Garden Plugs
A newsletter for Henderson County

Henderson County Center  May / June 2010

NOW IS THE TIME

Lawns
✦ Do not fertilize tall fescue and bluegrass lawns again until September. Excess nitrogen can lead to brown patch disease in lawns.
✦ Mow tall fescue lawns to 2 ½ to 3 inch height. Research has shown that mowing to the proper height will help control weeds.
✦ An established lawn will go dormant during hot dry periods if we do not receive adequate rainfall. If it does not rain in a 3 week period, consider watering.

Ornamentals
✦ Prune trees and shrubs that were damaged from the cold winter now. Remove dead tissue and prune into healthy tissue.
✦ Begin to remove foliage from spring blooming bulbs as the leaves turn completely yellow and brown.
✦ Plant annuals now in the landscape, be sure to keep them well watered and dead-headed to encourage continual blooming throughout the summer.

Miscellaneous
✦ Keep the weeds pulled, before they have a chance to flower and go to seed again. Otherwise, you will be fighting newly germinated weed seed for the next several years.
✦ Keep garden vegetables watered with at least 1 inch of water per week, especially tomatoes.

UPCOMING EVENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>05/29/2010</td>
<td>9:00-4:00pm</td>
<td>Bonsai Exhibit</td>
<td>Bullington Ctr—698-6104</td>
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<tr>
<td>06/01/2010</td>
<td>1:00-2:30pm</td>
<td>Container Gardening</td>
<td>Bullington Ctr—698-6104**</td>
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<tr>
<td>06/16/2010</td>
<td>10:00-12:00pm</td>
<td>Hypertufa Workshop</td>
<td>Bullington Ctr—698-6104**</td>
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<tr>
<td>06/21/2010</td>
<td>2:00 or 6:30pm</td>
<td>Food Preservation Canning</td>
<td>Extension Office—697-4891**</td>
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<tr>
<td>06/24/2010</td>
<td>2:00 or 6:30pm</td>
<td>Food Preservation</td>
<td>Extension Office—697-4891**</td>
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<tr>
<td>07/08/2010</td>
<td>3:00-4:30pm</td>
<td>Culinary Herbs</td>
<td>Bullington Ctr—698-6104**</td>
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** fee required

Person with disabilities and persons with limited English proficiency may request accommodations to participate in activities mentioned in this newsletter, please contact Diane Turner at 828-697-4891 during business hours at least 5 days prior to the event to discuss accommodations.
**ANTS ON YOUR PEONIES**

If you are concerned about ants hanging around on your unopened peony blooms, do not try to get rid of them. This is a natural and temporary activity. It is believed that peonies produce small amounts of nectar and other ant attractants to encourage ants to help in opening the dense double flower buds found in many peonies. The ants may be found covering certain varieties and avoiding others, this is totally normal.

Once the buds have opened the ants will disappear - also normal. Some people think ants are required to open the flowers, but this does not appear to be true.

Should you spray a pesticide to get rid of the ants? The answer to that is a simple NO. Since the ants are not harmful and some insecticides may be harmful to other beneficial insects. Instead just enjoy the unique interaction of ants and peonies; an evolutionary effect thousands of years in the making and posing no problems in the long run.

**BEE CONSERVATION TIPS**

It is estimated a third of the food we eat is pollinated by bees. So it is no wonder the dramatic and unexplained decline in the population of these insects is worrying everyone, not just the conservationists. Fewer bees mean less pollination, which results in less honey and fewer plants. The consequences are damaging food industries that depend on the insects' survival and threaten to make the food we eat more expensive.

Bees help pollinate many of the fruits and vegetables that end up on our plates. Their role in the food chain is extremely important. The value of the bees' services is estimated at more than $14 billion a year.

Due to increased urbanization, many of our rural areas and native vegetation has been destroyed. Buying native plants is one small thing we can do to support our state insect. Most houses and yards are landscaped, so by merely making certain choices, native nectar or pollen producing plants can be used with little or no additional cost. Though they have only a tiny effect on a single hive, every little bit contributes and the more people using these plants, the more significant will be the total benefit.

Marvin Owings—Extension Agent, Henderson County
Healthy plants come from healthy soil. The best way to achieve healthy soil is to make your own... or to compost. Composting is the natural process of breaking down organic matter using natural organisms already present in the soil. So many of the everyday waste products we produce in and around our homes can be transformed into a rich soil amendment with a small investment in time.

You may think that composting is a complicated process, but I would like to share with you how easy it can be. The first step is to create a structure to hold your materials in place. The minimum size for a composter is 3 X 3 X 3 feet, which should be large enough to keep the natural organisms in the pile warm and actively working.

You can either purchase some inexpensive wire to create a round form or scavenge some scrap lumber and form sides for a box. There are a few commercially available plastic composters on the market that will work just as well.

Be sure whatever structure you choose to use allows holes for adequate air circulation and an easy access point to turn your compost every few weeks using either a rake or a pitch fork.

Choosing the location of your compost bin can be as important as any other factor to the success of making compost. Select a dry, shady spot with close access to water. The composting process requires moisture; too much sun will dry the pile too quickly. If your compost pile starts to have a foul odor, you may be adding more water than needed.

