the bite. Smaller insects will only be able to consume softer parts of plants (new growth or leaf surfaces), but not veins; their damage sometimes has a lacy appearance (Figure 2). Medium sized insects will be able to consume more of the plant tissue, and their damage will include not just the surface of leaves, but also smaller veins. Large insects can consume much of the leaf, and may sometimes eat everything, or only leave behind major leaf veins (Figure 3).

Another item to point out concerning chewing damage is the difference between old and new damage. In Figure 2, the damage is old, and you will most likely not be able to find the culprit(s) unless you have new damage as well. You can tell that damage is old, because the plant turns brown in the area. New damage will still be green, like in Figure 3.

Rasping-sucking mouthparts contain a single mandible that is hardened. The mandible is used to puncture the surface of the plant, and the insect sucks up the juices that emerge. This type of mouthpart only occurs in thrips. Damage shows as silvering of foliage, flower discoloration (Figure 4), scarring of fruit, and deformity of the plant. Thrips may also transmit plant disease.

Piercing-sucking mouthparts are another type utilized by many insects that feed on plants. These mouthparts form a long tube that is often tucked between the legs of the insect on the underside of the body. Piercing-sucking mouthparts consist of a hardened outer layer that is used to puncture the plant tissue, while the middle part forms a tube that the insect can use to suck up plant juices. Many pest insects have piercing-sucking mouthparts, including stink bugs, leaf-footed bugs, chinch bugs, lace bugs, aphids, hoppers, mealybugs, scale insects and whiteflies.



Figure 2. Damage from smaller insects with mandibulate mouthparts.



Figure 3. Damage from larger insects with mandibulate mouthparts.

Insect Mouthparts and Plant Damaged

Continued...



Figure 4. Damage on roses caused by thrips.

Damage with piercing-sucking mouthparts can cause yellowing, curling, deformation and stunting of plant tissue (Figure 5). Fruiting structures can have puncture wounds (that may lead to secondary infection by fungus, bacteria etc.), and may also have scarring. Since there is a wide range of insects with this type of mouthpart, damage may show other signs as well.

Some insects with piercing-sucking mouthparts also create honeydew. These are mealybugs, aphids, scale insects and hoppers. Honeydew is a sticky, sweet substance that may drop onto plant foliage, and cause a shiny appearance. Honeydew can lead to sooty mold growth, which is a dark fungus. The fungus can block sunlight from reaching plant tissue, and further damage the plant by reducing photosynthesis.



Figure 5. Yellowing and plant deformation caused by piercing-sucking mouthparts.

Coming Events

Rose Care and Pruning

**Thursday, February 16, 2012
10:00 am - 12:00 pm**

Travis County AgriLife Extension Office

1600 B Smith Rd.
Austin TX 78721

Discover the varieties of roses available and care requirements. Learn how to plant a rose, fertilizer requirements, disease identification, general care, and pruning. Bring pruning shears for hands-on lesson.

This seminar is free and open to the public. It is presented by the Travis County Master Gardeners, a volunteer arm of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service in Travis County. www.tcmastergardeners.org. For information, call (512)854-9600.

Raising Backyard Chickens

**Saturday, February 18, 2012
10:00 am - 12:00 pm**

Zilker Botanical Garden, Garden Center

2220 Barton Springs Rd.
Austin, Texas 78746

Joy Williamson is a Master Gardener and an expert in the fascinating hobby of raising backyard chickens. She will be sharing her tips on the benefits of this garden activity, how to get started, FAQ on coop construction and how to protect your feathered friends.

Parking and seating are limited so please register online to reserve your seat at <http://travis-tx.tamu.edu/horticulture/> and click on "Public Seminar Registration". This seminar is free;

Note: Zilker park entrance fee is \$2 per adult, \$1 per child or senior.

The seminar is presented by the Travis County Master Gardeners, a volunteer arm of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service in Travis County.

www.tcmastergardeners.org. For information, call (512)854-9600.

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Visit the websites: www.tcmastergardeners.org and
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The End...

Time to Get Gardening!

