

# IN AND OUT OF THE GARDEN

The May 2011 Monthly Journal  
 Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners' Association  
[www.ramga.org](http://www.ramga.org)



" Spring is sooner recognized by plants than men." Chinese Proverb

## THE PRESIDENT'S COLUMN By Amy Scheuer

May is finally here! .... And so is our Plant Sale on Saturday, May 7, 2011. I hope you all plan to attend in one way or another. In addition to about 1,800 plants, with over 150 varieties, there will be a tool sharpening booth, a plant clinic, Rockbridge Recycling, and, my favorite, the SPCA. It's also a great place to catch up with old friends!

Our Continuing Education Program this month is on "Honeybees" presented by Scott Dubit which is being held at the Rockbridge Regional Library on May 26, 2011 starting at 7:00 pm. We have honeybee hives on our farm, and I have to tell you, it is so gratifying to see them gathering the nectar, and thereby pollinating the fruit trees in the

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spring. I look forward to learning more about these little creatures.

Again, I would like you to check out our Volunteer Alert column. We are getting involved in a new type of program, and need a couple of MGs to work with us.

See you all at the Plant Sale!



**ROCKBRIDGE MASTER GARDENERS  
MASTER POLLINATORS**  
Rockbridge Regional Library - Piovano  
Room  
Thursday, May 26<sup>th</sup> - 7:00 pm

The evening's topic will be Master Pollinators with Dr. Scott Dubit presenting. Dr. Dubit has been a beekeeper for 10 years and has 15 hives that he cares for. He will discuss plants to avoid and those that are on the bees most wanted list. Health benefits, as well as an update on Colony Collapse Disorder, will be discussed. Everyone is welcome to attend.



**VOLUNTEER ALERT!**

We need Master Gardeners to volunteer for:

1. Fairfield Elementary Project is looking for volunteers. Please contact Jane Comstock at (540) 377-6433
2. Looking for MGs to work on the upcoming LDMS/Diamond Hill 'Model Community Garden'. For more info, please contact Amy Scheuer at (540) 464-1818 or email: [ascheuer@embarqmail.com](mailto:ascheuer@embarqmail.com).



**THE FAIRFIELD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL  
GARDEN PROJECT**  
By Jane Comstock

The current school garden project at Fairfield Elementary has been active since 2008. However, in 2006 the first MG team of six led by Dorothy Coker established the garden and taught classes for several years. With changes in school administration, interest in supporting the project waned but was reenergized when a new principal called on the Master Gardeners in 2007, hoping we could resume a program. Now we have a full team, consisting of Karen Carlton, Molly Delappe, Phyllis Fevrier, David Mims, Pat Patterson, Tracey Smith-Oliver and Cecile West-Settle.

We were asked to concentrate most of our classes in the second grade. We have seven of these classes each spring starting in late



March. Subjects include seeds, germination, life cycles, soil and earthworms, compost, plant

parts, bees and flowers and other insects. Each class has an inside lesson that usually includes a hands-on or show-and-tell activity and often a story or song. Experiments with seeds let the children actually see the germination process. We collect hyacinth beans in the fall and plant them in the spring in pots, then watch them grow until they are ready to plant outside near beds on an arbor. In the fall they make the beds look glorious, with plenty of seed pods ready to be

harvested by the next class of second graders.

The children love to go outside, and we always have an outside lesson (weather permitting). Of course, things always get a bit more challenging once you bring them outdoors. Keeping everyone's attention and trying to ensure that learning is taking place requires real effort. The first year, we soon learned not to let the kids fill the watering cans themselves. How quickly that can get out of hand! But with small groups, worthwhile outdoor lessons are certainly possible.

We set a goal of keeping the children connected to the garden once they finished second grade. To that end, we have a fall and spring class with the third and fourth



graders. In the fall, the thirds get to go outside and harvest the potatoes they planted in the spring as

second graders. For the last two years the cafeteria has been using these in school lunches. Then, in the spring we have a soils lesson. We talk about types of soil, and then go outside to find various soil conditions, observing what grows and lives in these habitats.

