

THE GARDEN GATE

A Community Newsletter by the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners

March 2021



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Welcome, everyone, to the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners brand-new community newsletter.

Each month we will be bringing you relevant seasonal horticultural information for Rockbridge County. If you enjoy this newsletter, please pass it on. Subscription information is on the last page of this newsletter.

LOCAL HAPPENINGS

Wednesday, March 10, 7:00 – 8:00pm. “Starting and Maintaining a Successful Composting Program in Staunton, VA”, sponsored by the Rockbridge Area Conservation Council. Virtual. Register in advance at www.rockbridgeconservation.org

Saturday, March 13 at 11:00 am to 12:00 pm. Zoom talk, “To Prune or Not to Prune: When? Where? How? And It’s Tool Tune-Up Time,” put on by The Plant Clinic, part of the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners Assoc.; Register at www.ramga.org by 10am on March 13th.

AREA HAPPENINGS...

“Landscaping with Virginia Natives” Webinar Series. Plant VA Natives partners are offering a series of 12 webinars this spring and fall. Only \$10 to register for all 12 webinars. Keynote speaker will be Doug Tallamy, Friday, March 5, 6:30pm – 8:00pm. Learn more and register here: <https://www.plantvirginianatives.org/webinars-landscaping-with-virginia-natives>

Register for the following three Piedmont Master Gardener virtual series here: www.piedmontmastergardeners.org/events

Thursday, March 11, 7:00pm. “What is Conservation Landscaping” with Carol Heiser, a retired habitat education coordinator and education section manager of VA Dept. of Wildlife Resources. Piedmont Master Gardeners Virtual Spring Lecture Series #2.

Thursday, March 18, 7:00pm. “What a Warming World Means for Plants, Pests and Their Natural Enemies” with entomologist Mike Raupp. Piedmont Master Gardeners Virtual Spring Lecture Series #3

Thursday, March 18, 10am. “Vegetable Grafting for Home Gardens: Why and How to Graft Your Own Transplants”. Piedmont Master Gardeners Virtual Spring Lecture Series #4

Saturday, March 20, 9:00am – 3:15pm. Loudon County Master Gardeners 11th Annual Gardening Symposium. Virtual. “Woody Natives” with Ginger Woolridge; “Sugar, Sex, and Poisons: Shocking Plant Secrets Caught on Camera with William Cullina; “Grow Great Vegetables in Virginia” with Ira Wallace; “Introduction to Native Bees of the Mid Atlantic” with Sam Droege. \$40. Registration:

<https://loudouncountymastergardeners.org/events/annual-symposium/>

Saturday, March 20, 2:00 – 4:30pm. Virtual. “Select, Plant, and Care for Trees” with the Charlottesville Tree Stewards. Registration:

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdhkfWkGQB2tQW665IX9i0oDafciDpKw4jjKHfJ8p00IM2tCQ/viewform>

Tuesday, March 30, 7:30pm. “50 Shades of Green – and Yellow, Pink, Lavender, White...Native Spring Wildflowers and Foliage” with Carol Bergmann, a retired field biologist. Virtual. Registration is required at <http://www.mdflora.org/event-4153390>

MARCH GARDEN TIPS

By Donna Campagna

SOIL HEALTH

March is a good time to analyze and prepare your soil for planting. How good is your soil? It might appear healthy if your soil turns easily and has a good dark color, but you may want to know more. You should periodically test your soil. The Virginia Cooperative Extension office in Lexington provides soil boxes, a questionnaire form and instructions on how to take soil samples (call first due to COVID restrictions). You will mail your sample directly to Virginia Tech. They charge about \$10 for a simple soil test and will send you a report in about 10 days or so. The results include the soil pH, which determines the acidity or alkalinity level of your soil, in addition to key nutrients. The report includes recommendations on the amendments your soil will need depending on the test results and the intended crop. For more details consult the VCE publication on soil testing:



<https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/452/452-129/452-129.html>

CULTIVATING SOIL

There are several reasons to cultivate the soil:

- * to turn under green manure cover crops or soil amendments
- * expose and destroy insects
- * aerate the soil and build better soil structure
- * prepare the seedbed for the best possible seed germination

Cultivating can be accomplished by the digging method or the no-dig method. If you choose the digging method, just make sure the soil is dry enough before beginning.

