



dirty digs

Entertain, Educate, Elevate

A Publication of the Autauga County Master Gardeners Association February-March 2010

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Remember to get those plants ready for the plant sale April 30.

Journal can be a handy helper for maintaining your garden

In the early 1970s I was about to embark to the unknown, and I was scared. I was to attend military school and venture away from home for the first time in my life. I needed something for comfort. I found it in a flimsy three-ringed binder filled with loose-leaf paper and printed with nearly everything I did and thought on a daily basis.

I didn't know it then, but the journal would exist in some form or another through much of my life. It became a dear friend, and helped me sort through a whole lot of problems simply by allowing me to visualize my life on paper and later computer screen.

In more recent years its purpose has changed, but its contribution to my life hasn't. Scribbling by campfires I have chronicled my walks through Coosa County, detailing wildflowers and other discoveries, noting numerous sayings and stories passed along by others, and on really cold nights questioning myself on why the heck I



By Jim Plott
Editor

am in the middle of the woods in the middle of winter.

When my interest in gardening grew, so did the need for some sort of record. I saw the need the jot a note here and there about the type of plants I planted, yields and successes and bloom and harvest times. A second journal was born, and this one was more substantially active than the other. My

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Here's to hoping for a wonderful productive year

Well, it has been almost two months since I was installed as President of the Autauga County Master Gardeners Association. I want to thank each and every one of you for having the confidence in me to faithfully discharge the duties of this office. It is a humbling experience.

I also want to share with each of you the vision that I have for the Association that I trust will make us better gardeners and a better organiza-

By Anthony Yarbrough
Autauga MG President

tion.

The executive board has met and these are the things that I discussed with them. We will be taking one or two trips this year. Possible excursions will include Pat Dye's



Japanese Maple farm near Notasulga, the Auburn University Arboretum, Aldridge Gardens and Botanical Gardens, both in Birmingham, as well as other gardens. These will be one-day trips. I also am in contact with the Master Gardeners in Montgomery and Elmore counties to see if they would like to accompany us on these trips.

Three people have emailed me with suggestions to improve the asso-

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Older Plants Becoming Modern Day Problems

My inbox has been peppered with a lively debate among the members of the Alabama Plant Conservation Alliance. The topic is invasive exotic plants, one that on the surface doesn't seem to be controversial.

Yet the makeup of the group — scientists in the fields of botany, conservation biology and anthropology and horticulturists for public gardens — brought an amazing number of perspectives to the discussion.



Chinese Privet

The debate was touched off by the draft of a well-intentioned letter to homeowners and nurseries requesting them to avoid purchasing exotic plants known to be invasive in Alabama and neighboring states. (Amazingly, there are nurseries and garden centers still selling plants that are known to be invasive.)

Invasive species include not only plants but animals, fish and disease. They often arrive accidentally but are also introduced as ornamentals and, in the case of plants, as food for animals.

Without their native predators to keep them in balance, these organisms develop unchecked and can, in short order, degrade habitats and choke out the native plants and animals.

We see this process in action as we drive along roadsides covered with kudzu and lined with mimosa trees and privet. But it is happening in forests as well.

What may come as a surprise is that the USDA Forest Service list of

invasive exotic plants reads like a “Who's Who” of the most be-



By Mary Jo Modica

loved horticultural plants from your grandmother's garden.

What older home would have been complete without a foundation planting that included a few nandina? Today, this plant's bright red berries are being transplanted from city to forest inside the bellies of fruit-eating birds.

Happily, the seeds of the newer red-leaved nandina cultivars are sterile.

Some of the other plants from grandmom's garden on the watch list include lantana, monkey grass or creeping lirioppe, Japanese climbing fern, Japanese stiltgrass or *Microstegium* (my worst nightmare), common and bigleaf periwinkle, the non-native bamboos, English and other non-native ivies, and Russian olive.

While some argue that a few non-native plants sprouting in the woods is hardly a crisis, others point out that once a critical mass of plants is reached — somewhere around 50 plus years — reproduction proceeds exponentially.

The question becomes: How do we as gardeners indulge our love of exotic plants while

ensuring the plants we introduce today will not become a problem for our grandchildren?

The Alabama Invasive Plant Council (ALIPC) is providing assistance. They closely watch the spread of non-native species in the state and have developed a system of criteria for



Eleagnus

evaluating plant species for invasiveness. Their goal is to:

1. Rank plants based on their invasive characteristics;
2. Foster early detection so landowners and stewards can implement a rapid response to prevent plants from becoming established and spreading;
3. To educate the general public, resource managers, landowners and plant growers in an effort to eliminate the use of invasive plants in landscaping, restoration and enhancement projects.

