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Planning for Natives

By Susan Hall | February 2016-Vol.2 No.2

Native plants can be added to any existing garden bed that meets their horticultural requirements. Simple enough, right? And just adding some natives will certainly increase the amount of nectar and pollen on offer for insects in your garden. But what if you'd like to start a new garden? A wonderful option for those who have space to start a new garden is to recreate a functioning ecosystem by using groups of different plants that occur together in nature. Such groupings will do more to support wildlife than just sticking in some natives amongst the exotics. Ecologists have a term for these groups of plants — "plant communities" — usually defined as groups of plants "sharing a common environment that interact with each other, animal populations, and the physical environment." Pa. Dept. Natural Heritage/Plant Communities.

Native plant communities provide food and shelter for a wider range of insects and animals than a traditional garden. For example, if you want more butterflies in your garden, you need appropriate places for them to lay their eggs; in other words, you need plants that provide their larvae food. You might assume that the non-native butterfly bush (*buddleia)* would be a natural choice for a butterfly garden, but it only provides nectar for adult butterflies. Don't focus on just one life stage; butterflies, like all insects, need shelter, food for the larvae, and a place to hibernate during winter. Additionally, butterfly bush is an invasive plant. This alone makes native plants a better choice. It is true that this sort of gardening is very knowledge-intensive, but by creating a complete ecosystem you will have more success attracting all sorts of wildlife to your yard.

Mt. Cuba Center Gardens, Hockessin, Delaware. Photo Courtesy of mwms1916.

Another advantage of using a plan that follows the patterns found in nature is that you can be assured that all the plants have similar growing conditions. A soil test is very helpful in determining what sort of plant community your site can support. Plants that thrive together in acidic soil adjacent to a bog won't grow in alkaline soil in a dry meadow even if the sunlight levels are the same at both sites. Also, to some degree, you can make changes to increase or decrease the amount of light your new garden bed receives, but changing the structure and acidity of the soil can only be done very slowly over a period of many years. It's best to choose plants based on what you have. And while every new planting will need watering during its first year or two, when your natives become established, you'll only have to water during exceptional dry spells. Native plants growing under good conditions are also very good at out-competing any weeds that try to grow.

Mt. Cuba Center, Hockessin, Delaware.

Yes, this sort of gardening requires knowledge beyond the usual horticultural requirements. For very specific lists of natural plant community types in our area, I strongly recommend Timothy P. Spira's book, *Wildflowers and Plant Communities of the Southern Appalachian Mountains and Piedmont.* Not only does he list those plants that commonly occur in the various types of terrains in our area, he also provides detailed descriptions of individual plants and which forms of wildlife use them for either food or egg-laying.

The next article in this series will deal with sources for native plants. The mainstream nurseries usually carry some native species, but for those of us who want to go beyond coneflowers and other basics, the search becomes more challenging. If you have a favorite source, either a commercial nursery or garden club plant sale, please let me know. These lovely plants are out there, we just have to pool our knowledge to find them.

SOURCES:

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http://www.mtcubacenter.org

Photos from the Mt. Cuba Center in Hockessin, Delaware, one of the best native wildflower gardens in the US.

What’s all the hype about compost?

By Sara Elizabeth | February 2016-Vol.2 No.2

These days you cannot pick up a gardening magazine, read the garden section of a newspaper or attend a local vendor show without encountering something about composting. Have you ever wondered about composting and why it’s getting so much attention? Well, we’ve got answers, and we hope that you’ll feel ready to try it by the time you finish this article. Even if you’re already composting, you may just find some helpful nuggets here that can make your composting efforts more effective.

What is composting?

Compost is defined as a mixture of organic matter — usually created from leaves, grass clippings, kitchen waste, and sometimes, manure (no dog or cat) that has decayed or has been digested by microorganisms. It is used to improve soil structure and provide nutrients to plants.