Cultivate when soil is thoroughly thawed. Take a handful of soil from a shovelful and squeeze it into a ball, then drop the ball of soil. If it falls apart when it hits the ground, it should be dry enough to till, if not, it is too wet. Be aware that if you have a large garden, not all places will be thawed enough to cultivate. In that case, save that section for a later time.

Depending on the type of garden you have you can use anything from a rototiller, to turning the soil by hand with a shovel. Just turn the soil with the shovel, break up the chunks with a hoe, and rake it into a smooth seedbed.

If you have a larger garden, a rototiller will do, if your budget allows. They come in several types and sizes. Front-tine are usually fast, break sod and are less expensive. They can get into smaller areas as well. Rear-tine are usually slower, pulverize the soil, mix soil amendments better but cost more and may be more durable. Before making a purchase, you may want to talk to some of your garden friends to see what they are using and maybe try out their tiller to see how it handles.

The no-dig method is good for light soils where soil structure is easily damaged or where natural fertility is low. The no-dig method uses the resident worm population to cultivate the soil; layers of well-rotted organic matter are spread over the soil as a mulch and the worms incorporate this into the soil. Thus, no digging is needed. Crop plants are inserted through the mulch, and when they have matured, the stalks are cut off at soil level and the new crop is planted in between the rows of the previous crops, while the roots rot in situ. This method may not be suitable for direct seed sowing.

PLANT SUPPORTS/TRELLIS

If you have selected seeds of the climbing type you will need to prepare for them. March is a good time to plan for and construct any plant supports you may need. Some things to consider are:

- * Will it be a permanent structure or temporary? If temporary, it will still need to be sturdy enough to support growth and withstand wind and it will need to be stored in the off season.
- * Will you be able to till or cultivate around it?
- * Will it fit into your crop rotation plans?



Pea support - www.extension.umn.edu

Materials can include wood or metal posts, pieces of cattle fencing, sturdy tree branches, vines, etc. Teepees, the traditional support for pole beans can be built with 3 poles tied together at the top with seeds planted at the base of each pole. Be sure to make the poles are long enough to push down into the ground a good way so it won't blow over easily in the wind from the weight of the plants.

VEGETABLES OF THE MONTH

Outside:

Peas - Plant until March 22

Onions - Plant till March 30

Potatoes - Start March 17 and continue to plant until June 15

Spinach - Can be planted all of March

Turnips - Start on March 15

Lettuce - Plant March 21 through April

Radish - Can be started March 10 if using a row cover, on March 25 if not

Inside:

Eggplant - Start on March 5

Tomatoes - Start on March 10

Pepper - Start on March 15

References:

Johnston, N., (1995), *Dirty Knees*, Nancy Johnston Books

(1978), *Reader's Digest Illustrated Guide to Gardening*, The Reader's Digest Association, Inc.

Beckett, K., Bradley, S., Kingsbury, N., Newberry, T., (1999), *Gardening Basics*, Sterling Publishing Co., Inc.

Peas: The Vegetable that Will Grow When Snow is still on the Ground!

By Karen Carlton

The humble green pea is one of the easiest vegetables to grow, providing you give it the right conditions. We humans have been growing and consuming this humble vegetable for 6,000 years. Normally they were left to dry on the vine or picked as field peas. Then around the 17th century they began to be eaten as green peas or they were called garden peas. We are now eating now the immature peas with their wonderful, tender, green color instead of the dry peas.