In the end, the scientists and horticulturists struggling to come to common agreement about the need for a letter requesting gardeners to avoid purchasing known invasives agreed to disagree and deferred to ALIPC.

The list of invasive plants and their evaluation criteria is available at www.se-eppc.org/alabama.

Mary Jo Modica is horticulturist at The University of Alabama Arboretum. She writes a regular column for the Tuscaloosa News. Reach her at mmodica@as.ua.edu.



Chinese Tallow (Popcorn Tree)

Reaching Goals Comes from Many Hands

The 2010 service report numbers are in and, as usual, they are impressive. Fifty Autauga County Master Gardeners reported a total of 4,670 volunteer hours and 1,013 educational hours. That's an average of almost 115 hours per member.



Forget Me Nots

By Pam Olson

Of course, not every member has time to volunteer a 100 or more hours. To boost our average are members like Debbie Boutelier, this year's nominee for the AMGA *Top Hours of the Year Award*, with 593 hours. Wow!

The combined total is what matters for our county, though. As Anthony Yarbrough reminded us at the Christmas luncheon, we are a family, so we work together for the good of the group.

Even five total hours submitted by a certified member are significant because those five, added to someone else's 25, added to someone else's 200, unite to represent the cooperative effort of all our members to give back what we can to the Extension System and AMGA.

The 14 recent MG class graduates who joined Autauga County Master Gardener Association made an outstanding contribution to our county total with over 900 hours. We appreciate having so many new enthusiastic and dedicated members.

It's always exciting to see the number of contacts our members make throughout the year. We reached 7,172 young people and adults with information relating to gardening and conservation. Those are the numbers ACES likes to see in order to know that we are reaching the public on behalf of Extension.

Thank you to everyone who turned in 2010

hours, either by registering on the new on-line reporting system or by sending me your information.

Now it's time to recognize our 2010 *Reach for the Stars* award recipients. Bronze stars, for a minimum of 100 cumulative hours, were earned by Bonnie Boyd, Marjorie Hannah, Martha Hughes, and Ben Miller.

Silver stars, 300 hours, were earned by Mark Carmichael, Deborah Cheatum, Janet

Lohman, and Jimmy Prince.

Gold stars, 500 hours, were earned by Jim Plott and Anthony Yarbrough.

Albert Striplin will be awarded a gold name badge, 1,000 hours, at the state conference, and Debbie Boutelier will be awarded a ruby star, 4,000 hours, to be worn on her platinum badge. The "gem stone" stars are part of the new AMGA *Advanced Hours Recognition Program* to show its appreciation to MG's with over 4,000, 6,000, 8,000, and 10,000 hours.

Debbie is also our nominee for *The Jean Lee Lifetime Hours Award* with a cumulative total of 5,201 hours.

Another new award this year is the *Outstanding Newsletter Award*. Three 2010 issues of *Dirty Digs* were requested by the awards committee for the nomination. Best of luck to Jim Plott and everyone else who had a part in the March, June/July, and Oct./Nov. issues. Take a look back at these and see how special our newsletter truly is.

Congratulations to all our award recipients and nominees! And congratulations to every one of our 50 members for your part in ensuring the continuation of the Master Gardeners program! Each one of you is an incredible asset to our county.



A few favorites as the weather turns favorable

As I look over my gardening resolutions for 2010, I see I didn't do half bad. Of course, that means I only did half good, too. Oh, well—it's a new year, right? Maybe I can do better in 2011. Here's a run down of my goals for last year, plus an update for 2011. After an endless hot summer, and a cold, wet winter, I'm ready to garden.

My first resolution last year was to read four books by Michael Pollan. I did. And if you haven't read this guy yet, by all means do so, especially *Second Nature*, which is about gardening. I laughed, I reminisced, and I bonded with this writer. Here's a quote: "...it is gardening that gives most of us our most direct and intimate experience of nature—of its satisfactions, fragility, and power." I love that line. In fact, I like so many lines in the book, I've highlighted half of it. Jim Plott asked us to let him know our favorite gardening book, one that we use to tide us through the bleak winter. This is it for me—*Second Nature*.

Here are a few more lines: "Of the seven deadly sins, surely it is pride that most commonly afflicts the gardener." And, "Next come the loathsome slugs: naked bullets of flesh—evicted snails—that hide from the light of day, emerging at night to cruise the gardens along their own avenues of slime." Wow! Is that a great image of a slug, or what?

—If you read no other book

on gardening this year, I insist you try Michael Pollan's *Second Nature*. You probably will, as I did, hunger for more and read his other books. I recommend them, too—especially, *In Defense of Food*.

