

The Seedling

Newsletter of the Northwest Louisiana Master Gardeners Association

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MG ACTIVITIES

TIME TO START POTTING

The fourth annual stand-alone Spring Plant Sale will be April 4, and we have only a few weeks to get ready.

What Sells? Anything in bloom, anything unusual, anything that can't be bought in a chain store. Herbs, angel trumpets, hydrangeas, perennials, shrubs that have naturally layered near their parents (like shrub roses and azaleas). Daylilies and irises can be divided now. As you do your garden cleanup, think of the Plant Sale. You may have that quince or camellia that was perfect for that spot a few years ago, but is just too big now. What to do? Dig it up, pot it, and bring it for the Plant Sale!

How? Divisions: Now is the time to divide perennials in the garden. As they come up and begin to actively grow, you'll be able to see which will be too vigorous for that spot in the garden. Please pot up a few in the standard six-inch or gallon pot, depending on the size of divisions. Even plants we consider invasive, like false indigo and alstromeria, are a treasure to others because they can't find them in the nurseries.

Those little roots of oregano, sage and artemesia can grow into good-looking plants. Using potting mix instead of dirt will make them lighter and easier to carry to the sale. Larger plants like ginger and elephant ears, if potted early in gallon pots, will grow into good-looking plants by April 4.

Cuttings: Most woody cuttings will be too small to sell in April, but some large plants like angel trumpets and Confederate roses root very easily and make a good-sized gallon if started now. Just bring the cuttings indoors to the window sill. You will be surprised at how fast they grow.

Plants for the sale will be accepted at the Carriage House April 3 from noon to 5:30 p.m. We also need clean pots: 6-inch and 1-, 2- and 4-gallon sizes.

Just remember, the success of our plant sale depends on the generosity of our members. And don't forget to label each pot!

- Michele Wiener, Plant Sale director

WOG ON APRIL 1

A horticulturist/writer/photographer/landscape designer from Texas will be the second World of Gardening speaker in 2009, Lou Osburn and Sue Crow, directors, have announced.

Jeff Abt of Nacogdoches will tell us about “A Fool’s Garden, or Editing Your Garden” at 10 a.m. April 1 at the Klima Center, American Rose Center. Please let Lou know you are coming at lou@nokout.com or at 869-1526.

Abt kindly gave permission to the *Seedling* to reprint his celebration of autumn, “Schoolhouse Lilies,” on p. 4. Learn more about Abt and see his essays and photographs at his website, www.jeffabt.com.

GARDEN GUIDE SIGNUP

Le Tour director Margie Caplis and the selection committee have chosen six fabulous gardens, which were revealed at the February meeting. My job is to enlist tour guides for two shifts on Saturday and one on Sunday. If you were unable to attend the meeting, please e-mail your name and phone number to me at janedrake@bellsouth.net.

Here are the head guides and the neighborhoods where they will work: Don Toppett, Broadmoor; Dona Anders, Norris Ferry Road; Theresa Kruse, Black Bayou area, Donna Shield, Newcastle; Kay Shanks, Greenacres; Judy Roemer, Spring Lake; Donna Camp, Pioneer Heritage Gardens; Ruth Schlichtemier, refreshments, Black Bayou area.

- **Jane Drake**

GREEN THINGS

GROWING TOMATOES

Evelyn Thomas sent this:

If you still have time to save seed this year, here’s some help. If it’s too late, hold this information for use next year.

Tomato seed saving uses the process of fermentation for best results. Choose the biggest, best looking tomatoes from the healthiest looking plants. I know you’d rather eat those, but behave yourself!

Slice fruit in half across the middle. With a spoon or your well-washed fingers, scoop out the seeds and their gelatinous "goo" into a clean cup or glass container. Small tomatoes can just be smashed with your fingers. Add a couple of tablespoons of water to the seeds.



Cover the container with a piece of plastic wrap, and poke holes to allow aeration. Fresh air needs to get in and out of the cup to help foster fermentation.

Place the container of seeds in a warm location - a sunny windowsill or the top of the refrigerator. Fermentation takes about two or three days. Each night remove the plastic-wrap, stir the seed and water mixture, and then replace the plastic wrap. The top of the liquid will look scummy when the fermentation process has separated the goo from the seeds. It also helps destroy many of the possible tomato diseases that can be harbored by seeds.