The fourth graders get a lesson on herbs in the fall to go along with their colonial studies. They get to see and smell herbs and taste foods that have been prepared with various herbs. This spring we will have an advanced plant-parts lesson to complement

their science classes. All of the classes we teach in each grade level follow SOL objectives, and we try to review the relevant key concepts as we go along.

Since the garden space at Fairfield is large,



our work to improve it is continuous. We plant potatoes and greens each spring. The greens have been

particularly successful and beautiful into the summer months, and the children have been able to harvest before the end of school.

We established an herb bed with the fourth graders last year. There are four sections:

medical, tea aromatic and culinary. As we watch things coming up this spring, without a doubt our most successful plants are the various types of mint we planted in the tea and medicinal gardens. I do believe there is mint growing in every bed now as well as in the pathways—hardly surprising, you say.

Better nice green mint plants than nothing, I say, but I will probably rue the day. Our favorite garden feature is the arbor that supports our hyacinth bean vines. They look spectacular in the fall and create a tunnel of gorgeous purple and green that the kids can venture through.

Busy as we are, we have plans for more activities to improve our project. They include building a more attractive compost pile to include cafeteria materials, a butterfly garden, a better outdoor teaching area and, of course, fundraising.

Working with school children is fun, rewarding and tiring. After three hours of

classes you wonder how teachers can do it all day every day. But the children are always glad to see you, eager to participate and appreciative of everything you do for them. That kind of enthusiasm and positive response is not always easy to find in this world. Things can get wild at times, but in the end, you have helped a child learn to love and respect a garden and everything that lives there. You can feel you have truly accomplished something worthwhile.

**Note:** This is the third in a series of articles reporting the activities of our unit's projects. The series was mandated by the RAMGA Board and is overseen by Vice President Pat Kovach. The purpose is to keep all MGs aware of how busy we are and what good work we do.



**HOW TO REDUCE MAINTENANCE:  
SOME TIME SAVING TACTICS CAN  
MAKE YOUR GARDEN EASIER TO CARE  
FOR**

*by Sydney Eddison*



**Maintaining a beautiful border doesn't have to be a full-time job.**

Photo/Illustration:  
Janet Jemmott

A few years ago, having arrived at the startling age of 70, I realized that it might be a good idea to start replacing some of the perennials in the garden with less-demanding shrubs. At a leisurely pace and with the help of Brid Craddock, a talented

gardener and designer who comes for half a day a week, I began making minor changes. Then, in the spring of 2005, a drastic and heartbreaking change was thrust upon me: My husband, Martin, died.

Although he was never a gardener, we had functioned as a team for 45 years. Martin mowed the lawn in the summer, vacuumed up the leaves in the fall, and made the power equipment purr with goodwill. After retiring, he took on the grocery shopping, errands, and a dozen other household tasks so that I could spend more time gardening and writing. In his absence, everything has suffered. But to allow the garden—the living, ever-changing story of our lives—to go to wrack and ruin would have been unthinkable. So I have spent the past year trying to figure out what I can do to streamline operations and how to get help doing the things that are beyond me. So far, I am holding my own. Here are the simple but significant adaptations I've made to my gardening habits.

**Cover your beds with mulch**

**Mulch makes sense. Three inches of hoarded, year-old leaves deter weed growth, conserve moisture, and provide food for plants as they break down.**

My garden is large—perhaps an acre and a half—but simple, as befits a former cow pasture. A 100-foot-long perennial border follows the contours of the east-facing hillside. Behind it, paths run athwart the slope in the shade of overhanging maples and among deciduous shrubs underplanted with ferns and hostas.

The lawn stretches north between the long border and a huge, old juniper hedge. The so-called “new borders,” dug in 1990, partially enclose this panel of lawn. Beyond these beds lie shade plantings and the woodland garden. A crescent bed planted chiefly with daylilies is the most recent addition.