Peas are an annual vining cool season plant that can be grown in early spring or late summer, early fall. They are ready to harvest 60-70 days after germination. You can start peas one month before the last frost date in your area. In Rockbridge County, the last frost date is usually around May 12th. The

traditional time to plant is on St. Patrick's Day (March 17th). Some interesting old-time sayings about peas:

- If a girl finds nine peas in a pod, the next bachelor she meets will become her husband. (1)
- Legend has it that the phrase "green thumb" originated during the reign of King Edward I of England, who was fond of green peas and kept six serfs shelling them during the season. The serf who had the greenest thumb won a prize! (1)

There are three types of peas one can grow:

- English peas aka shelling peas (*Pisum sativum ssp. Sativum*)
- Snow Peas (*Pisum Sativum var. macrocarpon*)
- Snap Peas (*Pisum sativum var. macrocarpon ser.cv.*)

The English peas have an inedible pod that must be shelled in order to get to the edible peas. The other two varieties have an edible pod which can be cooked and eaten.

How to Grow Peas

It is best to plant the peas when the ground has thawed and can be worked. As I said previously, traditionally, planting is usually March 17th. Peas can take some snowfall and even a few frosts will not bother them too much. They like moderately moist soil and lots of sun. They can take partial shade but will not produce as abundantly as when they are in full sun.

The soil needs to be well drained. If planting the variety that vines, you will need some sort of support or trellis.

To improve germination, soak dried peas overnight in water before planting.

Plant peas 1 inch deep about 2 inches apart. Plant in rows spaced 12-24 inches apart. Don't let plants dry out but don't drown them either.

Keep the bed well weeded but be careful when weeding the young plants due to the fact the plants are shallow rooted.

Best to rotate every year or two to avoid soil borne diseases.

Peas grow best below 70 degrees.

To Harvest Peas

The peas are ready to harvest when the pods are full, and the outline of the peas are clear. (2)

You need to use two hands, one to hold the vine the other to pick off the pea pod. Another technique is using pruners to cut the pod off.

Storage: The best way is to use them right away, but if you are not able to eat them soon after picking, they last 5 days in the refrigerator. Also, you can blanch them and freeze them for up to 6 months.

If you try to plant the humble pea, I hope an abundant and wonderful harvest is your reward.

1. WWW.almanac.com/plant/peas
2. <https://dengarden.com/gardening/A-Guide-to-Growing->

MASTER GARDENERS AT WORK IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Paxton House Garden -

A Master Gardener Demonstration Garden inside Glen Maury Park, Buena Vista, VA

Gardening and Local History

Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners began a cooperative project with the Paxton House Historical Society in the summer of 2015 on the site of the circa 1831 Elisha Paxton House in Glen Maury Park. The goals of the project included:

- Design and install a landscape to enhance the historic site and provide examples of historic garden elements.
- Install plantings that demonstrate gardening techniques useful to gardeners now.
- Create a venue for garden oriented public education programs and events that share the connections between modern garden practices and local history.

Local master gardener volunteers began as consultants and administrators of the landscape plan. They continue to coordinate and oversee ongoing maintenance and development of the garden. Master gardeners also plan, coordinate, and execute educational garden programs and community outreach at the site, with an emphasis on gardening best practices.

What to See at the Paxton House Garden

You may stop by the garden for a self-guided tour. Glen Maury Park and the grounds of the Paxton House are open to



the public from dawn to dusk. The demonstration garden offers something to see throughout the year:

- Winter: Dormant perennial herbs, such as rosemary, thyme, lavender, and sage, anchor the raised herb bed along the fence on the east side of the house. Stone markers identify the plants, and an adjacent brochure box offers additional information about historic uses of herbs. Large evergreen specimen plantings on the house's front lawn offer wildlife shelter and create a more romantic setting for the home. Formal boxwood plantings along the front façade of the house echo the formal symmetry of the historic brick home.



Paxton House Gardens 1910

- Summer: A variety of herbs, annuals, and a native vine – coral honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*) (on an arched trellis over the entry gate), take center stage and flourish in the summer. Tucked in around the useful herbs in the raised beds, you may also see colorful zinnias and assorted vegetables, a nod to the kitchen gardens of the 19th century. Observe pollinators at work enjoying the bounty of food sources.
- Fall: While the garden blooms are in decline, the color of a sugar maple tree in front of the house, bids a cheerful farewell to the growing season. Fading blossoms, seed heads, and stems of herbs and annuals in decline are left in place to provide benefits to flora and fauna.

