

THE GARDEN GATE

A Community Newsletter by the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners

March 2022



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Welcome, everyone, to the Rockbridge Area Master Gardener community newsletter.

It has been a year since we began publication of this newsletter, and our mailing list has reached almost 450 subscribers. Thank you, everyone!

Each month we bring you relevant seasonal scientific-based horticultural information for Rockbridge County. If you enjoy this newsletter, please pass it on. Subscription information is on the last page of this newsletter or on the RAMGA website, www.ramga.org.

Virginia Master Gardeners are Virginia Cooperative Extension volunteers, extending horticultural and environmental outreach across the commonwealth. Volunteers receive fifty hours of training and are required to do, at the minimum, 20 hours of volunteering per year and 8 hours of Continuing Education to maintain their MG status.

Upcoming: Join the RAMGA Virtual Plant Clinic on March 19th at 11:00am-12:00pm to learn how to be a Healthy Gardener in Body and Spirit. To be discussed are some of the potential hazards and ways to avoid them, as well as the benefits of gardening. To register please go to www.RAMGA.org

HAPPENINGS...

Local events are in a larger font

Piedmont Master Gardeners Announce Spring Lecture Series – March 3, 10, 24 and 31, Zoom – The Piedmont Master Gardeners have lined up a slate of leading experts on sustainable landscaping, indigenous gardening wisdom, and small fruit production for their 2022 Spring Lecture Series, to be presented online from 7 to 8:15 p.m. on four Thursdays in March. Admission for each lecture is \$10. Registration to receive links to the Zoom sessions will be available beginning mid-February at <https://piedmontmastergardeners.org/events/>

The schedule includes:

- March 10 – Renée Gokey and Christine Price-Abelow, “The Three Sisters: Indigenous Origins and Best Growing Practices.”
- March 24 – Jayesh Samtani, “Home Garden Berries: Selection, Cultivation and Growing Alongside Ornamental Plants.”
- March 31 – Designing with Native Plants (Details TBA)

March 5, Saturday, 9:15 – 11:35 and Saturday, March 12, 9:15 – 11:35. Bedford Master Gardeners annual symposium, “Grow the Good Life” via Zoom. \$18 for each weekend, \$36 for the entire presentation. March 5 presentations: “Gardening in a Chaotic Climate”, “Plants You Can Eat and Drink” and March 12 presentations: “Gardening Simplified: Plants and Design Solutions for Time-Pressed and Maturing Gardeners” and “Good Weeds: Bad Weeds: What You Should Know About the Plant You Didn’t Plant”. Register here:

<https://www.bedfordareamastergardeners.org/event/grow-the-good-life/>

March 12, Saturday, Gardening in the Valley Symposium, 8:00 am – 4:00 pm, Hester Auditorium, Hester Hall, Shenandoah University, Winchester, VA. “Attracting Beneficial Pollinators”, Carrie Whitacre of Blandy Farm, State Arboretum of VA; Berenice Thieblot, “Reclamation of a Quarry”, “Growing Minds – School Gardens”, teachers Jennifer Horn and Christina Pezzimenti; “Role of Natural Remedies in Pet Health Care”, Dr. Wendell Combest; “Educational Public Gardens”, Perry Matthewes, Deputy Director, Museum of the Shenandoah Valley. \$65. Includes lunch and breaks. To register or for more information, contact www.nsvmga.org/events/symposium/

March 16, Wednesday, 8:00 – 4:00 pm, Roanoke Tree Health Care Workshop, sponsored by Trees Virginia. Virginia Western Community College. www.treesvirginia.org

March 18, Friday, Shenandoah Valley Plant Symposium 2022, 8:00 am – 4:15 pm, Best Western Inn and Conference Center, Waynesboro, VA. Speakers include Carol Reese on native plants, Paul Westervelt on new perennial introductions, Scott Beuerlein on survivor trees, and Marie Butler on designing for wildlife. \$95 registration includes lunch. Contact

<https://www.waynesboro.va.us/971/Shenandoah-Valley-Plant-Symposium> for registration and/or more information.

March 19, Saturday, RAMGA Online Plant Clinic, 11am – noon. “The Healthy Gardener”. Register for the Zoom presentation at www.ramga.org

MARCH GARDEN TIPS

Margaret Roach’s advice in her popular blog, “A Way to Garden” (and catch her weekly column in the *New York Times*) for the month of March is to “make like a daffodil”. In other words, poke your head up, look around and see what needs to be done and be quick to assess the weather. March can be so variable.

