

February 2015

Volume 7, Issue 1



The Latest Dirt

Official Newsletter of the Jefferson County Master Gardeners

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Meetings are the second Thursday of each month, 6pm in the Extension Office Auditorium

Upcoming Meeting Dates:

February 12 - "Fertilizers and Pesticides" David Poole

March 12 — TBA

April 9 — "Soil" Paul Eyre

President's Message

Greetings, Master Gardeners, and welcome to a new year of challenges and opportunities! Our first major challenge will be dealing with the always unpredictable weather. Many of our yards and gardens have suffered losses with the extreme weather we have experienced, and as February is cleanup and planning time, there will be much emphasis on cleanup. That being said, it is also the time when roses and muscadines in our garden need major pruning. As usual, the garden team will be at the JCMG Test Garden at the Jack Brooks Regional Airport on Wednesday and Friday mornings, so come join us and put your green thumb to work.

For those who missed the January meeting, our membership approved a \$500 donation for the new *Grow to Share* garden that Nutrition and Services for Seniors is establishing. Master Gardeners will be serving as mentors, and any time spent helping with this project will be good community service hours. You'll hear more about this as the project gets underway.

We are well into the planning for our Spring Plant Sale and Market Day, which is scheduled for March 28th at hangar 4 at the airport, and of course we want this to our best sale yet. Remember, this sale provides funds for any major improvements at the garden, allows us to offer scholarships, helps us do special projects, pays for our social events and more. The garden team is already planting and bumping up seedlings, and we potted 50 or more bare-root fruit trees and plants. Plant sale chairman, Stellina Reed, has e-mailed an assignment sheet for Market Day, so mark March 28th on your calendar and ask Stellina how you can contribute as we prepare for the upcoming sale.

See you February 12th at our monthly meeting,
Toni

Jefferson County Master Gardener Officers



2015 Board L to R: Toni Clark, Joyce Logan, Phyllis Smith, Pat Tolbert and Herbert Bass
Not pictured: Charisse Miller, Cecil Hightower and Tony Lucenti



Outgoing Officers L to R: Dorothy Norris, Stellina Reed and Melissa Starr

Camellias

By Micah Shanks, JCMG

If you have ever strolled through a true Southern garden, you are familiar with the lovely camellia. Once a status symbol of the Old South, camellias were used to show off wealth. Since they were difficult to propagate at the time, only the wealthy could afford them. That's why we see so many wonderful collections around the existing plantation homes across the south.

With more than 3,000 named varieties of camellias, there are plenty of beautiful choices for the garden enthusiast. The earliest varieties will start blooming in November and the latest will put on a show as late as May.

Camellia japonica is probably the most popular variety. This beautiful plant originated in China and found its way to America via Europe. Admired for showy blooms as large as 5 inches across, they come in several different forms, including single, double, semi-double, peony, anemone and rose. Colors range from all shades of reds, pinks, and whites to variegated. It is so popular across the south that the common camellia has been chosen the state flower of Alabama.

There are 17 varieties of japonicas that are considered southern heirloom plants. Those include Elegans, Debutante, Glen 40, Purity, and Wildfire. Some of the really old plants have grown to 25 feet high and 25 feet wide, but the average gardener can expect a 6 to 12 foot shrub.

Sasanquas are also well known in our area. The blooms are smaller, but more profuse, sometimes actually weighing down the limbs of

the shrub. These fall bloomers are often more sun tolerant and drought tolerant than japonicas. They are not as cold hardy as camellia japonica, but will survive if garden conditions are favorable. Broad leafed and evergreen, they are a good choice for espaliers, ground covers, informal hedges, screening, containers, and bonsai. Popular varieties include Apple Blossom, Cleopatra, Jean May, Tanya, and Yuletide.



The third camellia is camellia sinensis, otherwise known as the tea plant. Until recently, the only place that grew tea in American was the Charleston Tea Plantation in South Carolina,

which has been in operation for more than 100 years. Many other tea farms are now operating in the US, many of them located in Hawaii. The bulk of tea produced still comes from China.

Growing camellias is easy with a few simple steps. Plant them in a well-drained site which is rich in organic material. They prefer acid soil and protection from hot sun until they are established. Make sure the trunk base is above the soil line. Finish with 3-4 inches of mulch. Keep the soil moist, but not wet.

With so many varieties available, surely you can find at least one that you love. After all, what is a southern garden without a camellia? Fortunately for us, we no longer have to be wealthy to own them!