Events at Paxton House Garden

Starting in October 2015, Master Gardeners offered regular public events at the Paxton House, including a fall plant and shrub sale, and Labor Day garden tours, garden-oriented demonstrations, and family friendly activities. Labor Day events are offered in tandem with Paxton House Historical Society tours of the historic home, as well as local history-oriented exhibits and activities. While most 2020 events at Paxton House were cancelled, and 2021 events are on hold due to Covid-19 concerns, we look forward to resuming events at the site as soon as health officials give the “all clear” for public gatherings.

Find Out More! Get Involved!

We welcome volunteers from the community to join in our work at Paxton House Garden. Extra hands help us maintain and improve the gardens, as well as fill out our staffing needs for public events. Please contact us about special programs for your group, or for details about upcoming public events and opportunities to volunteer.

For more information contact the garden coordinator, Lori Wood, phone: 571-213-9458 or email: lorihobbywood@gmail.com.

Directions to the Paxton House Garden:

From the I-81 / Route 60 interchange – take Route 60 east to the first traffic signal, Forge Road (608). Turn right on Forge Rd. and continue .4 miles to Paxton House Dr. on left. Turn and continue on winding road past Green Hill cemetery and Vista Links golf course. Road will become W. 10th Street. Glen Maury Park will appear on the left, before the bridge across the Maury River. Turn into the park and continue across the riverside campground area toward the old brick house in the distance. Parking for Paxton House is on the east side of the house adjacent to the white fence.

Information Resource Links:

Find Paxton House Garden and Paxton House Historical Society on Facebook.

<https://www.facebook.com/paxtonhousehistoricalsociety>

<https://www.facebook.com/inside.glenmaurypark>

[Paxton Garden Herbs brochure](#)

[Map of Glen Maury Park](#)

[Early History of the Paxton House](#)

[Herb Culture brochure from Virginia Cooperative Extension](#)

[Container and Raised Bed Gardening brochure from Virginia Cooperative Extension](#)

BUG OF THE MONTH – MURDER HORNETS

The Buzz About Murder Hornets

By Karen Lyons

You may remember hearing about a new invader that was sighted in Washington State and British Columbia late in 2019: the Asian Giant Hornet (*Vespa mandarinia*) or “Murder Hornet” as it has affectionately come to be known. So why all the fuss?

This Hymenoptera species native to Asia is generally not overly aggressive towards

humans unless defending its nest. However, because of its large size (2-inch queens), it can deliver up to seven times the venom of the ordinary honeybee. What’s more, the hornet sting can penetrate the usual beekeeper suit.

The murderous nickname might more rightly be applied to its potential impact on other arthropods especially our beloved honeybee. As AGH workers typically forage for food, they prey upon other insects, forcefully

removing their heads then chewing the muscular portions of the victim's thorax into balls of flesh that they take back to the colony to feed the queen and developing larvae. However, in late summer or early fall, the AGH will mount a coordinated attack on a honeybee colony. During phase 1, the hunting phase, scout hornets will locate a hive, kill singular honeybees for food and deposit a pheromone to guide other members of the hornet colony back to the beehive. In Phase 2, the slaughter phase, numerous hornets attack the hive beheading as many as 14 bees per second per hornet, leaving their decapitated bodies. After most defender bees have been killed the hornets turn their attention to the bee brood, harvesting their larvae and pupae to transport back to the hornet nest, Phase 3 or occupation phase.

What is the likelihood of this war story being played out here in Rockbridge County? The short answer, thankfully, is no time soon.

Following the initial siting of AGH, aggressive measures were undertaken to hunt down and eradicate existing nests in the Pacific

So, what can we do to prevent establishment of this invasive? Learn to identify AGH and differentiate it vs. indigenous look-alikes ([see figure](#)).

Become more knowledgeable about it and other important invasives such as the spotted lanternfly (more to come on this topic).