- Start your garden clean-up, but it is wise to take it slowly, as our last frost date hovers around May 7th. Remove twigs and other debris. Pull weeds, especially those winter annuals such as chickweed and hairy bittercress before they bloom and set seed in the spring. Cut back dead stems.
- Cut back dead hellebore foliage to give the new growth and those beautiful flowers a chance to shine.
- Cut back your ornamental grasses to 4-6” (more on this on p.5)
- Clean out your bird boxes. Nesting birds don’t care for a dirty house.
- Now is the time to start seeds indoors.
- Direct sow cool-season vegetables such as peas, carrots, leeks spinach, arugula mid-March
- March is a great time to plant trees and shrubs.
- There is still time to prune summer blooming shrubs such as beautyberry, clethra, oakleaf hydrangea.
- A rule of thumb is to prune your roses when the forsythia blooms.
- Now is the time to get out the deer repellent. Hungry pregnant does will ravage new plant growth. Deer will get used to any repellent, so switch off repellents throughout the season.
- Top dress your vegetable beds with compost.
- Sow grass seed in your lawn’s bare spots and keep it moist until it sprouts.
- Late March is a good time to divide daylilies and Shasta daisies.
- Now is a good time to have your soil tested.

Oh! For Peat Sake!

By Karen Carlton

I was just reading an article by Margaret Roach in the *New York Times* about the need to have alternatives for Peat-free growing material for plants and seeds. Roach was trying to find a suitable growing medium for her seed starting in spring planting time. It seems that peat is a valuable resource for the planet as it provides a bog for native plants and animals. Peat is a huge carbon sink and extracting it releases a large amount of carbon. So, what is a gardener to do?



COMPOST
VERSUS
peat moss



Margaret talked to Brian E. Jackson, an associate professor of Horticultural Science at North Carolina State University. He focuses on soilless growing media also called substrates. The problem with swapping peat or some other growing media is that peat is such a wonderful addition to growing seeds. It has all the right ingredients to foster growth. There are alternatives; Britain has taken 20 years to research, trying to fix their bogs from being used for gardens. They have all kinds of soilless growing media for seed starting but do not export any of it.

There are a few alternatives, but they also have a large carbon footprint. Coconut coir is from South Asia, and it requires fresh water to wash the salts and other minerals they pick up while it is growing. Seeds don't like a lot of salt in their soil. Perlite comes mostly from Greece. Vermiculite comes to us by way of South Africa. Both materials need furnaces to make them.

Wood and their byproducts from lumber also requires energy. Seeds are very unforgiving when it comes to what they want to grow in and thrive.

You will need to experiment and try different ways to grow seedlings without peat or maybe mixing peat with other media, for example a compound of peat, Perlite, and compost. I would suggest hydroponics as an option, but that too carries a lot of energy, time, and various items needed for the plants to grow. In March I will discuss a continuation in next month's article "To Peat or Not to Peat!"

Spring Care of Ornamental Grasses



If you haven't cut back your ornamental grasses yet, now is the time. For the tall grasses, gather the foliage together and tie with a cord. Then cut back the foliage to about 4-6" using a sturdy pair of pruners, heavy duty scissors, a hedge trimmer, or a sharp sickle. When foliage is removed, spring growth will begin earlier. Old foliage left on the plant, besides being unsightly, delays the crown's warming and can delay new growth up to three weeks. If you have lots of grasses, you might consider burning

them to the ground in the spring. Again, tie the grasses back and then cut them to about 4 -6". Do not burn them without cutting them back; that can be very dangerous, especially if you have other plants nearby. Using a propane torch, burn the remaining foliage. Make sure you have a water source such handy. This technique works especially well on those huge overgrown grasses. And once there is a couple inches of green growth, the small size makes the grasses easier to divide.

THE VEGETABLE GARDEN...

LEEKS

Leeks are an unappreciated vegetable in this country. They have a much milder taste than other members of the allium family and are delicious, particularly in soups where they melt into sweetness. The French love them. Unlike most members of the onion family, they do not bulb. Instead, the thickened stalk is harvested. And their leaves are flat instead of tubular. Native ramps are actually wild leeks and have a strong onion-garlic flavor.



Seeds can be sown in flats in February through March, ¼" deep or they can be sown directly in early spring, 6 seeds per foot, ¼ - ½" deep in row 24" apart. When they erupt from the soil they look just like grass. I like to sprinkle the seeds in 6" pot and cover them with ¼" of soil. I gently tease the tiny plants apart when they are about 1.5" tall and plant them directly into rows. Plant the seedlings 6" apart. The white part of the leek at the bottom is the tasty part, so as the plants grow, hill them with soil 2 or 3 times to blanch more of the green stalk. Leeks need full sun and really do best in a fairly rich soil. The number of days to maturity range around 100, although they are tasty when young, too.

One of the nice things about leeks is that if you do succession plantings, you'll be able to harvest leeks well into the winter. There are several cultivars that are bred specifically for winter harvest, 'Lexton' and 'Bandit' being two of them.

A culinary hint: Only the white and light green parts of the leek are used for cooking. An easy way to clean leeks (all those layers are great at catching dirt!), is to split the leek lengthwise and run it under cold running water.

**Here is a tasty leek recipe thanks to Melissa Clark (with a few edits) from www.nytimescooking.com

Golden Leek and Potato Soup

2.5 lbs. leeks, white and green parts only, cleaned and thinly sliced

2 bay leaves

4 large sprigs of thyme or 1.5 teaspoons dried thyme

4 large sprigs of sage or 1.5 teaspoons dried sage.

