

# IN AND OUT OF THE GARDEN

The October 2009 Monthly Journal  
Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners' Association  
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[www.ramga.org](http://www.ramga.org)



"Fall is not the end of the gardening year; it is the start of next year's growing season."



## THE PRESIDENT'S COLUMN By Barbara Thomas

Now that it's October, maybe we should consider what we can do to put our gardens to bed and improve them for next year. Here is a checklist of possible fall improvements:

- **Soil Test.** Virginia Tech is usually less busy in the fall so the results will return quicker. Also, there's more time for any of the recommended amendments you add to break down and work their way into the soil.

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- **Cleanup.** Enjoy the great outdoors in your garden by removing dead plant material to your compost pile to eliminate the best eating locations for bugs, but be careful to **burn** any foliage from diseased plants.
- **Cultivate.** Tilling soil in the fall can reduce pest troubles next spring. It interrupts the life cycles of insects by exposing underground grubs, eggs and pupae to hungry birds and cold temperatures
- **Tend to tools.** Wipe dirt off, oil them with vegetable oil (to fend off rust), and store them away for winter. Drain and store all hoses, watering wands, nozzles and sprinklers before freezing weather can damage them.
- **Tend prized plants.** Don't forget to divide perennials, replant or repot for next year's RAMGA's Plant Sale. Jerusalem artichokes, rhubarb, horseradish and asparagus can be planted in fall. Prepare sites where you have spring bulbs by digging in lots of compost and mulch those tender plants such as fig trees.
- **Tender herb cuttings and care tips:** Cold-sensitive herbs such as rosemary, lemon verbena, scented geraniums and tender lavenders and sages won't survive unless they're brought indoors for winter. However, these tenderfoot plants need some tough treatment. First, wait until after the first hard freeze to dig the herbs. Then set them on the garage floor for several days. This shocks the plants into a very short (but necessary)

dormancy period. Next, prune back the stems and pot each herb in a container that is two inches wider than the root ball. Bring them indoors, and water minimally until their stark branches show signs of perking up and only moderately after that. To root herbs, clip pieces that are three to four inches long. Strip off the leaves on the lower third to half of each piece, and dip it in a commercial rooting hormone. Then put it in a light soil mix and keep the soil moist but not wet.

- **Make a list.** Just because you know now that next spring you'll need such items as a new hoe, piece of wire fencing and red paint for the tool handles, doesn't mean that you'll remember all those things the next time you're at the hardware store or the flea market. Note those areas where you over planted or under weeded this year in your journal.
- **Sow cover crops.** If you're more interested in improving soil fertility than in reducing insect pests, don't leave open, cultivated soil. Hardy cover crops or 'green manure' eliminate erosion, improve soil structure, and keep nutrients from leaching.
- **Grow hardy.** Sow winter-hardy crops like kale, spinach, mustard, Swiss chard and Chinese cabbage. Protect them with simple cloches of clear plastic over PVC arches, wooden cold frames or recycled windows atop bales of hay.
- **Grow garlic.** Sure, you can plant garlic in the spring, but it will grow bigger and better if you set it out the prior fall.

Poke individual cloves into the ground about an inch below the surface and spaced three inches apart. Then immediately mulch your new bed to save hours of weeding hassles next spring.

- **Start spring greens.** Sow lettuce, spinach, corn salad, cress and parsley under a row cover two weeks before that first fall frost is due. You may get as little as 50% germination from those seeds come spring, but they'll produce the earliest and best tasting greens around.

- **Take in tender herbs and prepare herb cuttings.** Bring in non-hardy herbs and prepare them for the over wintering. To enjoy fresh herbs all year, start cuttings from them anytime from two months to two weeks before the first frost date.

- **Over winter hardy herbs.** Oregano, chives, mint, parsley, lemon balm, hardy lavenders, culinary sages, thyme and savory are a few of the herbs that can handle what winter dishes out. Hold off on trimming until late winter or early spring and mulch them.

- **Save seed.** Don't forget to collect seed from your favorite plants (non-hybrids only): that tastiest tomato, the last summer lettuce to bolt, and the cheeriest flower.

- **Send in your hours.** One last reminder, turn your hours of volunteer time to Carol Schoner, our Records Coordinator. Paper forms are available from the Extension office and forms can

also be found on our website - ramga.org under "For Active MGs."

RAMGA improvements have already started for our new class of 2010 because the class committee met and has started the entire process earlier than in years past (David Buckner is the new Class Coordinator). We now have a deadline of November 19 for completed applications and for interviews to be held during the first two weeks of December. Class will start on January 12<sup>th</sup> and concludes with graduation on April 8<sup>th</sup>. Virginia Master Gardeners Association (VMGA) is improving their monthly board meetings by holding their October 10<sup>th</sup> meeting in beautiful Rockbridge County! Feel free to bring flowers to the Extension Office on October 9 at 1:00 and if you can, stay and help make centerpieces for the event.