Photo credit: www.abcnews.go.com

For more information:

<http://bugoftheweek.com/?offset=1589807304414>

[https://cms.agr.wa.gov/WSDAKentico/Documents/PP/PestProgram/Vespa_mandarinia_NPRG_10Feb2020-\(002\).pdf](https://cms.agr.wa.gov/WSDAKentico/Documents/PP/PestProgram/Vespa_mandarinia_NPRG_10Feb2020-(002).pdf)

Mark your calendars! The Rockbridge Master Gardeners will be having a Virtual Plant Sale this year, online and open to the public, beginning May 15th. Sales will be open for one week only.

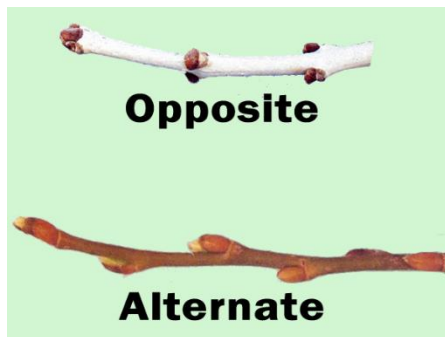
Early Spring Pruning for Shrubs

By Faith Vosburgh

March is when our garden chores start in earnest. It can always be a bit daunting to think how much work lies ahead, but thrilling on the other hand, to finally head out to the fresh air and get something done. It has been a long confining winter, and I for one, am ready.

Where to start? There are many shrubs that need to be pruned now, mostly shrubs that bloom on current season's wood. Pruning these shrubs in the spring encourages vigorous shoots that will flower later in the same year. These are, for the most part, summer and fall bloomers. Early spring bloomers, such as forsythia or azaleas, need to be pruned after blooming, before buds are set for the following year. It is really a matter of common sense. Pruning a spring bloomer now would cut off all the blooms. Dead or diseased woods can be cut out anytime. These are general guidelines.

Before starting to prune, make sure your pruners, loppers and pruning saws are perfectly clean and have a small spray bottle of alcohol (bleach works, too) to take with you to disinfect your chosen tool after each plant. This will prevent the spread of disease-causing pathogens. Tools also must be sharp, so you can get a clean cut. Ragged cuts also invite disease. The winter months are great for sharpening tools.



When making your cuts, the bud arrangement on the stem will give you a clue how to make your cut. If the buds are opposite each other on the branch, cut squarely across the stem just above the bud. If the buds are arranged along the stem alternately, cut at an angle.

Some shrubs can benefit from being cut almost to the ground in very early spring. Red twig dogwoods (*Cornus sericea*), if cut down to 2" annually, will produce their signature bright red stems. Make sure you do this before the shrub breaks dormancy, usually before St. Patrick's Day. I usually cut back my Wild hydrangeas (*Hydrangea arborescens* – some popular cultivars are 'Annabelle', 'Incredibelle' and 'Incrediball' series) to about 6" in early spring. The popular mophead Hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla*) with the big colorful blousy blooms, flowers on last season's wood, so these plant needs to just be pruned for shape after flowering. Beautyberry (*Callicarpa spp.*) is another shrub I prune hard in early spring. Even if I prune these shrubs to about 4 – 6" in spring, by summer they are 4-5' tall. Now is the time to cut back hard the Butterfly bushes (*Buddleia spp.*) and fall blooming Bluebeard (*Caryopteris spp.*).

March is the month to prune the following shrubs for shape: Cherry Laurel (*Prunus lauroserastus*), Clethra (*Clethra alnifolia*), Crape Myrtles (*Lagerstroemia spp.*), Rose-of-Sharon (*Hibiscus syriacus*), deciduous hollies (*Ilex verticillata*), Nandina (*Nandina domestica*), some

Spireas, Sweetshrub (*Calycanthus spp.*), Vitex (*Vitex agnus-castus*). Look at the growth of the plant. Is it upright or spreading? Prune out crossing branches or crowded stems. Some shrubs, such as the abelias (mostly *Abelia grandiflora*), send out what I call stray hairs, long stems that shoot a foot or two above the natural shape of the plant. These can be pruned back to the shape of the plant. Dead or diseased branches can be cut back anytime.