It has always been a trick, keeping up such a large place. But settling for tough, ordinary perennials—like daylilies (*Hemerocallis* cvs., USDA Hardiness Zones 3-10), rudbeckias (*Rudbeckia* spp. and cvs., Zones 3-11), sedums (*Sedum* spp. and cvs., Zones 3-9), and catmints (*Nepeta* spp. and cvs., Zones 3-8)—worked well enough.

And mulch solved what otherwise might have been a real maintenance problem.

Introduced to the benefits of organic mulch 25 years ago, I've been covering the perennial beds with year-old leaves ever since. This management technique has allowed me to garden, almost single-handedly, for a great many years. I gather leaves into an expansive pile in the fall. In spring, I mulch every square inch of soil between the perennials with 3 inches of these hoarded leaves. This layer of leaves shades out weed seedlings, conserves moisture, and breaks down during the season, providing organic plant food.

Shredded wood-chip mulch, purchased in bulk, is the next best thing. Brid and I have been using it in the wilder parts of the garden: along the paths, on the shrub plantings, under a pair of old apple trees, and on the crescent bed. It doesn't break down as quickly and is heavier than the leaf mulch. It also lasts longer and has proved the solution to managing these large, rough areas.

These efforts should be all that is necessary for the season, except for occasional weed pulling. It has been a struggle, however, to complete the job before summer arrives, and as we are both busier than before, we now need help in the form of some professionals.

### Replace perennials with shrubs and trees

In the perennial beds, I have accelerated the



replacement of perennials, which I began in 2000. Daylilies and false sunflowers (*Heliopsis helianthoides*, Zones 4-9) found new homes with friends and neighbors. In their place, I planted a dwarf Alberta spruce (*Picea glauca* var. *albertiana* 'Conica', Zones 2-6) and a narrow, compact arborvitae (*Thuja* cv., Zones 2-9). Happily, the evergreens have proved a great addition with their year-round color and solid, conical forms. In another area, a mass of asters has given way to the vase shape and bronze foliage of an eastern ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius* 'Diabolo', Zones 3-7).

**Add woody plants where perennials reigned. The author's beloved daylilies have been gradually replaced by shrubs that typically only need pruning once a year, as opposed to the deadheading and dividing required by many perennials.**

Last fall, Brid and I embarked on an ambitious overhaul. Many daylilies were sacrificed to make way for a linden viburnum (*Viburnum dilatatum*\* 'Asian Beauty', Zones 5-8), a weigela (*Weigela florida* 'Variegata Nana', Zones 5-8), two compact oakleaf hydrangeas (*Hydrangea quercifolia* 'Sike's Dwarf', Zones 5-9), a golden spirea (*Spiraea japonica*\* 'Goldmound', Zones 4-9), and a small but ravishing variegated Korean dogwood (*Cornus kousa* 'Gold Star', Zones 5-8). Most of these shrubs need pruning only once a year, instead of the regular deadheading, staking, and frequent division that many perennials require.

Perhaps the quickest route to lower maintenance in a flower bed is the elimination of plants that require even a little too much care. Gone from my garden are the balloon flowers and Russian sage; both have lax stems that invariably flop over. While I miss them, the beds are less trouble and look better. In the long run, a beautiful border is a manageable one. Fewer kinds of perennials, each with their own individual demands, make for ease of management.

### **Simplify your approach to edges**

Harder than giving up a bit of variety within the beds is letting go of their once immaculately cut edges. Edging every bed once or twice a season is just too time-consuming now. But I have learned to live with a reasonably tidy edge maintained using a string trimmer. The trick is to leave a space between the edge and the plants, to keep that space weeded, and to trim carefully and uniformly.

Another strategy that helps maintain the lines of the beds is to choose foreground

plants that remain neat and attractive all season. In the sun, I favor low-growing grasses and naturally compact, orderly perennials that have good-looking foliage and either bloom for a long time or recover quickly from shearing.