## OCTOBER EVENT

### "REMARKABLE TREES OF VIRGINIA"

Speaker: Dr. Jeff Kirwan, Virginia Tech Professor of Forestry and 4H Extension Specialist

Date: Thursday, October 29, 2009

Time: 7:00 PM

Place: W&L Library

A Book Signing by the author will be held following the presentation during the refreshment time. The Book Signing will

be conducted by The Bookery, a local bookstore in Lexington.

HelenSmith, Anne Riffey-Buckner,  
Laura Mattingly - Program Committee



## NEW MASTER GARDENER CLASS PLANNED

By Jim Davis

Canceling last year's MG Class was a disappointment for us all, but the prospects of forming a class this year are bright. Under the leadership of Barbara Thomas as RAMGA President and David Buckner as Class Coordinator, the steering committee has held a meeting at which all were enthusiastic. Letters to last year's applicants and to those who signed up at MG events (*nine* at the community festival) will go out soon; public announcements will follow with a deadline for applications the 19<sup>th</sup> of November. This is an earlier scheduling of preliminaries, and it will allow more time to advertise the class. Moreover, applicants will have leisure to consider the offered education and required commitment without the distraction of the holiday season. At this writing, the Class is scheduled to begin January 12<sup>th</sup> and end April 8<sup>th</sup>. Loyal MGs should pass the word of a coming class and encourage good folks to sign up. Other members of the steering committee are Jane Birzenieks, Jim Davis, Margaret

Fletcher, Ted Jenks, Debbie Lugar, Anne Riffey-Buckner and Nancy Smith.

Some history of our unit may be interesting and perhaps even helpful in recruiting. Our first Class was held in 1994. It was set in motion by Katherine Smith, who had moved here from Richmond, MG certificate in hand and encyclopedic knowledge packed for traveling. Jon Repair has admitted that at the time he didn't want to be bothered with a MG program. However, Katherine was persuasive, Jon says, and he caved in. In fact, he was the principal teacher, taking 70% of the Class sessions. He has since expressed much gratitude for our unit and is very supportive, as we all know. The Master Gardener program apparently didn't attract much attention at that time, so another class wasn't held until 1997. Katherine didn't do all the teaching, but did just about everything else. From that year until last, we've skipped only three years, all for lack of applicants.

Interviews initially were held with two or three MGs meeting with individual applicants. Recent practice has four or five applicants to three MGs. The change came from a different attitude toward the procedure. Official MG policy is that we are conducting a job interview, trying to fill open positions in teams. Ostensibly, no one would be accepted for the class unless he or she was qualified for a specific need. This practice is

probably necessary in large units where applicants are plentiful, classroom space and projects limited. Many potential MGs there are rejected, no doubt, as unqualified or second best. Here, we have fewer applicants, though fortunately they are able folks with many talents. Our interviewers, therefore, use this valuable time for several other purposes. They get to know applicants, and applicants, in turn, can ask questions. But perhaps most important, they focus on the obligation to volunteering and public education that is the heart of Master Gardening. The hope is that full knowledge of our essential and vital nature will raise the number of MGs who will stay active. We would thus consistently have adequate staff for all needs and be able to create new projects (such as the often-requested garden at Central Elementary).

This emphasis seems to have been effective. Our attrition rate over the years has been high (though not higher than the state-wide rate). Nevertheless, fourteen out of the fifteen who completed all requirements in the 2007-2008 Class are listed in our directory of active members. The long-range result of changing focus of interviews, and indeed of efforts throughout the unit, remains in question. But there is plenty of reason for hope.

Keep in mind that all MGs are invited and encouraged to attend sessions of the

class, showing support and meeting trainees (without, alas, earning continuing education credit). You may even be asked by the steering committee to attend on a specific day. In any event, please come. Spreading word of your satisfaction will surely help the cause.



## NATIVE PLANT NEWS

By Jeanne Eichelberger (with thanks to the Virginia Native Plant Society)

### Contractile Roots

We all know that “weeds”—i.e., anything that’s growing precisely where we don’t want it to grow—often seem to fight back when we try to pull them up. Turns out, some of them actually do put up a fight. Certain plants have what is called contractile roots, meaning roots that can actually contract and, in doing so, pull the plant deeper into the ground. This mechanism protects the growth tip, or apical meristem, so that, even if the plant is broken off at ground level, frozen during the winter, or shriveled from protracted lack of water, its growth tip will have endured safely just under the surface of the ground, ready to produce another set of stems and leaves as soon as conditions are more favorable. Contractile roots function differently in different types of plants, as described in a most interesting article by W. John Hayden in the Spring 2009 issue of the *Bulletin of the Virginia Native Plant*

*Society.* Some of the plants with this protective mechanism include dandelions (are we surprised?), skunk cabbage, gladioli, and certain desert plants. Wonder if stilt weed is part of this contrary fraternity? Supposedly cutting it off at ground level in no way discourages it. Worth looking into...