Boxwood can also be pruned now through July. It is not a good idea to prune in the fall, because any new growth created by pruning can be hit by frost. Please don't use electric or gas hedge clippers to trim your individual boxwoods. Excessive shearing leads to very dense outside growth and the interior of your plant will be bare of leaves due to a lack of light. Instead work with hedge shears or pruners and place your cuts carefully.

And, lastly, don't be intimidated by pruning. It really is mostly common sense.

The James River County and Williamsburg Master Gardener groups put together an excellent pruning handbook that combines all the Virginia Cooperative Extension publications on pruning in one place. <http://jccwmg.org/PDF/PruningHandbook3.2009.pdf> The pruning calendars are especially helpful.

Another useful tool, this one with lots of color photographs, is the "Best Management Practices for Pruning Landscape Trees, Shrubs, and Ground Covers" from the University of Tennessee Extension, <https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/documents/pb1619.pdf>

And this is the textbook I used when I took a course on pruning. My classmates and I spent the whole semester pruning the plants on campus! Christopher Brickell and David Joyce, *The American Horticultural Society Pruning and Training*, 1996.

Why Be Concerned about Invasive Plants?

By Jan Hunter Smith

Many people are becoming native plant enthusiasts. Dr. Doug Tallamy has scientifically proven that our native insects prefer native plants and trees. Since insects are the base of the food web that supports birds, native bees, pollinators, and directly or indirectly just about all our critters, we need large areas of native flowers, shrubs, and trees. Even if you are not a wildlife lover, did you know that without native bees, we would have no blueberries, tomatoes, or squash? [See text box on next page] There are many reasons why we need to be concerned about invasive plants since they are taking over large areas of land.

But we live in the country – there is so much out there for wildlife! When you look around you probably see vast areas of lawn or pasture. Fescue, although not an invasive plant, is not native. It does not support wildlife – think of lawns and pastures as a food desert.

Keep looking. What else do you see? In the spring, very likely you see Bradford pear trees. They are popping up all over the place now. This tree is on our state invasive list. Its blooms are too early for our native bees, so it supports nothing. Native serviceberry would be much better. Perhaps you see privet hedges in town and now spreading along county roads. Unlike native shrubs, privet berries are full of carbohydrates (sugar) during the time of year when breeding birds need protein and lipids. So, although the privet is a food source, would you serve a pregnant woman a constant diet of candy bars? Shrubs such as Spicebush or native viburnums would be a better choice. And lovely as well.

You may be surprised to find out you have invasive plants. A good resource on invasive plants, which the new class members are familiar with, is [“The Plant Invaders of the Mid-Atlantic”](#). Another good source for factsheets and classes on identification and control methods is the Blue Ridge PRISM organization <https://blueridgeprism.org/about/>. There are many RAMGA members who are also members of the Virginia Native Plant Society and can help with identification (contact janhuntersmith@gmail.com for more information).

While invasives can be found throughout our area, our chapter can be proud of our efforts to improve the environment. Since 2016, our May plant sale no longer offers any plant that is on our State’s invasive plant list: DCR list <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural-heritage/document/nh-invasive-plant-list-2014.pdf>. The Class Steering Committee in 2018 pioneered providing new students with training materials on natives and invasive plants. In 2019, our Thursday night programs focused on native plants and the Board created a Stewardship Project. This Project allows our members to earn CLE and/or volunteer hours for activities such as planting trees on public lands, educating the general public about invasive plants and helping to remove these plants on public lands.

Being a Master Gardener is all about learning and there is so much to learn about how and what to grow not just for our viewing pleasure but for all creatures.

What is native? Simply put, one definition is any plant that evolved in a region/ecosystem before Europeans came and another is any plant that evolved in a region/ecosystem without any human intervention. Tomatoes and squash were brought from South and Central America by native peoples. Most organizations use the later definition. What is native to Rockbridge County?

[National Wildlife Federation - enter zip code](#) or [Digital Atlas of VA Flora -enter plant name](#)

To subscribe to this newsletter, click
<https://www.ramga.org/what-s-happening>

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