Composting is a way to recycle your yard waste (leaves, grass clippings, garden waste, etc.), kitchen scraps (peels, trimmings, egg shells, tea bags, coffee grounds, filters, etc.) and other biodegradable products (newspapers, shredded cardboard, paper towels, etc.). Let’s face it, we all seem to have plenty of these. By

throwing such items into a pile and letting nature do its thing, they decompose and are transformed into a usable product — **compost —** that is great for your garden. And how does this magical transformation occur? Worms, insects, bacteria, and fungi break down the leaves and scraps and other organic materials into a nutrient-rich, dirt-like substance. There are many different types of composting: hot, cold, trench, layering and vermicomposting (using worms). This article will focus on hot composting, but before we get to the nitty-gritty, let's talk about WHY we should all be making compost.

Benefits of composting

Most of the raw materials capable of being composted — the kitchen scraps and lawn clippings and the like — are simply thrown in the landfill, pushed down the kitchen garbage disposal or tossed out in the trash. Why not put all this waste to good use?

By regularly adding compost to your garden soil, you will:

- Improve your soil structure
- Improve the nutrient-holding capability of the soil
- Promote healthy plants
- Reduce what is sent to the landfill

Unstructured Compost Pile

What is the compost recipe?

The recipe is pretty easy. First, you need a **location** in your yard away from the house. It could be enclosed or simply an unstructured pile.

You need a mixture of "browns" (carbon) and "greens" (nitrogen). "Browns" are items like leaves, sticks, dryer lint and papers. "Greens" are items like fresh grass clippings, kitchen waste, flowers, coffee grounds and tea bags.

You should **chop or shred** both "greens" and "browns" for faster decomposition by using hand pruners, a lawn mower or weed trimmer. You will have plenty of microorganisms to get the process going.

Add water, but not too much. The debris should be as moist as a wrung-out sponge. You will add "air" as you mix the pile. **Use a 3 to 1 ratio of browns to greens;** in other words, the breakdown process works best when you have three parts "browns" to one part "greens". This is known as your carbon-to-nitrogen (C:N) ratio. If the pile starts to smell, add more "browns." If it is too dry, give it a drink, but again, not too much.

Tools: You can use a pitchfork for turning, a long-stemmed thermometer to check the internal temperature, a composting bin or a pile, and a wheelbarrow to haul compost to your garden beds.

Building and maintaining the compost pile

How hard can this be? What do I need to do? What is my investment in terms of time and money?

There are several **compost tumblers** available on the market, and you may find you like using one. Minor assembly is usually required, and you may want to post a daily reminder to yourself to rotate the barrel! There are also plastic compost bins available for purchase. If you are using a compost tumbler or ready-made bin, add "browns" and "greens" using the same 3:1 ratio discussed above, and be sure to follow the instructions included with your bin.

Building your compost pile is not hard, but will require some time and a few supplies. You can sturdily **frame the area with pallets or wooden walls**. Or even easier yet, build an **unstructured pile**. Locate your container or pile in a partly-shaded area with good drainage and make sure you have plenty of space and access to water. A compost bin or pile should be able to hold 3 feet by 3 feet by 3 feet of materials.

Start by adding a layer of sticks or twigs on the bottom to aid in aeration and drainage, followed by a layer of "browns" and then by a layer of "greens." **Remember the ratio is three "browns" to one "green."** Repeat layers until all materials are used. You can also save your leaves in the fall and add them to your pile as needed. You will need to **mix your pile** to ensure everything is evenly distributed. Add water as you build the pile so the pile is moist but not too wet. Also make sure kitchen scraps are buried deep within your compost pile to prevent critters or pets from digging in the pile. Remember, you are building a compost pile, so it doesn't need to be perfect.

The compost pile will begin to "heat" up within a few days. This heat is important to kill off weed seeds and harmful organisms. It is common for the temperature to reach 150ºF – 160ºF, but try to maintain temperatures between 120ºF -140ºF during the composting process. If your pile does not heat up, add more "greens." When too warm, turning the pile more often will help to cool it off. You can purchase an inexpensive, long-stemmed thermometer to insert at the center of the pile to get an accurate temperature reading.

You will need to "turn" your pile occasionally to add oxygen for the microorganisms to breath. You can use a pitchfork to do this task. This will help keep the microorganisms alive and aid in decomposition. Don't forget to check the moisture level! If it is too wet, add more "browns." If too dry, add a little water.

How long does it take?

So you have built your compost pile, checked on it and turned it. Now you're probably wondering: How long before you have good compost for your garden?