### **Invasive non-natives**

The Spring 2009 *Bulletin of the Virginia Native Plant Society* offers some good sources for information on invasive non-native species in the southern U.S., including maps and spreadsheets of the distribution of these species at <http://www.invasive.org/fiamaps/> and specific details on some of the species at [http://srs.fs.usda.gov/pubs/gtr/gtr\\_srs\\_062](http://srs.fs.usda.gov/pubs/gtr/gtr_srs_062). The latter website features the book *Nonnative Invasive Plants of Southern Forests: a Field Guide for Identification and Control* by Jim Miller. The non-natives mentioned in the article as most troublesome are cogon grass, tallow tree, Japanese climbing fern, tree-of-heaven, of which the latter seems to be the invader most in evidence around here. A sidebar article in the same issue asks readers to be on the lookout for purple loosestrife on sale at nurseries (yes, they're *selling* the stuff! I'm not making that up!), and also names as troublesome invasives the multiflora rose, musk thistle and Johnson grass (which was apparently introduced into the U.S. by cattlemen hoping to provide

better pasture for their livestock in dry spells, but ironically winds up producing a toxic substance that can actually kill livestock during dry spells!).

As Master Gardeners we know that the line between native and non-native plants can be blurred. Like honeybees and many other highly respected families, some foreigners have been here for so long we think of them as our own. It comes as an unpleasant surprise when nice garden plants like myrtle and barberry turn out to be highly invasive aliens when left to their own in the woods. And it certainly leaves us with egg on our faces to learn that the tree-of-heaven was once considered a desirable ornamental plant. At this point, though, we can only hope we have learned our lesson about importing pretty stuff without knowing how it behaves, and we can defend our environment only by learning to recognize the invaders and avoid spreading them. As a friend once quipped, eternal vigilance is the price of darned near everything!



### **COVER CROPPING (Super Soil Using Solar Power) By Linda Davis**

It's time to think about putting the garden to bed - cleaning up leaves and dead plants from summer's exuberant growth, perhaps putting in a few mums

for fall color. Your cleanup should also include blanketing the bare earth in the vegetable garden. What does that mean, exactly, in the garden? The soil is "resting" over the winter to be sure, since most likely you are not actively growing food. But soil is a living ecosystem, even in winter, and unless you protect what you have, it will degrade over time. One of the best ways to protect and build your garden soil is to plant a cover crop in the fall, and plan to dig it under to decay in place in the spring.

So what constitutes a cover crop? It could be clover or rye or hairy vetch, common choices in this area of the country for winter cover. This seed is available in bulk at the Rockbridge Farmers Co-op.

Cover cropping actually builds the soil fertility and improves its texture. How does this happen?

- . Covering the bare soil prevents erosion by wind and water.
- . Vegetative cover prevents compaction by rain.
- . Cover crop plants take up mineral nutrients from the soil (nitrogen, potassium, phosphorus and trace minerals) and store them. These minerals will be released when the plants die and rot.
- . When the cover crop is turned under in the spring, the dead plant material adds

lots of complex organic matter to the soil.

- . The organic matter feeds a tremendous diversity of bacteria, fungi, protozoa, earthworms and other organisms that are vital to soil health. In fact, it is the microorganisms that actually make most of the nutrients available in useable form for good plant growth in the spring and around the year.

- . Cover crops enhance the soil tilth (crumb structure). This is particularly important in heavy clay soils such as ours so that we have adequate aeration and drainage.

- . Cover crops suppress weeds.

October is about as late as you can plant a cover crop for winter. Broadcast seed as evenly as possible over the bare earth. Rake it in to incorporate the seed into the soil. If the soil is dry you can even walk on the beds to assure good contact between the seeds and the soil. That's it. Fall and winter rain should take care of germinating and growing your crop.

In the early spring, before the plants burst into rapid growth again, dig under the whole cover crop (or rototill if you have the equipment). Then wait for a couple of weeks to let the plant pieces disintegrate and get incorporated into the soil by the worms and other soil fauna. Your soil will be noticeably fluffier than soil that was bare all winter; the soil ecosystem will be in full swing; and the organic content will be a

notch higher, ready to feed your plants during the growing season.

Now a secret of mine: sometimes if I forget to plant a cover crop at the proper time, I just let the red deadnettle (yes a WEED) do the job for me. It comes up prolifically in my garden anyway and is not very hard to remove. It smothers all sorts of other weeds, and has such a fine and vast surface root network, that it does a wonderful job over the winter. If I then remove the deadnettle, the soil is ready to plant instantly. You might not want to use this method for a huge area, but on a small patch it is very effective. Just add some compost in the spring since you are not turning under the weeds.