4 Tablespoons butter or olive oil

2 garlic cloves, grated

8 cups vegetable or chicken stock or water

1 tablespoon kosher salt or more to taste

1 teaspoon black pepper or more to taste

1 ¾ lbs. Yukon Gold potatoes, halved and thinly sliced

Heavy cream for serving

Thinly sliced scallions for garnishing

Optional: 1 lb. thinly sliced kielbasa, sauteed separately in 2 Tablespoons of olive oil



Melt butter or oil in a large saucepan over medium high heat. Stir in the leeks and cook until dark golden brown and soft, about 10-15 minutes. Add the garlic in the last minute and sautee.

Stir in the stock or water, the herbs, the salt and pepper. Bring to a boil and then reduce to medium low. Simmer for five minutes.

Add the potatoes and simmer until the potatoes are very tender and falling apart about 45 minutes. Adjust seasoning. Add the sauteed kielbasa if using. Remove the herb sprigs and bay leaves. Drizzle a bit of heavy cream in the bottom of each bowl when serving and garnish with scallions.

The Unappreciated Witch hazel

By Faith Vosburgh

Note: This article is reprinted from “In the Garden Gate”, the internal newsletter for the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners. My apologies for the duplication MGs, but I feel everyone should know about this gorgeous plant, one of my favorites.

The end of February and the first couple weeks of March are usually peak for another of my favorite



plants, witch hazels, in this case, *Hamamelis x intermedia*, a cross between two species' parents, *Hamamelis mollis* (Chinese witch hazel) and *Hamamelis japonica* (Japanese witch hazel). You might be more familiar with our native witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*), another nice plant that blooms in fall, the same time as its handsome yellow foliage. Another spring blooming witch hazel is the Vernal witch hazel (*Hamamelis vernalis*). All have their virtues.

However, I do have a special fondness for the intermedias. They are considered a large deciduous shrub or small tree, somewhat coarse, and grow 15 – 20' tall. Their sterling characteristic is their flowers. Depending on the cultivar, you will find intermedias blooming from January to mid-March, just when you have about given up on spring. The petals are long and spidery, anywhere from 1-3" long and come in shades of yellow, red, and orange. There are often fragrant. Flowering is best in full sun. Autumn foliage is usually yellow, but the red-flowered varieties may have redder fall foliage. There is a beautiful 'Diane' directly in front of the lodge at Boxerwood with reddish-orange petals and an orange petalled 'Jelena' behind the handicapped parking that I've long admired. There are many, many cultivars of the intermedias, but they are often hard to find in the nurseries, probably because when they are in peak bloom the nurseries don't have much foot traffic if at all.

The Common or Eastern witch hazel is our native witch hazel, blooming from October to December. The Blue Ridge mountains are full of this low maintenance plant. They can grow to 15-20' tall but look more shrublike with competition in the forests. A notable feature of all the witch hazels is their zig-zag twiggy structure. Cluster of bright yellow flowers, each with four crinkly threadlike petals appear along the branches after the leaves drop. Fruit forms over a long period of time through the winter forming a greenish seed capsule that ripens to brown. The seed capsules split open in the following year, spitting their seeds up to 30'. The leaves look rippled and are a dark green turning to yellow in the fall.



The Vernal or Ozark witch hazel is the other native. It, too, does best in full sun, but can take partial shade. Flowering from January to early March in colors ranging from yellow to reddish-purple, this fragrant shrub is a great addition to the winter garden. The four threadlike wavy petals are small, about ½" long with a slight waviness. As with the other witch hazels, the petals curl up in frigid temperature and unfurl with warmer weather. A minor liability is the leaves tend to linger through the

winter often obscuring the early flowers. The shrub can top out at about 15' or so but is more often around 8'. This witch hazel will sucker.

All the witch hazels are tough low maintenance shrubs with an open habit. Many are fragrant. They'll grow in almost any soil, including the stubborn clay soil here in Rockbridge. Occasional oak galls may be the only problem they experience.

If you are ever in the Washington DC area, check out Green Spring Garden Park, 4603 Green Spring Rd., in Alexandria, a public park run by the Fairfax County Parks Authority. Green Spring's has an official Plant Collections Network collection of Hamamelis, part of the American Public Gardens Association. There are 215 witch hazel plants in the collection and 100 different types. **Note:** Some friends and I did go to visit Green Spring the first week of March. Dozens and dozens of witch hazels were in bloom. I took photo after photo. I want them all! The petals range from yellow to orange, lime green, and even amethyst. If you are ever in Alexandria, VA in late winter, early spring, definitely go and check them out. They are magnificent.

Resources: Dirr, Michael. **Manual of Woody Landscape Plants**, 7th edition, Stipes Publishing, 2009

www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/plant_finder/

[https://www.chicagobotanic.org/plantinfo/which witch hazel should be your yard](https://www.chicagobotanic.org/plantinfo/which_witch_hazel_should_be_your_yard)

<https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/hamamelis-virginiana/>

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