Seeds are ready when they move quickly and easily across a plate and do not stick to each other. Store seeds dry in a container. Any moisture in the seeds will be transferred to all seeds and foster mildew and rotting.

Howard Garrett, www.dirtdoctor.com

CACTI

I went with a friend to look at a cactus collection. Dr. Carlos Smith, from the LSU AgCenter, has been stuck (no pun intended) on cactus for 30 years, even traveling to Mexico to collect specimens. The collection in question was being given away by a nice couple on Cross Lake who just couldn't picture themselves packing it to their new home in Wyoming.

I learned a lot in a very brief time. No. 1: don't touch anything without barbecue tongs! Even the blades of a "spineless" cactus that Dr. Smith insisted I take can stick you. After I find that tiny pricker in my finger, I'm supposed to slice and stir fry the young nopale and plant the older blades that he so nonchalantly carved off and handed me. The young ones taste like green beans. The older ones taste like the beginning of a new obsession.

Cacti come in every imaginable shape, from long, weeping strands to the spiny clumps of oval bladed prickly pear leaves to the tall, fat, armed sentinels watching over the desert. They seem to all share an ease of propagation. If you can cut off one of the blades or arms at the point where it joins the main plant, you can make a new cactus plant. All you do is let it dry for a few days, then stick it about an inch deep in the ground. Without any more fuss than an initial watering, it will magically make roots and start all over. My only problem will be to resist watering it.



Not all cacti can live outside, but a surprising lot of them are cold-hardy down to the single digits. The challenge is, once again, to resist watering them along with the rest of the landscape. In fact, they just don't follow the regular landscape rules at all. They need to go in a sunny location in a bed that's been raised up high with a lot of sand. When nature refuses to cooperate by providing rain (not unusual in North Louisiana), the cactus bed will just get bigger and better. When you return from a two-week vacation, your potted cacti will be the only plants that actually look happier than before you left.

It takes a special landscape to accommodate cacti in mass plantings. A simple ranch-style home can usually pull it off. You'll also get a chance to show off those interesting rocks you collected on that southwestern vacation. And how about those big chunks of glass from the old glass factory? We are all still hoarding them, looking for a good use. They'd look great in a cactus garden. The word "garden" really does apply to cacti. Think beyond the stickers and look forward to the flowers. Bursting open suddenly with a little rain after a dry stretch, cactus blooms can be devastatingly beautiful.

A cactus garden will end up in a sunny corner in the back yard if you live in a colonial style house. If you can't picture a guy in a sombrero walking by the house, cacti will probably look a little goofy. Don't forget about using hardy cacti in the back as "chastity plants." Chastity plants are plants and shrubs placed under the windows of teenage girls to discourage suitors. We usually use prickly hollies for that purpose, but in the rest of the Americas, good cactus fences make good neighbors.

Non-cold hardy cacti live in pots in a sunny window in the winter and on the most miserable scorching corner of the patio for the summer. For a window cactus, the big chain garden centers carry a terrific variety. My favorites are the tiny barrel cactus that are grafted, one on top of the other, like scoops of ice cream. Lovely to look at, but don't forget the gloves and barbecue tongs for handling.

- **Denyse Cummins**

POTPOURRI

SCHOOLHOUSE LILIES

Schoolhouse lilies (*Rhodophiala bifida*) began to bloom this week in my yard. It means a new year begins, a new school year, that is. As I look back on my youth, the New Year did not begin January 1; it began the first day of school. Everything began all new and fresh – new pencils and pens, new notebooks, new blue jeans, a new football season. Glorious! The school year beginning afresh is wonderful. Who knows what will happen? Summer has worn on long enough; it's time for a new beginning in the fall. It's the same in gardening.

If you will, think about the gardening year with me for a moment. Winter is cool, wet and sleepy. Unappreciated by the world, its virtues go unnoticed in spite of the fact it's the perfect time to plant trees and shrubbery. In winter, everything in the garden readies itself.

And then there's spring... Springtime in Texas is pure youth, full of colorful, blooms and effervescent verdure. But in a moment it's over, gone, and forgotten, leaving at our doorsteps Texas summer.

Summertime in Texas is surly. It drags on endlessly, pausing only to shout orders out at us like a drill sergeant: "Mow the grass!" "Weed the flowerbed!" "Trim the shrubs!" "Water the lawn!" (Though thoroughly bad-tempered, summer at least stops and smiles at us in the midst of the wavy heat and tips his hat with a smile in the bloom of crape myrtles.)