I will save the other five resolutions I made for 2010 until my next article or two. Right now I want to throw in a few lines on my new "favorite potted plant"—my Nun's Orchid. I bought it last year at Southern Homes & Gardens, and it wasn't cheap—about \$25 for one pot—but it has been my pride and joy. The plant has long, wide leaves, resembling a Ti plant, only the Nun's Orchid leaves are green, not red. The plant puts out long stalks, two to three feet tall, that are covered with beautiful, white,

orchid-like blossoms. My blossoms lasted for a good 30 days. Last year the plant had three blossom stalks, this year there are nine.

The Nun's Orchid is not, as far as I can tell, a true orchid. It is a *Phaius grandifolius*, whatever that may be. But when it is covered with its orchid-like blooms, there is nothing prettier. I keep mine outside in screened sunlight all spring and sum-

Earl's Pearls



By Earl Fisher

mer, but bring it inside to a sunny window in the winter. In the summer I water it every day, in the winter twice a week. I give it a sprinkling of Osmocote 19-6-12 in the spring, and a weak solution of 15-30-15 every weekend during the spring and summer. It seems to work. I intend to hit it with some 15-30-15 this weekend, now that it's about to go into full bloom. If you want an unusual potted plant, I recommend the Nun's Orchid.

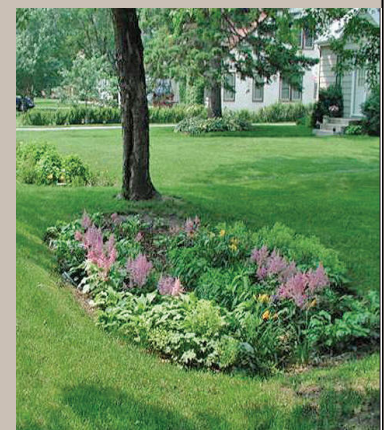
And, say, wasn't Saturday, January 29 the most beautiful day ever? Seventy degrees, not a drop of humidity, and sunshine all day long. I did, as Michael Pollan suggests in his book, commune with nature—I gardened all the lovely day long. It was wonderful.

Extension, City to Hold Rain Garden Program

The Autauga County Extension office and the Autauga Master Gardeners along with the Clean Water Partnership and the City of Prattville will conduct a Rain Garden Seminar for the public Tuesday, March 29 from 10 a.m. to noon at the Doster Community Center in Prattville.

This will be an hour of lecture on rain garden site selection, plant selection and how to design and install. Then we will go out and around the block to the Community Garden location to view the site where they will install the Rain garden and have more information on plant selection and placement and also designing the rain garden by city Horticulturist Ken Johnston.

This event is Free, but you must call the Autauga County Extension office at 334-361-7273 to register in advance.



Many home gardeners become discouraged starting their seeds indoors because the plants become weak, spindly, leggy or even die of diseases. It's not that difficult to grow good quality seedlings at home, but there are some important things you need to know before you begin to ensure success.

When asking yourself, "Is it time to sow seeds?" It is always better to lean on the side of being too late rather than too early. Keep in mind that you can continue to grow seeds throughout the summer to have a succession of vegetables in your garden rather than planting them all at once. On deciding when to start seeds, calculate the average date of the last frost for your area. Then according to the seeds you are growing count back the number of weeks to when you should sow. Plants like beans, okra, carrots and corn should be seeded directly into the soil, but other plants like tomatoes, eggplant and peppers respond well to an indoor start.

One advantage to starting seeds indoors is you can order from a reputable source and select varieties that you would most likely not be able to find in the garden centers. From the "heirloom" varieties to the latest hybrids, starting seeds indoors opens a whole new world of plant varieties and types of vegetables to try.

Now that you have the seeds and know when to sow them, what should you sow them in?

Select containers that provide good drainage. If you use containers you have previously grown plants in, it is best to wash them in a 10 percent bleach solution to

remove any fungi or bacteria. Then select a growing medium that is sterile and free of weed seed. It is best to start seeds in a medium that is labeled "Seed Starter Medium." Always make sure to moisten the soil well before you sow any seeds and prepare all of your labels to identify your plants ahead of time.

By Mallory Kelley
Regional Extension Agent

Few seeds need light to germinate so it is not necessary to provide light to the media and

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Sow Ahead

Give Seeding a Try This Year

seeds until after they germinate. If the seeds are very tiny you may want to cover them lightly with vermiculite. As a rule of thumb, plant seeds two and a half times the diameter of the seed.

For good germination, the seeds will need warm soil and humidity. To create the humidity place a clear plastic bag over the container or a clear lid to hold in the humidity. If you see water dripping inside it is too hot and wet and could

cause disease problems so make sure to vent the lid or cover.