You should have good compost in about 4 to 5 months. It could take less time if it is warm outside and the materials were chopped, kept moist and turned regularly. It could be longer if the outside temperatures were on the cooler side. You want to stop adding to your pile as the composting process comes to an end.

You will notice the pile shrinking. When composting is complete it will be dark and crumbly with a pleasant smell. Now it's time to spread it over your garden and start a new pile! Or, you may wish to store some of your compost elsewhere, using it whenever you need it.

With a little practice, patience and fine tuning, you will find that this process is pretty easy, and, best of all, your plants will thank you.

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Epimedium

By Patsy Chadwick | February 2016-Vol.2 No.2

When it comes to landscape design, not much attention is paid to ground covers. Typically, landscapers focus on shrubs, trees and perennials – the key elements of landscape design. More often than not, ground covers are treated as a practical solution for erosion control, weed suppression, or moisture retention. They are not given the credit they deserve for creating texture in the landscape or for the role they play in visually tying together the compositional elements of a garden.

The upside to many ground covers is that they tend to spread widely and fill in problem areas very quickly. The downside to ground covers is that they don't always play nicely with others and – let's face it – in many cases, they can be downright invasive. Because of their natural inclination to spread, they may grow well beyond their intended boundaries and crowd out other plants. Worse yet, they may escape into other areas of the garden or into the lawn and become a nuisance. Pachysandra (*Pachysandra terminalis*) is just one example of a popular ground cover that can be a problem. It generally behaves itself when planted in dry, rocky soil where it has to compete with tree roots for moisture and nutrients. However, when planted in loose, fertile, moist soil, it can spread aggressively and may require some serious intervention to keep it contained. A better strategy is to choose a ground cover that spreads slowly and can be more easily controlled. An *Epimedium* is an example of just such a plant.

WHAT IS EPIMEDIUM?

The Epimedium genus is an herbaceous member of the barberry family (*Berberidaceae*) of plants. The good news is that it shares none of the invasive characteristics for which some woody members of that family are

known. It has many common names of which the best known are barrenwort (because it was believed to cause barrenness in women), bishop's hat (because the flowers resemble a clergyman's mitered hat) and fairy wings (because the dainty flowers hover above the foliage like butterflies or fairies about to take flight). Low-growing *Epimediums* average 8 to 12 in. in height. Depending on the selection, they form either a low mound or a gently spreading ground cover. They grow best in a shady or semi-shady area in gardening zones 5 – 8.

Epimedium x stellulatum 'Long Leaf Form'

Epimedium leaves are generally heart-shaped, graceful, and most charming, particularly in the spring. There's a great deal of variety both in leaf size and color. Some selections, such as the one shown in the accompanying photo* of *E. stellulatum* 'Long Leaf Form', have elongated leaves that are shaped much like arrowheads. The emerging spring foliage of many selections varies widely in color, with many selections exhibiting reddish coloration or markings.

The accompanying photo of *E. x youngianum* 'Royal Flush' shows an example of that cultivar's gorgeous spring foliage. As the foliage matures, it changes to solid green in summer or to green with reddish markings. A particularly beautiful example is shown in the photograph of *E. sempervirens* 'Cherry Hearts'.

E. x youngianum 'Royal Flush'

In early spring, the flowers appear in clusters on long arching scapes. Depending on the species and cultivar, flower colors include white, red, pink, purple, yellow, orange and various bi-color combinations.

Epimedium x sempervirens 'Cherry Hearts'

A great deal of hybridization has taken place to expand the floral color palette. In my opinion, the delicate flowers are certainly charming but it's the amazing foliage that endears me to this plant.

The photo of *E. x versicolor* 'Sulphureum' is an example of a yellow-blooming selection. Its newly emerging spring foliage has rusty-red markings and is quite striking.

Epimedium x versicolor 'Sulphureum'

Epimediums are naturally distributed in areas around the Mediterranean Sea and Eastern Asia. Those species that evolved in the Mediterranean area tend to be evergreen and drought tolerant once they are established. Species that have been introduced from Asia are not as drought tolerant as their Mediterranean cousins and prefer rich, moist soil. They also tend to die back in fall and re-emerge in spring with fantastic variations in foliage, texture, and

color. Some varieties turn red, yellow or bronze for a second flush of color as temperatures drop in the fall.