### **Two strategies for tidy edges —**

1. Maintain crisp edges with plants that keep their compact forms throughout the growing season. Here are a few examples.

#### **For sunny spots:**

Blue oat grass *Helictotrichon sempervirens* (Z 4-9)

'Blue Wonder' catmint *Nepeta racemosa* 'Blue Wonder' (Z 4-8)

'Hameln' fountain grass *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Hameln' (Z 6-9)

Lesser catmint *Calamintha nepeta* (Z 5-9)

Sedums *Sedum* spp. and cvs. (Z 3-9)

Variegated liriopse *Liriope muscari* 'Variegata' (Z 6-10)

#### **For shaded areas:**

Barrenworts *Epimedium* spp. and cvs. (Z 5-9)

Bigroot geranium *Geranium macrorrhizum* (Z 4-8)

Gingers *Asarum* spp. and cvs. (Z 2-9)

Hellebores *Helleborus* spp. and cvs. (Z 4-9)

Hostas *Hosta* spp. and cvs. (Z 3-9)

Vancouveria *Vancouveria hexandra* (Z 5-8)

2. Instead of digging in new border lines, use a string trimmer to keep the grass low and the edges manicured.



## Don't rush to fill spaces



For the disciplined gardener, an easy way to reduce maintenance is to resist filling every gap that appears in the landscape. I am not a disciplined gardener, but

*Photo/Illustrations: Sydney Eddison* adopting a wait-and-see attitude toward empty spaces has paid dividends. For 15 years, a lovely flowering cherry (*Prunus* 'Hally Jolivette', Zones 6-8) flourished among the dwarf conifers in my island bed. Then, quite suddenly, it died.



With uncharacteristic restraint, I did not replace the tree, and I was glad because the conifers rejoiced to find themselves in full sun once again. The 'Blue Star'

juniper (*Juniperus squamata* 'Blue Star', Zones 4-9) became bluer, and the golden false cypress (*Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Filifera Aurea Nana', Zones 4-8), which had remained green in the shade of the cherry, was restored to its former bright self. Then, during the winter of 2004, voles set upon the juniper, leaving only the Alberta spruce and the false cypress. In terms of design and balance, that was all right, too; the remaining shrubs needed the extra room. The garden

changes, and the plants adapt. The gardener must do the same.

**Adapt to garden changes. Instead of replacing a flowering cherry when it died. ...the author allowed adjacent plants to fill in.**

Gardening is all about change, about hanging on and letting go. At a certain stage, the gardener must look at every plant and ask hard questions: "Have I the time and energy to give this plant what it needs? And if not, do I love it enough to give it what it needs anyway?" Often, alas, the answer may be "No." But then there are the exceptions, like a blue-and-white-striped balloon flower. It was given to me by a perfect stranger. He found it as a seedling in his aunt's garden and named it 'Louise' in her honor. I could never willingly part with 'Louise'. In some ways, I just can't let go.

\* This plant is considered invasive in some areas. Please visit [www.nps.gov/plants/alien/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/plants/alien/index.htm) for more information.

Photos, except where noted: Melissa Lucas



## PLANT NEW TREES AND SHRUBS CORRECTLY! By the Viettes

Your trees and shrubs are probably one of the biggest investments you have in your landscape!

Don't risk losing them due to improper planting. The secret to success is to prepare

a perfect planting hole to get them off to a strong start.

Just a few years back, the horticulture industry discovered that we were planting new trees and shrubs at the wrong depth. We used to recommend that you prepare the planting hole 2 times the width and 1 1/2 times the depth of the root ball.

We have now learned that it is far better to prepare a hole that is **three times wider but no deeper** than the root ball size. This places the root ball on firm but well-drained soil so it doesn't sink after planting.

**Andre's motto for planting trees and shrubs: "Plant them high - Never die!"**

The planting depth is determined by the root flare, the point where the roots start to spread out at the base of the trunk. The **root flare must be visible** after filling the hole with the back-fill.