The best place in the home to put your container with seeds is on a warming pad to warm the soil or if you do not have a warming pad place the planted container on top of your refrigerator. Your seeds will need to remain moist and humid and should begin to germination in 10-12 days.

Once the seedlings germinate you can remove the cover that you have over them creating the humidity and place them directly under lights as close as you can without touching for 14-16 constant hours to prevent them from becoming long and leggy. No fertilizer is needed until after the first set of true leaves appear.

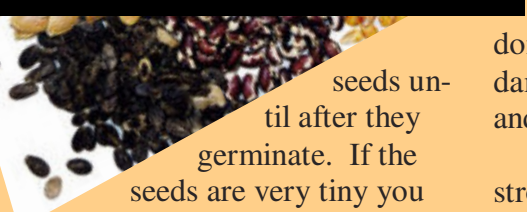
Then use a water soluble fertilizer at half strength every 2-3 weeks.

If you sow the seeds in small cell packs or sow all of the seeds together in one container you would then need to transplant them into bigger containers as they grow.

This transplanting should be done early and carefully to avoid damaging the plants' delicate roots and stems.

Once your plants get larger and stronger and it is close to planting time outdoors you should begin to harden off your plants by taking them outside for a few hours a day and bringing them back indoors. This is done to prepare young plants for the harsher environments outdoors such as the full sun, wind, and varying moisture.

When the day finally arrives to plant outdoors, a cloudy day with little wind is the most ideal.



The March Gardener

Are you as far behind in the garden as I am? It seems I have been playing catch-up since the middle of last summer. And guess what? If I don't get on it immediately, I am about to be twice as far behind.

After a long period of dormancy, everything is coming out gangbusters and it waits for no one. So what's say we get at it? We have a lot to do.

Trees/Shrubs:

Examine the backside of euonymus and camellia leaves for scale insects. Thoroughly spray with horticultural oil if the pests are found.

Remove spent camellia blooms from the bush and from the ground. You'll prevent camellia petal blight.

Forsythia, quince and winter honeysuckle can be pruned to a smaller size after flowering.

Fertilize shrubs: 1 tablespoon of 10-10-10 (or shrub fertilizer) per foot of height.

It's getting late, but if your crape myrtles haven't leafed out yet, give them a slight prune if they need it. Avoid drastic cutting.

Annuals/Perennials

Divide overgrown clumps of hosta now that you can see the leaves unfurling aboveground.

Lawns

Sharpen your mower blade or replace it with a new one.

If you have weeds in the lawn, set your mower level at least low enough to cut them. The cool season weeds will die soon enough and depriving them of sunlight helps the process.

Rake dead grass to allow new grass to grow in lawns. This will increase the effectiveness of fertilizers and pesticides applied to the lawn.

Bulbs

Fertilize any bulbs as they finish blooming with bone meal or bulb booster.

Do not remove the foliage from daffodils or other perennial spring-blooming bulbs. The foliage should be left for at least six weeks in order to store enough energy in the bulb, before dormancy, to ensure next spring's bloom.

Vegetables/Fruits

Plant onion sets in the garden.

Sow leaf lettuce in the garden if you haven't already.

Consider staggering the planting of the leaf lettuce rows by several days, so the entire crop doesn't mature on the same weekend.

Spray a fungicide on apple and peach trees while the blooms are on the tree.

Roses

Last chance to prune bush roses to approximately one half their present size.

Plant bare-root roses in soil that contains plenty of organic matter and which has been thoroughly tilled.

Ornamental Grasses

Cut most of the green foliage off of tattered liriope. A mower, set to its highest setting, is the best tool for large areas.

Indoor Plants

Repot houseplants you plan to move outdoors. Their roots will need more room as they grow rapidly in the sun.

Miscellaneous

Broken or weak arbors, fences and trellises should be repaired this month as you will only be getting busier in the coming months.

Clean out your birdhouses now, so they will be ready when birds return from their migrations.

~~Wanted~~
Needed

Your Story Submissions
Your Photos • Your Ideas
Anything to Improve Our
Newsletter

Submit to Jim Plott (jmplott@msn.com) or
361-9621

JOURNAL, continued from Page 1

original intent was to learn from my failures, but I realize now I was vastly overlooking my stubbornness.

At first this primitive garden journal was nothing more than a few scrawls in date blocks of a calendar offered by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. The calendar was designed to help people with their finances, but it suited my purposes well.

However, something happened. For some reason I found it necessary to start recording the high and low temperatures of each day, the amount of rain, and even the time of the year when certain birds or butterflies appeared.