In his second edition of *Herbaceous Perennial Plants (*1989), author Allan Armitage described *Epimedium* as "a genus whose time has come, with plenty of attributes and very few faults." Since that edition was published, there has been an explosion of interest in the genus due to the discovery of many new Asian species, largely from China, and to extensive breeding work of commercial plant developers, such as Darrell Probst of Massachusetts, as well as a number of non-commercial growers and enthusiasts. As a result, literally hundreds of cultivars now exist with more in the works.

Epimediums are generally trouble free. Deer and voles normally don't bother them but rabbits have been known to nibble the tender spring foliage. Slugs and snails may occasionally chew the foliage but they don't usually do any lasting harm to established plantings.

HOW TO USE EPIMEDIUM IN THE LANDSCAPE

Epimediums can be used in a number of interesting ways in the landscape. For example:

- In a mixed shade garden, plant it as a ground cover where it can gradually fill in the spaces between trees and shrubs and serve as a living mulch.
- Plant it as a border along a woodland path. The foliage will soften the edges of pathways and lend movement to the landscape as the wind ruffles the individual leaves.
- If you have lots of taller plants in a shade garden, use lower-growing *Epimediums* as an edging or border. The small heart- or arrowhead-shaped foliage makes a nice transition between lawn and garden plantings.
- Use it in a shaded rock garden setting where its low-growing habit will harmonize with similar ground-hugging plant forms.
- Plant it as an accompaniment to spring bulbs. The colorful emerging foliage will add additional interest and texture to a spring bulb display. Another advantage is that it will help hide dying bulb foliage.
- Use it to help solve an erosion problem. The dense, rhizomatous root system is ideal for holding soil in place. Bear in mind, however, that this plant may not be the most practical choice for a large area due to its slow growth rate. Also, it is a more expensive solution than the cheaper (but aggressive) ground covers such as bugleweed, ivy, vinca, or pachysandra).
- Create a complex woodland tapestry by interspersing *Epimediums* with other shade-loving ground covers. With so many shade plants to choose from, the biggest challenge is to select just two or three other species so that the design doesn't become too busy. A few complementary species that come to mind include: Allegheny spurge (*Pachysandra procumbens*), columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*), ferns, fringed bleeding heart (*Dicentra eximia*), hostas, Lenten rose *(Helleborus)*, lungwort (Pulmonaria), pigsqueak (*Bergenia cordifolia*) and wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*).

HOW TO GROW EPIMEDIUM

Epimedium is a great solution for dry shade conditions where other plants may struggle. It competes well with tree roots, is not bothered by rocky soil, thrives in dry soil, and tolerates lower light levels. These are, however, the worst-case growing conditions. While a clump of *Epimedium* can easily tolerate these less-than-ideal growing conditions, it will perform best if you:

- Select a garden spot with light shade or dappled light. This plant can take some morning sun but cannot tolerate hot mid-day or afternoon sun. If you don't have an ideal garden spot, try planting

it on the north side of the house or near taller plants or other structures that will cast a shadow in the afternoons. It will also grow in pots, which might be easier to manage.

- Verify (by doing a soil test) the pH of the soil before you plant. Most *Epimedium* species prefer neutral to slightly acidic soil. However, many of the newer varieties from China grow well in alkaline soil. Hybrids and selections of the Japanese species prefer acidic soil with a pH between 5 and 7.
- Plant in moist but **well-drained** neutral to slightly acidic soil. *Epimediums* do not like heavy soil that is soggy or holds water.
- Loosen the soil in a dry or rocky site as best you can and work some compost or well-rotted leaf mold into the planting hole.
- Space the plants about a foot apart. Actual spacing depends on the specific growth habit of the species or cultivar you select. The clumps will gradually grow together, filling in the empty spaces as they spread.
- Water new plantings regularly until they are well established.
- Shear the foliage of the evergreen varieties back to the ground before the flower spikes emerge in spring because, despite being evergreen, the foliage tends to look a bit tattered by then. Unlike deciduous species, which turn brown and fall off on their own in autumn, evergreen species do not fall off even when they become tattered or skeletonized.