February Gardening

By Cecil Hightower, JCMG

Fickle February is now upon us. At this mid-point of winter when the weather is usually so miserable we only want to sit around a roaring fire, sipping our favorite beverage, outdoor chores beckon, and all corners of our yards and garden are demanding our attention in this busiest of gardening months.

Luckily for us gardeners, frigid February days are often interspersed with warm, sunny stretches of weather reminding us that spring is just around the corner and giving us a chance to get outside to stroll around and take stock of what needs to be done.

If you have bare spots in your landscape, this month is the perfect time to plant dormant, deciduous trees and shrubs as well as fruit trees and rose bushes. Perennials such as day lilies and iris, which have become overcrowded and outgrown their beds, can now be divided and transplanted or shared with friends.

Mid to late February is the time to fertilize shrubs and evergreens as well as established citrus trees. Use an acid type fertilizer for evergreens, conifers, azaleas and camellias; citrus trees will benefit from a slightly nitrogen rich or balanced NPK fertilizer that has some micronutrients like magnesium, iron, copper and zinc.

This is not the time to fertilize your lawns though, as you want to wait until the ground has sufficiently warmed and the grass is showing signs of growth before applying a slow nitrogen release fertilizer. If, however, you are being plagued by an early onset of spring weeds, you can address this issue with a post emergent herbicide that is labeled for use on the type of weed that is growing.

Pruning should be at the top of your February 'to do' list as this is the prime time to undertake this chore on plants while they are dormant. The main objective of pruning should be to remove all dead, decayed and broken or rubbing branches and to improve the shape of the plant as well as to open the center to good air circulation and sun exposure. This is especially important for roses and fruit trees such as peaches and plums which are generally pruned mid-month. Prune summer flowering shrubs now, but be aware that spring bloomers such as azaleas have already produced their buds, which were formed last fall, and pruning them now will result in flower loss.

Muscadines also need their yearly pruning now to ensure clean, healthy vines and a bountiful summer crop. If you've ever witnessed this procedure, you noticed how drastically the vines are cut back, leaving only short stubs containing only 2 or 3 nodes or 'spurs'; each of which will amazingly sprout several feet of muscadine laden vines.

Don't forget to check your blackberry vines and remove all canes that produced berries last year, leaving the newly emerged canes, which will bear this season. At this point, it's sometimes hard to tell which is which, so a good practice is to mark the canes while they have berries. You can do this with a piece of twine, a bread twisty or a spray of paint at the base; this way you'll know which canes need to be cut at the end of the season as fruit is produced only on two year old canes (thorn less varieties).

February Gardening . . .continued

You would think the vegetable garden would be the last place about which to be concerned during this dreary month, but now is the time to plant seed potatoes and strawberries, and you can even still plant cool loving vegetables such as cabbage, broccoli, spinach, Asian greens, lettuce, parsley and kale.

If you're really planning ahead, you can begin indoor seeding of spring and summer flowering annuals like petunias, vinca, verbena as well as vegetables for your summer garden including tomatoes, peppers and eggplant for transplanting after the threat of frost has passed.

As you close out your list, don't forget to check your garden tools and equipment now before you need them. Sharpen blades, oil moving parts, and if your mower, edger, leaf blower or shredder needs servicing, get them in before the spring rush.

As you can see, February is not the month for fireside sitting and leafing through seed catalogues; it's time to step outside and get busy, and hopefully we'll have many sunny, warm days to get everything accomplished before that Easter cold front hits.

Just as a suggestion: instead of getting your Valentine an overpriced vase of short-lived flowers or a box of waist-expanding chocolates, you might consider an Earth-Kind rose bush, which will provide many vases of free blooms all year, or a tree that will bear nutritious fruit for years to come. Just saying.....

Happy Valentine's Day!

Time Saving Gardening Tips *By Micah Shanks, JCMG*

Hopefully we have seen the worst of winter. I, for one, will never get used to being cold. If you haven't already planned your spring garden, it's time to get busy.

First of all, what needs to be replaced after the freezes? I never get too upset if I lose something to frost because it creates an opportunity to try something different. I also like to try new designs and color palettes in my flowerbeds, so Jack Frost makes it easy for me. When choosing new plants, consider what kind of time you will have to devote to maintenance. Some years I have been able to spend lots of time tending my flowers, but last year was not one of them. I knew in advance that I had lots of other obligations coming up, so I cut down on annuals and just let my perennials take center stage. That's the good thing about a well planned garden. There is always something in bloom year round!