Then there's fall. Fall in Texas is... What can I say? It's wonderful. Everything seems to change. The sun and its light shift to the southern part of the sky, and there is hope that the air will cool. Our summer turf grasses (St. Augustine, Centipede, and Bermuda) can be perfect this time of the year. Our summer perennials (phlox, salvias, roses) are preparing themselves for their last bloom cycle as if all that came before was the mere warm-up act for that perfect time of the year, autumn. Then come the trumpet notes of the chrysanthemums proclaiming autumn's pageantry (how bright and cheery). And don't the feathery blooms of the ornamental grasses look perfect this time of the year? No, fall is perfectly splendid. To me it's the beginning. As a schoolboy or a college student or even a gardener, for that matter, I've always looked forward to the fall.



SCHOOLHOUSE LILIES

I love the plants that come into their own in the fall of the year, sweet autumn, clematis, spider lilies. And then there are the trees: hickories, blackgums, sweetgums, sassafras and maples. As you read this column, think of them out in the woods. They're not tired out by summer. Producing summer's greenness is nothing to them; it's effortless. Ah, it's the color of fall that's tricky. That's when the trees, talented showmen that they are, can upstage the rest of the gardening year. The house lights dim (the green fades), the footlights come on, and then the show begins, that great stage play, "Fall's Foliage in the Garden." Gardening critics ask themselves, "What will the show be like this year?" Somehow in my mind, the greenness of summer is merely a rehearsal for the beginning of the season of fall.

So, when the little schoolhouse lilies began to bloom in my garden this week, I said to myself, "Ah, the year begins." Literally, Monday the blooms sprouted, children tromped off to school, bands marched in preparation of the first game of the year, football players collided in practice. And though I'm old and all that's past (I don't get to play football anymore) and I think about new notebooks and pencils and pens with only a wistful smile, today I see time moving through my garden with the bloom of schoolhouse lilies. This week was the beginning of a New Year.

- **Jeff Abt**, from his blog at www.jeffabt.com

SQUIRRELS WIN AGAIN

Squirrels are ruining next year's flowers. I sowed poppy, larkspur, forget-me-not, bishop's lace and other easy-to-grow flowering annuals a few weeks ago in the soft earth of my sunny perennial beds.

I took pains to do it the right way, mixing the tiny seeds with sand so I could scatter them sparingly. I kept the seedbed moist for days to aid germination. The weather cooperated splendidly. And what do you know, the seeds sprouted. I had a nice stand of seedlings covering the ground. Already, I was envisioning a lovely cottage scene of old-fashioned flowers coming into bloom before the perennials took over. I was quite pleased.

But now the seedlings have been buried by the doggone squirrels digging for buried nuts. It's wasted effort to pat the soil back into place. My flowers-to-be were buried alive.

For a couple of years, I outsmarted the squirrels. I sprayed potions and lotions. I spread crushed oyster shell on the soil surface. I sprinkled cayenne powder generously (although a snootful didn't seem to bother the squirrels much). They left my tulip bulbs alone all winter. I believe the extra precautions helped. But the real remedy, I suspect, is what is known in wild-bird-feeding circles as squirrel diversion.



I grudgingly installed several squirrel feeders in the back yard. Yes, I buy bags of varmint food and fill the feeders with it. All year. Squirrels took to the feeders immediately and ate their fill. This kept them out of my garden beds and away from my tulip bulbs and pansies in winter and caladium bulbs and succulent Dragon Wing begonias in summer.

But I knew it couldn't last. First, pigeons discovered the squirrel feeders. They don't get inside the box model with the hinged lid as the squirrels do (making for hilarious sights). But the birds stand on their pigeon toes and stretch their necks into the feeder to get dried corn kernels and sunflower seeds. Even if they can't reach the seed level, they park themselves on the feeder lid, keeping squirrels from approaching.

The pigeons scattered the seeds onto the ground below the fence-mounted feeder, too, causing worse problems. I believe that's how my sweet Silkie hen, Ethel, ate spoiled seed, got an infection in her craw and died. The spilled seeds also attracted rats and mice (or rats and baby rats). One night this summer, I counted eight small rodents inside the box feeder before they sensed my presence and disappeared in a flash.