HOW TO PROPAGATE EPIMEDIUM

Epimediums are best propagated by division. This plant is slow to colonize but it can eventually exceed its allotted space in the landscape. Divide it in spring after flowering has finished or later in summer or early fall, preferably on a cool, cloudy day. TIP: Moisten the soil before you try dividing the plant. That will ease the task of slicing through the mass of dense, fibrous roots. Also, use a sharp spade or a serrated knife for this task.

SUMMARY

Whether you are a novice gardener or a serious plant collector, you can't go wrong with *Epimedium*. It is long-lived, tough as nails, low maintenance, deer resistant, and drought tolerant. Its delicate flowers and beautiful foliage make it interesting all season long. With so many species and cultivars to choose from, don't limit yourself to just one. Although it is slow to spread, be patient and this plant will reward you with a fascinating combination of color, form, and texture in your shade garden. Best of all, it plays nicely with others.

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PHOTO CREDIT

*Photo of *Epimedium stellulatum* 'Long Leaf Form' used with the permission of Carolyn Walker, http://carolynsshadegardens.com/.

February in the Ornamental Garden

By Patsy Chadwick | February 2016-Vol.2 No.2

The best thing about February – besides Valentine's Day — is that it's short! For many of us, February is a month to be endured while we wait for spring. The days are noticeably longer now, but the bone-chilling temperatures and the frozen ground clearly remind us that it's still winter outside. We know it's too soon to start working in our gardens, but there's plenty that we can be doing while we wait for spring to arrive.

February is a good time to take **root cuttings** from your houseplants. The basic procedure is to use a sharp knife to sever a cutting just below a node. The severed piece should be about 2 to 6 inches long. Remove all but the top 2 or 3 sets of leaves. For expert advice on methods for propagation, see Virginia Cooperative Extension Publication No. 426-002, *Propagation by Cuttings, Layering and Division*. (http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-002/426-002_pdf.pdf).

If you're interested in re-purposing plastic soda bottles to keep them out of the land fill, use them to **make mini "greenhouses**" for rooting house plants or cuttings from annuals and perennials. Here's what you do:

- Remove the paper or plastic label that surrounds the empty 2-liter soda bottle.
- Thoroughly rinse out the bottle and screw the cap back on.
- Carefully cut the bottle in two about 3 to 4 inches from the bottom.
- Fill the bottom portion with a couple inches of well- moistened (but not soggy) potting soil.
- Using a pencil or other pointed implement, poke a hole in the moistened potting soil.
- Insert the stem cutting of your plant into the hole deeply enough so that it can support itself.
- Place the top portion of the bottle over the bottom portion and maneuver the two so that the top overlaps the bottom portion slightly. If you find it difficult to do this, try taping the two parts together.
- Place the bottle where it can receive plenty of light, but do not place it in direct sun.
- Depending on the plant you're rooting, it may take 6 to 10 weeks for roots to develop. You should be able to see the roots through the clear plastic soda bottle.

Cut amaryllis flower stalks off about one-half inch from the bulb now that the plant has finished blooming. Do not remove the strappy leaves. They are needed for photosynthesis so that the plant will bloom next year. Give the plant plenty of light and keep the soil moist but not soggy.

Are you wondering **what to do with forced bulbs** now that they have finished blooming? Don't throw them out! If you forced spring bulbs such as daffodils, hyacinths, crocuses or paperwhites into bloom this winter, continue to give them sufficient water and light to keep the foliage alive and healthy until spring. Plant them in your garden then. They will gradually replenish their stores of nutrients and will eventually re-bloom in a couple of years.

Pinch Christmas cactus stems back to encourage a thicker, fuller-looking plant. Pinching them back after they finish blooming is a good way to control their size. Otherwise, they can become quite large and leggy.

If you plan to **grow annuals from seed**, check the seed packets to see how many weeks they need to reach transplant size. If you intend to transplant the seedlings outdoors in late April or early May, you may find

that you need to start the seeds now for such annuals as ageratum, begonia, snapdragons, marigolds or melampodium. As a reminder, the last frost date in this area of Virginia is approximately May 10. If you transplant your seedlings outdoors before that date, you may need to protect them from chilly overnight temperatures.