Remember to keep your tools handy in a basket or bucket near the back door. You don't want to waste a lot of time searching for your clippers. Drip irrigation is easy and cost efficient to install...another time saver. And of course, always keep 3-6 inches of mulch down. Mulch is the ultimate time saver. It reduces the need to water, cuts down on weeds and prevents diseases. Gardening should be a stress reliever and not a cause of anxiety. When you choose low maintenance plants and follow time efficient practices, you can enjoy your garden without feeling like a slave to it.

2015 Master Gardener Christmas Party



*Helping Hand Award
Melissa Starr*



Congratulations

**Diane Davis, Master
Gardener of the Year!!!!
Article to follow in the May
Newsletter.**

It's Rose Pruning Time!

By Melissa Starr, JCMG

The sweet scent of cascading roses is a dream of any gardener. On Valentine's Day, rose vendors are on every street corner, so it makes sense that the rule of thumb here in Southeast Texas is to prune your roses on Valentine's Day. However, pruning them any day in the month of February will insure prolific blooms in spring.

How do you prune a rose? The first step is to gather your tools. You will need hand pruners, loppers, and leather gloves. Make sure your tools are clean, so you may want to wash them in a bleach solution a few days ahead of time to prevent contaminating your roses with a disease from another plant.

Next, look at your rose bush and remove any dead canes flush with the bud union or cane from which they grew. If you have climbing rose that blooms only in the spring, STOP! Pruning anything more than dead canes will mean no blooms this year. Wait until after the spring blooms have died, and then prune. For all other roses, continue the pruning process.



Now you can begin the more severe pruning. If canes are growing from one side of the bush to the other, remove them. Roses need good air circulation, so most of your canes should grow up or out from the center. If you have an old gray cane that only produced spindly growth, cut it off at the bud union so new canes can take its place. Next look for an outward facing dormant

bud and cut ¼ inch above it at a 45 degree angle. This encourages new canes to grow outward instead of across the center of the plant. After pruning, The American Rose Society recommends that you seal the large canes with Elmer's glue to prevent destruction from borers. "How much do I cut off?" is another question people frequently ask. The Texas A&M website (<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/archives/parsons/publications/roses/prune.html>) recommends that hybrid teas be 18 to 24 inches tall after pruning, floribundas be pruned to half their height, and antique roses be pruned to 2/3 their height (1/3 pruned off).

Whew! Now that the pruning is done, there are still more chores to do. Make sure you remove any old foliage from the bush and clean up fallen leaves and pruned canes. Any dead leaves will harbor diseases that can infect your roses later. Finally, fertilize, mulch and wait for the spring show!

My Master Gardener Anniversary

By Ann Bares, JCMG

Today, the second Monday in January, is the beginning of my 16th year as a Master Gardener. Actually, I was just a student on that Monday morning in 2000. When I walked into the classroom, excited, shy, and totally unaware of the journey I was about to begin, I asked myself, "Exactly what have you signed on for?"

First, we were given our binders, and into them we inserted a lot of printouts while our county's Horticulture Agent, Vince Mannino, told us a little about what we would cover in our first week of classes. It sounded interesting, if a little intimidating, to a backyard gardener with no real horticulture background. I looked forward to all the different subjects and speakers from Texas A&M and other areas of Texas I'd never visited. We had a coffee break and enjoyed, what I was going to learn was a big part of all Master Gardener events, lots of warm and tasty snacks to keep us happy. As we hung out close to the coffee bar, we got acquainted and began what would be a special part of the next two weeks and, for many of us, many years to come. Due to bad weather, many of the speakers weren't able to travel, so for many of the programs, our instructor was our agent, Vince. We realized that his true and favorite calling was sharing his knowledge and love of horticulture. Sitting on the back row, and still a little shy, I finally raised my hand after a few days to ask..."Just what *is* a crabapple?" After the laughter subsided, Vince replied, "Well, Annie, it's not a crab, so....?" More laughter, but this time I joined in. After that, I felt comfortable, and a few of my fellow students said it made them aware that there's no harm in a wrong answer. It's a way we all learn. We went on to build the Test Garden where we taught children's classes and held many community events.