So feed your soil to feed your plants! If you want a fuller explanation of cover cropping, two information sheets are available online at [www.vabf.org/publications.php](http://www.vabf.org/publications.php).



**RAMGA PICNIC**  
By Carol Schoner

**Thursday, September 24, 2009.** The annual picnic was a huge success despite the threat of rain. Great fellowship was had by all who attended.

The picnic started with a plant exchange (at least for those of us who did not forget to bring their already potted plants) which was new for the picnic.

We cheered on those who hit the volunteer milestones of 250 hours (Molly Brown, Gordon Jacoby, Diane Jurand, David Mims, Carol Schoner, Sherry Smith, Gerri Wenz, and Penny Wilson), 500 hours (Margaret Fletcher, Ann Jones, and Heather Marion), 1000 hours (Mary Adkins) and 2000 hours (Barbara Thomas) during 2008.

We elected officers for the New Year. And, finally we tasted the best of pot luck foods. Thanks to all who came with those great dishes and enjoyed the fellowship with other gardeners and their spouses!!

<b><u>OCT</u></b>	<b>CALENDAR</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Pruning Workshop*</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Plants for Free: Divisions!*</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Gorgeous Ornamental Grasses*</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>Planning &amp; Designing a Kitchen Garden*</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>Bluebirds in the Garden*</b>
<b>13</b>	<b>Moving Toward Sustainability*</b>
<b>17</b>	<b>Plants for Free: Seed Harvesting and Preserving*</b>
	<b>* See Educational Events Calendar this issue</b>



## Calendar of Educational Events - October 2009

Date	Event/Credits	Content	Location/Contact
<b>October 3</b> 1:30-3:30pm Cost: \$20	<b>Viette's Pruning Workshop</b>  <i>Credits: 1.5 hrs</i>	"When" and "how" to prune. Bart McDowell, Bartlett Trees, will discuss methods, timing and techniques.	Fishersville, VA Viette's Nursery (800) 575-5538 <a href="http://www.inthegardenradio.com">http://www.inthegardenradio.com</a>
<b>October 3</b> 9:00am Free!	<b>Plants for Free. Divisions!</b>	Division of plants in the fall gives them time to come back for the spring. Give new life to plants and immediately produce more plants for give away or add to your own garden.	Richmond, VA, Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden <a href="http://www.lewisginter.org">http://www.lewisginter.org</a>
<b>October 7</b> 12:00 Noon to 1:00pm  Cost: Free	<b>Gorgeous Ornamental Grasses!</b>  <i>Credits: 1 hr</i>	Ornamental grasses rule the garden with their feathery plumes and fall foliage. Many are native and deer resistant. Dr. Holly Scoggins will provide an identification list to take home, as well as planting and maintenance tips as we walk along.	Hahn Horticulture Center <a href="http://www.hort.vt.edu/hhg/">http://www.hort.vt.edu/hhg/</a>
<b>October 8</b> 6:00 – 8:30pm Cost: \$80	<b>Planning &amp; Designing a Kitchen Garden</b> <i>Credits***</i>	Move beyond vegetables in a row and herbs in a pot to elegantly designed kitchen gardens in a compact, easily managed space.	Richmond, VA, Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden <a href="http://www.lewisginter.org">http://www.lewisginter.org</a>
<b>October 10</b> 9:00 – 10:30 am Cost: \$20	<b>Bluebirds in the Garden</b> <i>Credits: 1.5 hrs</i>	A discussion of how to attract these beautiful and useful birds.	Richmond, VA Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden <a href="http://www.lewisginter.org">http://www.lewisginter.org</a>
<b>October 13</b> 9:30am – 3:00pm Cost: \$20	<b>Moving Toward Sustainability</b>	Nature, Wildlife Habitat and Year-Round Vegetables. A Joint Master Gardener – Master Naturalist Training – Held at Tufton Farm near Monticello	
<b>October 17</b> 9:00 – 11:00am Cost: \$30	<b>Plants for Free: Seed Harvesting &amp; Preserving</b> <i>Credits 2 hrs</i>	Now is the time to harvest the fruits of your garden labors! Learn to harvest seeds at the prime moment and how to handle and store your seeds successfully.	Richmond, VA Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden <a href="http://www.lewisginter.org">http://www.lewisginter.org</a>
Credits *** Contact Kip Brooks for credit questions: <a href="mailto:kipb@rockbridge.net">kipb@rockbridge.net</a> or 462-6160			

**2008-2009**

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**IN AND OUT OF THE GARDEN**

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The newsletter may also be viewed at [www.ramga.org](http://www.ramga.org)

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