

IN AND OUT OF THE GARDEN

The November 2009 Monthly Journal
Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners' Association
Volume 13, Number 11
www.ramga.org



"All gardeners know better than other gardeners." Chinese Proverb

THE PRESIDENT'S COLUMN By Barbara Thomas

The October meeting of the Virginia Master Gardeners Association (VMGA) has come and gone and it was a great success. If someone does not concur, at least our hosting is over and done with for two years or so. The meeting was held at the Horse Center Mezzanine and what a fantastic backdrop it was! There was a horse jumping event going on in the main ring as well as an event for riders with handicaps in barn four. More distractions were offered by a Farmer's

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Market in the Horse Center's parking lot as well as Mountain Days in Buena Vista.

The meeting included a presentation from David Close about risk management. Remember that if you want to be covered by MG liability insurance, your volunteer and educational hours MUST be up to date with our Records Coordinator, Carol Schoner. There was also a budget update about VA Tech - they are to take a \$68M reduction from the state which means Extension will face further budget cuts beginning in July 2010 of 5%. As the repercussions become clear, we'll keep you updated.

The goodie 'bags', that were assembled on October 9, held pens from BB&T, a carpenter's pencil from Spencer's Home Center, chocolates from the Cocoa Mill, a flashlight key ring from the Farm Service and assorted mints all in a plastic cup from the Bank of Rockbridge (scrounged up by yours truly). There were about 35 attendees so it turned out there was a door prize for all. Many thanks to Carol Schoner for her quilted table runner, Mary Adkins for her ceramic plant holders & books, me for hot pepper jelly, nametag necklaces & books and the ten flower arrangements made by Anne Riffey-Buckner, Ann Jones and Nancy Smith. Laura Mattingly, Jane Comstock and Carol Schoner helped transport the rather awkward arrangements (Yes Ann, I have now learned that flower arrangements are

best put together where they will be displayed). Flowers came from the above MG's as well as Debbie Lugar and Katherine Smith. Of course, thanks to David Mims, our VMGA representative for the meal & overall coordination for the meeting.

As a member of VMGA (www.vmga.net), I do find it useful and interesting to learn about out what MG's are doing across the state. The dues are only \$12.00 a year and that includes a subscription to the bi-monthly newsletter and educational offerings several times per year that are discounted for members. VMGA's mission is to foster communication, education, and fellowship among Master Gardeners, and to give support and input to the state leaders of our Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) program at Virginia Tech.

In fact, I just attended an educational workshop sponsored by VMGA held at Tufton Farms (which is associated with Monticello). After a short walk in their gardens, there were speakers on native plants, fall gardening, planting for wildlife and in depth information about butterflies. In addition to yummy local chicken salad for lunch, I learned that when a butterfly comes out of its cocoon, the proboscis is in two pieces and as it dries, it gels into a single piece. Nature is truly amazing and outstanding (as are RAMGA volunteers)!



NOVEMBER EVENT

November 19 - 7:00pm
 Piovano Room, Rockbridge County
 Library
 "Preserving Native Plants in the
 Allegheny Highlands"

The speaker will be Marek Smith with The Nature Conservancy. In 2002 the Conservancy obtained about 9,000 acres near Warm Springs that had been owned by one family for about 80 years. The Conservancy had the conservational task of going through someone's 80 year old attic. They found native plants and trees, invasive species, and a long history of natural fires. Marek will show us how they are dealing with those and other issues.



COMMON ISN'T REALLY SO BAD By Jim Davis

We all recognize the importance of botanical names. If every discoverer of plants used his own system for naming, if every country used its own language, or if we relied on names from folk medicine, we'd have no sure means of identifying a plant. And since Latin is a dead language, its meanings hold up, not changing as do modern tongues. Latin words can be useful, as when they indicate the color of a flower or the similarity of one plant to another. They can also be interesting if we find the Latinized name of a

distinguished botanist or mythological figure. These are valid reasons, but most of us memorize Latin with difficulty and pronounce it with anxiety.

Not so with the common names. These are easy to remember and say and often clever and euphonious. But too often the reason for the name is a mystery. While I can decipher some of the Latin meanings (thanks to Mrs. Medusa, my high school teacher), in general they don't rouse my interest. Who can get excited on discovering that *Lobelia* comes from "L'Obel," an ancient botanist? There are many books on plant names, none of them entirely satisfactory, in my opinion. One of the best will translate the Latin of the botanical name, but if no botanist, color or habit is revealed, will often just say, "Well, that's what the Chaldeans called it." Thanks, but I'd like to know why. I feel the same about common names, and there is no full directory. Since so many of our plants were named in America, you'd think we'd have a complete guide, giving the origin of terms like *tickseed*, *pennyroyal* or *shadbush*.