**We recommend** that for a 24 inch by 24 inch root ball prepare a hole 5 feet wide and 24 inches deep. You want the root ball to rest on top of undisturbed soil. This prevents it

from sinking later on - one of the main causes of death for many trees and shrubs. Organic matter such as good quality compost should be used in the back-fill **around** the root ball, **not underneath**. Mulch to maintain even moisture levels but be sure you don't over-mulch the plant. Use only 2-3 inches of mulch.

### **After Planting**

Staking a newly planted tree is usually not necessary. If the site is very windy or the tree has started to lean supporting the tree with flexible staking that allows the trunk to sway in the wind is recommended. Trees, which are allowed to sway in the wind, will develop a better taper and a stronger root system. Keep your trees and shrubs well-watered during the first year. Unless there is a soaking rain, slowly pour 2-3 bucketfuls of water around the roots every two weeks. During a hot, dry summer, it may be necessary to water every week to ten days.



## **May 2011 Events and Educational Programs**

**May 7 Saturday 8:30am-Noon**- RAMGA Annual Plant Sale- Waddell Elementary School  
Perennials, veggies, and shrubs for sale as well as native plants available from Upper James River Chapter of the VNPS.

### **\*\*Educational Programs**

**May 13-15, Friday-Sunday**- Spring Wildflower Symposium- Wintergreen Nature Foundation- Wintergreen Resort lectures, walks, workshops \$120 reservations required. For more info, go to

[www.twmf.org](http://www.twmf.org)- Multiple credit hours, depending on which programs and walks you choose to attend.

**May 18 Wednesday-1:00-3:00pm**- Blandy Public Program at Edible Landscapes, Afton, VA  
**Michael McConkey "Edible Landscaping"**. \$10 - More info at  
[www.virginia.edu/blandy/2011SpringPrograms.pdf](http://www.virginia.edu/blandy/2011SpringPrograms.pdf) 2 credit hours

**May 26 Thursday 7:00-8:00pm** - RAMGA Program "Honeybees" by Scott Dubit- Rockbridge Regional Library, Lexington, VA. 1 credit hour.

### **Garden Fairs**

**May 7,8 Saturday & Sunday**- Garden Fair- Blandy Experimental Farm, State Arboretum of VA, Boyce, VA vendors, plants, children's activities, food.

**May 21 Saturday- 9:00am-3:00pm** - Herb and Garden Festival, JMU's Edith J. Carrier Arboretum- Harrisonburg, VA -[www.jmu.edu/arboretum/events.shtml](http://www.jmu.edu/arboretum/events.shtml) .

**May 21 Saturday 8:30-11:00am** - County Council of Garden Clubs Plant Sale- Hopkin's Green, Lexington, VA.

### **Save the Dates**

**June 7 Tuesday 1:00-3:00pm** Norfolk Botanical Garden "Orchids 102" with Steve Urick, Greenhouse Conservator and Curator of the Kaplan Orchid Conservatory, \$24. More info at  
[www.norfolkbotanicalgarden.org](http://www.norfolkbotanicalgarden.org) 2 credit hours

**June 23-26 Thursday-Sunday Master Gardener College, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA.** For more info, go to [www.hort.vt.edu/mastergardener](http://www.hort.vt.edu/mastergardener) or [www.vmga.org](http://www.vmga.org) Multiple credit hours depending on classes attended

**August 27 Saturday** Down and Dirty Garden Symposium II, Hahn Horticultural Garden, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA. <http://www.hort.vt.edu/hhg/events.html>

**October 11-14 Tuesday-Friday** International Master Gardener Conference Charleston, WVA <http://imgc.ext.wvu.edu>

\*\*\* For credit hour questions, contact Liz Maurer [esm306@yahoo.com](mailto:esm306@yahoo.com) 757-428-4777 (c) or 540-377-9095

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**IN AND OUT OF THE GARDEN**

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