After these disastrous events, I quit filling the squirrel feeder. Soon, however, as autumn arrived, I noticed my grape hyacinths, Spanish bluebells, striped squills, species tulips and glory-of-the-snow – the so-called minor bulbs that come back annually – had been unearthed. Some had been eaten. No matter how many times I replanted them, squirrels dug them up the next day.

One of my neighbors couldn't abide squirrels. At his memorial service this summer, references were made to his sharpshooting skills: 113. That's how many squirrels he had dispatched since moving into the house in 1978.

Guns aren't an option for me. Therefore, not only have I refilled the first squirrel feeder. I've bought and installed four more around the back yard. And that's not counting the baffled and caged bird feeders whose squirrel-proof functions are not squirrel-proof.

Manufacturers introduce inventions each year to the country's frustrated backyard bird feeders, ranging from Fort Knox fortresses to novelties that are the equivalent of squirrel amusement parks.

I have a couple of those carnival rides – the Tilt-A-Whirl bird feeder that spins when a squirrel boards it and a bungee cord baited with corn cobs. But my chubby squirrels prefer a more relaxed snacking venue. They sit inside a round plastic-saucer feeder, their fur protected from the elements by the umbrellalike dome of the squirrel baffle.

Marianna Greene, www.dallasnews.com, Nov. 21, 2008

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

We are living in a “common year,” a year without an intercalary period – a February 29. February, our shortest month, as mythological legend has it, is named after Februus, the Roman God of Purification. As gardeners, it was our month in Louisiana to purify our lawns, gardens, and flower beds, whether we believe in any legends or not.

Joe White, our legendary *Times* columnist, recently emphasized to his readers the importance of purifying lawns and gardens of weeds. He also shared his expertise on pruning. Joe knows – is what I say. To purify, you can employ a chemical pre-emergent, or a physical pre-emergent (mulch, cloth or plastic sheets). Physical pre-emergents save on water and discourage weeds; they are more labor intensive, but, more important, they are eco-friendly. It is also a time to reconstruct and prepare your flower beds for spring. The first step is proper pruning, followed by soil preparation, and finally new planting. It is a lifecycle process that you are assisting.

While flying jets over the years, I have had the opportunity to experience many majestic sunrises and sunsets from our skies above; often I wished I had a camera, but for safety reasons, cameras are best left out of the cockpit. Sunsets bring, and sunrises leave, civil twilight. Civil twilight is defined as when the sun is six degrees below the horizon. This is the limit at which illumination is adequate for garden objects to be clearly distinguished. Accomplished photographers will tell you that right before civil twilight starts in the evening and right after it ends in the morning are the best times to snap photos in your garden.

Early spring flowers are beckoning your shutterbug presence. We gained about 50 minutes of light in February in Shreveport, so the more you procrastinate, the earlier you will have to get up, or the later you will have to wait in the day. Don't be caught saying you wish you had your camera—get out there and take some photos to share.

After doing the shutterbug, take in the fresh air with a couple of hours of pruning (see the LSU Ag Center website for a pruning guide) and exercise. Give yourself time to reflect on life in the peace of your favorite gardening spot with a cup of tea or coffee. Or get out there and volunteer and help prune (they will teach you) at the gargantuan and variety-filled American Rose Center during this optimum rose pruning time.

Early spring is a time to prune, but it is also a time to grow, so I'd like to welcome our new class of Master Gardeners to the fun and challenges of becoming certified as a Louisiana Master Gardener. I'm sure you find yourselves already enveloped in a compost-pile size of information. Soon you all will be ready and comfortable to share your expertise with gardening enthusiasts on all levels throughout our community. Welcome aboard and get out there and purify your gardens!

- **Scotty Rogers**, from the Intercalary Period

KITCHEN SINK

CAJUN CHICKEN SALAD

Boil a package of boneless, skinless chicken breasts in water with liquid crab boil (1 capful), celery pieces, half an onion chopped fine, and black pepper. Bring ingredients to a rolling boil, and then add the chicken. Bring back to a boil for one minute, then turn fire off and allow it to cool down.

Pull chicken pieces apart; do not cut up (texture issue).

Toast almonds at 300 degrees for two minutes, and then remove from oven. Chop up the slivers finer when cool. Add chicken, almonds, mayo, red grapes cut in half, and celery cut fine to your taste. Season with Nature's Seasoning and serve.
(**Cookie Duet** brought Cajun chicken salad to the Christmas luncheon, and several MGs asked for the recipe.)