Graduation in June at Ethridge Farm in Kountze was a family affair with brown-bag lunches, sweet tea, watermelon, cake and cookies from the MGs. The blueberries were plentiful, and we were invited to pick some to take home. I left the next day for a week in Austin. My first week home, I went to the office and, coffee in hand, went to say hello to Vince. "How was your trip?" he asked, followed by "I have a job for you." It was chair of the greenhouse. It was the first but not the last job/position I declined but then filled while always learning something new. Several times we were without an agent for many months, but we held classes and graduated over 25 new MGs each time. Each new class added new ideas, or made the old ones better. We realized that, like any family, we became stronger when we had to pull together even though we would sometimes respectfully disagree.

These 15 years have taught me more than when to prune the roses or plant the mustard greens. I've learned that; like every garden, family, or community; what keeps it together is not only cooperation, but a strong foundation. The best seeds or plants will not grow in unhealthy soil or without the room to reach their full potential. When I count my blessings, my Master Gardener family is always at the top of the list.

Happy New Year, looking forward to 2015!

Potatoes

By Melissa Starr, JCMG

During dreary winter days, many gardeners are dreaming of March and their spring gardens. Potatoes, however, can be planted now. Potatoes enjoy warm days and cool nights, so they should be planted in mid-February in order to give them as long a period of cool weather as possible.

When preparing your soil, till deeply and test the pH of your soil. Potatoes grow best in a slight acidic pH of 6.0 to 6.5. Use lime to raise pH and sulfur to lower it. Next add organic matter and a fertilizer such as cottonseed meal or a 15-5-10.

Buy only certified seed potatoes from a nursery or feed store. Do not use potatoes bought from the grocery store because they are treated with growth inhibitors. Use potato pieces that are about 2 inches wide. If your seed potatoes are larger, cut them into pieces and either let them dry overnight or dust them with some agricultural lime to prevent rotting. Good varieties for our area include Red Lasoda, Pontiac (red), and Kennebec (White).

Plant your potatoes at least 3 to 4 inches deep and mulch with compost or hay. When the plants are 6 inches tall, add additional mulch or pull soil up around the plants. New potatoes grow on the stems that are covered, so the more stem that is underground, the higher your yield. If there is a freeze while your potatoes are growing, you will need to cover them, or the exposed stems will be damaged.



Lightly fertilize your potatoes again about 4 to 6 weeks after planting or when they have grown about 6 inches. By the end of May, you should be able to dig up potatoes one at a time. When the plants begin to die at the end of May or in June, don't fret because this is normal. It is just a sign that it is time to harvest.

After harvesting your potatoes, allow them to dry before storing. Do not wash the potatoes, and store them in a cool, dry, dark place in a container that allows ventilation. Use any potatoes

that have cuts or bruises immediately; they will not store well.

Potatoes are a great crop for gardeners to grow. They are easy to grow and fun for kids of all ages. When I was growing up, I checked my parents' and grandparents' gardens every week to see how big the potatoes were growing. The anticipation was too much for me, so I would take one finger and dig in the dirt until I uncovered a tiny potato. When I was satisfied that they were growing, I would cover it back up and try again the next week. When harvest time came, I was always overwhelmed at how many potatoes we dug up from under each plant. Then my mom would cook those tasty red potatoes and we would feast on them for weeks.

The Latest Dirt

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1225 Pearl Street, Suite 200
Beaumont, TX 77701

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Fax: 409-839-2310
Hotline: 409-835-8742



We're On The Web:

<http://txmg.org/jcmg/>

<http://jefferson.agrilife.org>



MISSION STATEMENT

To encourage and support the horticultural community of Southeast Texas through education and example.

2015 Officers

President—Toni Clark

Vice President—Herbert Bass

Secretary—Charisse Miller

Treasurer—Joyce Logan

At Large—Cecil Hightower, Stellina Reed,
Phyllis Smith

Past President—Tony Lucenti

Announcements

Check the website for more details

Spring Vegetable Seminar
Saturday February 7 8am—noon
Beaumont Botanical
Garden Center
\$15 per person

Landscape Design and Rainwater
Harvesting Seminar
Saturday March 7, 8am—Noon
Beaumont Botanical Garden Center
\$10 per person

Giving Field
Organic Workshop
March 14 8am-4pm

Tree Giveaway
February 20 9-11
at the Test Garden

Spring Market Day and
Plant Sale
Saturday, March 28
8am—2pm
Jack Brooks Regional Air-
port



T-Budding and Grafting Seminar
Saturday April 18
8:30—Noon
Texas A&M AgriLife
Extension Auditorium
\$10 per person
Graftwood must be
pre-ordered by April 1
409-835-8461