Do a germination test on seeds left over from previous years to make sure they are viable. This is easy to do. Just moisten a paper towel and place about 10 seeds of the same variety on it. Roll up the paper towel and put it in a plastic bag. Don't seal the bag. Place the bag in a warm area. Check the seeds daily and keep the paper towel damp. After several days, see how many seeds have sprouted. If at least half of them did, then the rest will likely sprout as well. If less than that, you may need to acquire fresh seed.

If you stored **tuberous begonia bulbs** over the winter, sprout them in late February or early March for transplanting later into flower beds or hanging baskets. Place the tubers, hollow side up, in a potting mix that drains well. Keep the soil medium damp but not soggy. Place the container in indirect light in a cool room. The tubers should start to sprout within three weeks. Don't place them outside until about mid-May, after the threat of frost has passed.

Look for the appearance of spring bulb foliage as you stroll through the ornamental garden. A few warm days in February can trigger the emergence of early blooming daffodil, snowdrop, hyacinth, crocus, or other spring bulb foliage. The foliage can generally handle short periods of frosty temperatures without harm as long as daytime temperatures rise above freezing. On the other hand, if temperatures are forecast to drop well below freezing overnight or if prolonged freezing weather is predicted, then you may want to protect the foliage with a frost cover, a layer of evergreen boughs, chopped leaves, light mulch, or even a layer of newspaper.

Prune shrubs and trees while they are dormant, but make sure you know which plants respond well to pruning now and which ones should be pruned later. For example, February is the ideal time to prune arborvitae, juniper, nandina and late spring or early summer flowering abelia, beautyberry, buddleia, or caryopteris. Spring-blooming shrubs, such as forsythia and flowering quince should not be pruned until after they finish flowering, later in the spring. Before you make that first cut, check VCE Publication No. 430-462, *A Guide to Successful Pruning, A Pruning Calendar* (https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/430/430-462/430-462_pdf.pdf) for guidance on when to prune shrubs and trees.

Preserved Lemons

By Cate Whittington | February 2016-Vol.2 No.2

Some of my favorite dishes originated in the Middle East and Morocco. I love the smell and taste of the spices commonly used in that part of the world — tumeric, saffron, coriander, cumin, cinnamon, cloves, and the like. Preserved lemons — lemons pickled in salt and their own juices — are just as indispensible

to authentic Middle Eastern cookery. Pickling mellows the tartness of the lemon, ridding the rind of its bitter taste, and accentuating its lemon flavor.

I doubt that there is a recipe for chicken tagine that doesn't call for the concentrated taste and velvety texture of preserved lemon. Many specialty stores carry jars of it, but it is simple to make and great to have on hand in your refrigerator. Its uses are endless, not limited to tagines alone. Substitute preserved lemon for lemon zest or a squeeze of lemon. It pairs well with fish, lamb, stews, salads, dips, and sauces. Add some chopped rinds to grain and pasta dishes for an added zing.

The following recipe fills one 1-pint Mason jar and will keep in your refrigerator for at least a year. Lemons and salt are the only necessary ingredients, but optional spices, listed below, will enhance the flavor.

Ingredients

5 lemons (Meyer lemons, preferred)

1/4 cup salt

1 cinnamon stick

3 cloves

5-6 coriander seeds

3-4 black peppercorns

1 bay leaf

Directions

1. Sterilize a one-pint Mason jar.
2. Soak lemons in a solution of vinegar and water for a few minutes to clean the outer peels.
3. Quarter the lemons about 3/4 of the way from one end, leaving them intact at the other end. Sprinkle the exposed flesh with salt.
4. Cover the bottom of a one-pint jar with salt. Then pack the salted lemons into the jar, cut side first. Squeeze them in, one on top of the other, adding additional salt and optional spices between each layer. If their own juices do not cover the lemons, add some freshly-squeezed lemon juice to cover.
5. Seal the jar, making sure there is a bit of air space at the top. Let the jar sit at room

temperature for three days, shaking and turning the jar a few times each day. After three days, place the lemons in the refrigerator for three weeks before using.

6. After three weeks, the lemon is ready to add distinctive flavor to your dishes. Use a sterile spoon to remove only as much lemon as you need. Thoroughly rinse the salt from the lemon. The rind is commonly chopped for recipes. Some people discard the pulp, but that is personal preference. You may use both the rind and the pulp. The pickling juice may be used again and again or added to other dishes at will.