We don't. But research reveals much about origins—and some principles to guide us. An important one is not to take names literally. For instance, the *few* in *Feverfew* (*Parthenium integrifolium*) doesn't mean "not many." Rather, it's a loss of original meaning. The word was once *febrifuge*, which could be translated

"fever fly away, begone!" We didn't like the French word, or we discovered the herb didn't work. Maybe we're all familiar with the source of *dandelion*, the French *dent de lion*, tooth of the lion, referring to the indentations on the leaves, and not to its dandy if fierce intelligence. But how about the *goose* in *Goose Grass* (*Potentilla anserine*)? Turns out it's Flemish for *cross*, named for the crosses that grow at the nodes. We might also notice that the Sycamore isn't really a Sycamore, the Poplar not a Poplar and that Rosemary has nothing to do with the woman's name (it means "dew of the sea").

Another principle: reality is in the eye of the beholder. Consider Columbine. This common name comes from the Latin for *dove*, as the inverted blossom is supposed to resemble a flock. But the botanical name is *Aquilegia*, from Latin *Aquila*, eagle, referring to the shape of the petals. Closely eyeballing blossoms over the years, I've seen neither. On the other hand, I do see the heart bleeding in some *Dicentra*, the trousers in one (*D. Cucullaria*), or Dutchman's Breeches, stogies on the Indian Cigar (*Catalpa*). I never could, though, get the Obedient Plant (*Physostegia virginiana*) to obey. Newly situated on their stalks, the flowers are *supposed* to hold the position.

There are so many other common names whose once familiar meanings we could

know: yes, Pennyroyal, Tickseed, Shad Bush, as well as Wormwood and Rue. A good place to start is the works of Willard N. Clute, a respected high school biology teacher (born 1869) and prolific writer. His *Dictionary of Plant Names* (1923) tries to list all common names of most northeastern species, but gives no meanings. *The Common Names of Plants and Their Meanings* (1942) discusses the categories of names, such as Indian names; names from saints, devils and heroes; snake names and dog names. This is learned and readable, often witty. We shouldn't fault Clute for not explaining every name in his *Dictionary*, but he doesn't. While both books are out of print, they are available used, on line. In Allen J. Coombes *Dictionary of Plant Names*, the standard for sources of botanical names, you seldom find meaning of common names. The same is true for the *American Horticultural Society A to Z Encyclopedia*. If none of these helps, you'll have to rely on an occasional reference in gardening magazines or other reading.

We need a complete dictionary—any volunteers?



MAKING LEAF MOLD

Recycle fall's debris to create this organic soil amendment and mulch

By Lee Reich, Fine Gardening

As a graduate student, I once rented a house and was delighted to discover, tucked into the edge of some woods along the back of the yard, a gold mine: a large, old pile of leaf mold, or composted leaves, representing years and years of accumulated leaves that had been raked from the property and piled there.

Although not particularly rich in nutrients itself, when incorporated into the soil, this organic amendment physically alters the soil so that it becomes spongier, holding both moisture and air -- a heavenly environment to plant roots. When applied to the soil surface as mulch, leaf mold prevents extreme fluctuations in soil temperature, keeps the soil surface loose so water penetrates easily, and retains soil moisture by slowing water evaporation.

Leaf mold also stimulates biological activity in the soil, creating a microbial environment that helps thwart pests.

Nothing could be easier than making leaf mold: All you really need is leaves and time. Since I have only a few deciduous trees in my yard, I import leaves into my garden each November. I create a 6-foot-diameter ring with 3- or 4-foot-tall

wire fencing and just dump the leaves in, packing the pile down as I add to it. An enclosure isn't necessary, but I find that it helps to keep the leaves contained and more compacted.

About two years after I build a pile, it has shrunk considerably, and the leaves have been transformed into a rich, brown, crumbly leaf mold.

Leaf mold is something gardeners can never have too much of. It is useful in container plantings, in the ground, and on the ground. When sieved through half-inch hardware cloth (steel mesh), it becomes an organic amendment for potting soils, helping to increase the mix's aeration and water retention. Substitute it for peat moss in potting mixes by combining it with equal parts of soil and perlite or, for a soilless mix, with an equal part of only perlite.

Out in the garden, mix abundant quantities of leaf mold into the top 6 to 12 inches of soil where you need to loosen up sticky clay. When laid on top of the ground, leaf mold is an attractive and functional mulch and a natural foil for flowering plants, especially in a formal flower bed. There's no need to dig the material in at the end of the season, either; just pile more on top.

Use leaf mold as mulch. It helps to retain moisture in the soil and to prevent extreme temperature fluctuations.

Another bonus of leaf mold is that it is essentially weed-free. Occasional tree seedlings do appear, but they are easily pulled and never attain the weed status of plants like quack grass or creeping Charlie. Such weeds can, over time, insinuate themselves into a leaf mold pile from the edges or from seeds dropped by birds, but this minor problem can be averted by being more careful with material skimmed off a pile's edge or top. This highlights another advantage of larger piles: The edge makes up a smaller percentage of the total mass. Very little effort is needed beyond making the pile large enough that you're left with something substantial at the end; nature does all the rest. So gather those leaves every year and pile them up. Before you know it you'll have a continuous supply of this rich, organic soil amendment.