As a matter of convenience the two journals metamorphed into a single unit.

These days peering into the journal you are much more likely to read about jonquils instead of journeys.

While I am still unlikely to learn from the mistakes of the past – I did mention I was stubborn didn't I- keeping a garden has been invaluable and a wonderful teaching tool.

It helps me to recall what tomato varieties did well the year before and the year before that. It also serves as a reminder that trying to keep flowers hydrated in August is a waste of time and water. And maybe just for the fun of it, it lets me know what year the white oak in my yard produced an uncommon number of acorns.

I like to record the dates of the first and last frosts of the year, insect and other garden problems and how I solved them and an abundance of other tidbits.

At times I get more complex than necessary. Often I will section off portions of the lawn or garden bed and conduct experiments. Readers of my columns are familiar that I am not a big advocate of fertilizing. That's basically because I have noticed through testing that there is no vast difference between shrubs or flowers that received fertilizer and those that didn't.

By hyper linking key words like tomato or lawn on my computer journal I am basically able to follow progression of vegetable plants or experiments and bypass non-pertinent entries.

And through the marvels of technology I now accompany notes with photos. This helps when you are tempted to water plants in August and when you are trying to remember the color of that iris in the corner of the yard.

The journal also helps me plan ahead. At the page bottom I insert notations la-

ANTHONY, Contd from Pg. 1

viding education opportunities to the public. As more and more extension agents are retiring, they are not being replaced due to budget cuts. I hope to put in place people from our association who would be willing to implement training programs in Autauga County. One such program already in place is the Junior Master Gardener Program that is implemented through the Extension Office. Some of our members have already expressed an interest in being involved. Thanks for reading my ramblings and I look forward to seeing each one at the next meeting.

ciation and we are implementing some of those changes such as the aforementioned trips. I eagerly await other suggestions.

Another change will involve stream-lining the meetings. As you have noticed, all of you that have email capability have been sent the minutes of the last meeting. We will dispense the reading of the minutes and only ask for corrections.

One main focus of Master Gardeners statewide is the need for pro-

beled by month or season to remind that I need to transplant a shrub, prune one or any one of a dozen things that I need to do, but often forget when the time comes. By having the note at the bottom of the page I am always likely to see it.

Garden journals can be as simple as taking a pen and pad along when you walk in your garden or yard and making a few notes. It can get as complicated as your time and you allow. It's your journal and you can do with it as you please.

Perhaps the main advantage of a journal from my perspective is to measure my growth as a gardener. While there will always be new things for me to learn, I have been able to see how much I have learned over the years, and in that respect it makes me feel my time in the garden hasn't been in vain.

Dirty Digs is a monthly publication of the Autauga County Master Gardeners Association.

For information, story ideas and submittals, contact Editor Jim Plott at 334-361-9621 or jmplott@msn.com.

The association meets each second Thursday of the month alternating day and evening meetings.

President: Anthony Yarbrough

Vice President: Mark Carmichael

Secretary: Jean Hare

Treasurer: Michelle McGowan

Historian: Carroll Bonifay

Membership: Mark Carmichael

Hours Coordinator: Pam Olson

Newsletter Editor: Jim Plott

Helpline: Janet Lohman

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Garden Calendar

March

20 - Rip Weaver, executive director of Aldridge Gardens, will switch your focus on ground covers in a talk from 3 to 5 p.m. at the gardens in Hoover. Rip will discuss and show us images of exciting new ground cover ideas for our landscape from dull but glittering ground glass to reindeer moss to interesting plants previously considered as weeds. There is a fee. Contact Audrey Ann Wilson at aldridge-aaw@bellsouth.net or 682-8019, ext. 3 for additional information.

30 - Linda Franzo Cooking Class at Petals from the Past in Jemison. Linda, the owner and operator of the Passionate Platter in Slidell, Louisiana, will dabble in making herb yogurt cheese and fresh ricotta cheese, then drizzle and dollop pesto, vinaigrette and olives on it. Please call the retail shop at 205-646-

0069 to make reservations for this class. Space is limited so call early. Fee \$25.

April

4 - Training for Junior Master Gardener classes from 10 a.m. - 1 p.m. at the Autauga County Extension System office in Autaugaville. Learn how you can help youth and the Extension System with this valuable program. Please bring a covered dish. Call the Extension System at 361-7273.

16-17 - The Alabama Wildlife Association will host Floral Weekend at its Lanark in Millbrook. More details to be released later.

30 - Autauga County Master Gardener Plant Sale. Master Gardeners get your plants up and ready for our biggest fundraiser of the year. Buyers, come out and take advantage of some great deals and some unusual plants. More information coming.