Once you have your structure and a location for the pile. It is time to start composting. Experienced gardeners will talk about layering your browns and greens into the compost pile. The browns are your carbon source or your dried leaves, twigs, shredded paper, and straw. The greens will provide the nitrogen through wet materials such as grass clippings or food scraps such as fruit and vegetable peels from your kitchen. You may also add manure from any grass eating animal as a nitrogen source. Layer these materials in a 3 parts browns to 1 part green ratio. Shredding larger pieces will ensure quicker compost. Be sure to never add meat products, dairy products, or diseased and pesticide treated plant trimmings.

The natural process of composting requires the pile to heat up to somewhere between 110-160 degrees. You may choose to purchase an inexpensive cooking thermometer to check the internal temperature of your pile periodically. A well heated pile will periodically give off steam on cooler days. If your pile is not heating properly, you may not have a large enough pile or you may be sufficient in moisture, air, or greens.

Finished compost is very dark in color with no remnants of food or yard waste. This may happen in as little as 2 to 3 months, once you have achieved this finished product, the compost is ready to use in your garden or landscape beds. Not only will you save money on mulch and fertilizers, you will help preserve our environment, as well as improve the appearance of our landscapes.
You may have limited space or you may just like to accent your spacious beds with splashes of color, either way container gardening is a great way to add a variety to any home landscape. Below I listed a few tips to help you be successful.

Pick the right pot.— Generally a pot should be one-third the height of the mature plants for things to look balanced.

Plant in the right type of soil.— The soil should be a mixture of peat moss, compost and a little sand, with small amounts of puffy perlite or flaky vermiculite to lighten the mix and aid drainage. Packaged potting soil often includes fertilizer, which further simplifies the planting process.

Plant what you will enjoy.— You can plant annuals, perennials, vines, vegetables, herbs, ground covers, bulbs, shrubs and even trees. So think about what you want your final outcome to be.

Start with healthy plants.— Look for plants with fresh green leaves and sturdy stems. Inspect them carefully for pre-existing insect and disease problems.

Pick the best combination of flowers.— You can place as many plants together as you like, but consider combining just two or three varieties for your first few attempts. The plants should have similar watering and sunlight requirements.

Keep them well fed.— The roots of the container-grown plants can’t wander far and wide in search of nutrients; it’s up to you to supply them. You can use either water-soluble plant food (about once every two weeks) or granular fertilizer (scratched into the soil surface every 6 to 8 weeks).

Keep them well watered.— If the top inch or two of soil feels dry, the plant probably needs watering. Consider using water saver crystals to cut down on watering frequency.

Pinch and groom them.— With annual flowers pinch or clip off the old blossoms to prolong overall flowering. When an entire stem seems to have borne its last bud, clip that off too.

"A garden is a friend you can visit any time."
Voles are small mammals, commonly called mice, that live in field and shrub habitats. In the wild, voles forage on native vegetation and provide a valuable food source for predators such as weasels, hawks, and snakes. In horticultural plantings, including flower and shrub plantings and home orchards, however, voles can cause damage by eating flower bulbs, girdling the stems of woody plants, and gnawing roots. Plants not killed outright may be invaded by diseases or die from water stress during periods of drought. Although voles have value in the natural world, homeowners may need to use measures to control damage from voles.

There are two kinds of voles in North Carolina, the pine vole (*Microtus pinetorum*) and the meadow vole (*Microtus pennsylvanicus*). Both of these cause damage in orchards, ornamental nurseries, and in home gardens.

Homeowners, however, notice damage from pine voles more often as they spend most of their lives under the ground in burrow systems. They feed on plant roots, flower bulbs, and the growing tissue (cambium) of tree roots. Pine voles tend to stay in an area as small as 1,000 square feet for their entire lives. At night, they come above the ground and feed on fruit and tender green vegetation. Soils with substantial clay content are more likely than sandy soils to support pine vole populations because the clay in soils permits relatively permanent tunnel systems and nest chambers. The typical natural habitat for voles is the shrubby edge between the woods and meadow openings.

Pine voles damage trees and plantings below the ground. When the damage to a particular tree, shrub, or broad-leaved plant is extensive, the plant will be severely weakened and may die. The trunks of small trees or shrubs may be severed from the roots, making it possible to pull the top of the plant out of the soil. Upon close inspection of the plant, gnawing marks can be seen just under the soil line.

Currently, trapping with mouse traps or rodenticides are the only ways NC State recommends to control pine vole populations in home plantings and orchards. If you choose to use a rodenticide, make sure place it only where infestations are expected.

There is a product on the market called VoleBloc manufactured by Permatill, it is an expanded slate product that is marketed to create a barrier to keep voles out of plantings. Their website claims “it works because voles do not dig through materials that are coarse in texture”. I have not tried this product my self, but know many gardeners that use it religiously. If you are losing valuable bulbs, perennials, and other plants in your landscape; it might be worth a try.
Garden Plugs

A newsletter for Henderson County Gardeners

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Diane A. Turner
Extension Agent-Horticulture

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