Three ways to speed up the process

If two years seems like a long time to wait for leaf mold, here's how to hasten the process.

1. **Shred the leaves** — If you like, you can use a shredder to shred the leaves, giving the microorganisms more surface area to work on. However, to me, using a noisy, energy-guzzling machine to shred leaves seems contradictory to the environmental soundness of recycling leaves.

2. **Provide shade and water** — Pile the leaves in the shade where evaporation is

reduced, so the leaves stay moist. Watering the pile as you add leaves ensures that it's moist right from the get-go.

3. **Add nitrogen** — Carbon and nitrogen are the two foods the microorganisms need in greatest quantities. Autumn leaves are high in carbon, so the lack of nitrogen becomes the limiting element. Therefore, sprinkling some high-nitrogen material on the pile as it is built is another way to speed the transmutation of raw leaves into leaf mold. High-nitrogen materials I've occasionally used include soybean meal and grass clippings, which often are conveniently mixed in with leaves after late-autumn mowings.



<u>Nov</u>	<i>CALENDAR</i>
5	The American Chestnut*
11	Cool Conifers*
11	RAMGA Board Meeting
13	Community Forests Grow Community Benefits*
14	Exciting Evergreens for the Low Maintenance Landscape*
19	Preserving Native Plants - Piovano Room - Library
	* See Educational Events Calendar this issue

Calendar of Educational Events – November 2009

Date	Event/Credits	Content	Location/Contact
November 5 2:00-3:30 pm Cost: \$8 nonmembers; reservations encouraged.	The American Chestnut Katie Burke, University of Virginia <u>Credits: 1.5</u>	Once common in the East, the American chestnut was all but eliminated by blight but trees can still be found. Learn the chestnut's history, current status and see new hybrid chestnut test plots.	Blandy Experimental Farm, the State's Arboretum Clark County, VA http://www.virginia.edu/blandy/calendar.html
November 11 12:00 Noon – 1:00 pm Cost: Free	“Cool Conifers” with Dr. Alex Niemiera <u>Credits: 1 hr</u>	From the grandiose stature of <i>Chamaecyparis nootkatensis</i> ‘Glauca Pendula’ to the cheery foliage of <i>Thuja plicata</i> ‘Sunshine’, a look at all shapes, sizes, colors, characteristics of conifers!	Hahn Horticulture Garden Blacksburg, VA http://www.hort.vt.edu/hhg/events.html
November 13 8:30 am – 3:30 pm Cost: \$75	Community Forests Grow Community Benefits <u>Credits 7hrs</u>	Understand how the benefits of the urban forest can be quantified, valued, and used to influence public policy; and discuss the role cultural differences play in managing community forests.	Sterling, VA Algonkian Conference Center at Algonkian Regional Park 434.220.9024 becky.woodson@dof.virginia.gov
November 14 9 am – 12 noon Cost: \$40	Exciting Evergreens for the Low Maintenance Landscape <u>Credits: 3 hrs</u>	Beth Burrell discusses evergreen trees, shrubs, and perennial varieties that are low-maintenance, plus provide foliage texture, color and some bloom.	Richmond, VA, Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden http://www.lewisginter.org
November 19 7:00pm Cost: Free	Preserving Native Plants in the Allegheny Highlands		Piovano Room, Rockbridge Library
LOOKING AHEAD:			
December 4 9:00 am–4:30 pm Cost: \$20	5th Annual Continuing Education Seminar <u>Credits: 7 hrs</u>	Benefits of Composting; Exotic Invasive Insects; Design & Plants for Shade Gardens; and more!	Charlottesville, VA Register at the Albemarle Extension Office: 434-872- 4580
Jan. 15-18, Feb. 12-15, March 13-14, and April 10-11 Cost: By sliding scale: \$895-\$1200.	Blue Ridge Permaculture Design Course <u>Credits: ***</u>	Working with natural systems to design sustainable environments that produce food, shelter, and energy. This 72-hour certificate course is presented by the Blue Ridge Permaculture Network.	Harrisonburg, VA http://www.blueridgepermaculture.net/courses.html
Credits *** Contact Kip Brooks for credit questions: kipb@rockbridge.net or 462-6160			

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IN AND OUT OF THE GARDEN

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In and Out of the Garden is published monthly by the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners Association. Items to be published in the newsletter must be submitted not later than the twentieth of the month prior to publication. Articles, Letters to the Editor, and inquiries about subscriptions may be addressed to the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners Association, c/o Sherry Smith, 225 Dalewood Drive, Lexington, Virginia 24450 or e-mail resmith575@aol.com.

The newsletter may also be viewed at www.ramga.org

Subscription rates: \$8.00 per year.

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