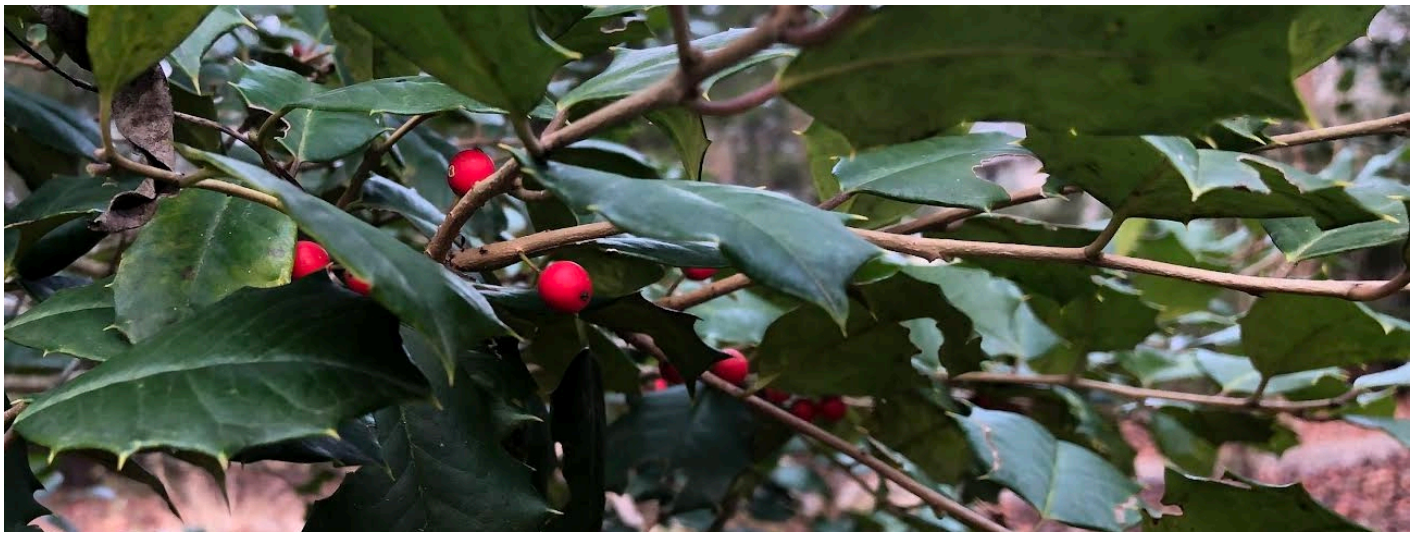
December 2024-Vol.10,No.12



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The Ornamental Garden in December

By Cathy Caldwell | December 2024-Vol.10,No.12

With the onset of winter, leaves have long since fallen and you can easily observe the “bare bones” of the garden. This is the ideal time to walk around your landscape and note what changes or improvements you would like to make next season. And while you’re taking a critical look at your landscape, don’t forget to tackle any gardening chores that remain undone.

- **Look for areas in your landscape where water collects after long periods of rain or snow.** Water that collects on the surface of the soil during winter will freeze and can damage perennials. As a temporary solution to this drainage problem, dig shallow trenches to help drain excess water away from the planted area. In spring, consider improving drainage by aerating the soil or raising the beds by gradually adding soil as a top dressing. For more information, see this Northern Virginia Soil and Water Conservation district article on solving drainage problems.
- **Loosen or remove thick layers of matted leaves** from perennial beds that might prevent moisture from penetrating into the soil or, conversely, hold too much moisture in the soil.
- **Continue watering recently planted trees and shrubs.** This is particularly important because lack of moisture during long, dry periods in fall and winter can cause injury or death to plant root systems.
- **Look for cool-weather weeds in garden beds**. It may be December, but lots of weeds can be found growing in the garden at this time of year. Common chickweed, henbit, purple deadnettle,

and other “winter weeds” sprout in mid to late fall. Weather permitting, pull the weeds now if you can reach them. A little effort now means less weeding needed in spring. As you weed, try to avoid stepping into flower beds because that can compact the soil.

- **Check to make sure mulch is not touching tree trunks**. If it is, pull the mulch away from the trunk to prevent moisture from being trapped against the bark. Otherwise, the prolonged moist conditions can decay the bark and, in time, eventually damage or kill the tree. For guidance on mulching, see the Virginia Cooperative Extension’s (VCE) publication on mulching.
- **Before the first winter storm occurs,** check to make sure you have a good supply of sand or sawdust on hand to put on icy walkways near plantings. Some plants are sensitive to de-icing salts, and sand or sawdust are better alternatives to use for this reason.
- **After the ground freezes, check for plants that have been displaced** due to soil heaving and replant them. This is a common occurrence with plants that were newly planted in fall and haven’t had sufficient time to anchor their roots into the soil. Make sure the roots are well covered with soil and mulch to protect them from freezing temperatures.
- If you didn’t remember to do this earlier in the fall, **drain all water hoses and store them** in a garage, garden shed, basement, or other suitable place out of the weather. Also, don’t forget to drain irrigation systems and non-frost-proof outdoor faucets.
- **Store concrete bird baths, planters, rain gauges and other outdoor ornaments** that might collect water and break in freezing temperatures.
- **Clean garden tools** with steel wool or a stiff wire brush, wipe with a damp cloth, dry, and apply an oil such as cooking oil, boiled linseed oil, tung oil, or WD 40.

PREPARING YOUR LANDSCAPE FOR SNOW

If a heavy snow or ice storm is predicted, take precautions to prevent damage to your evergreen landscape plants. Species with multiple leaders are susceptible to snow and ice damage. The branches of Leyland Cypresses, in particular, are bad about splaying under a heavy snow load and the damage is generally permanent. Other evergreens that might also be damaged include arborvitae, upright junipers, yews, magnolias, boxwoods, and some hollies. Minimize damage by loosely encircling the outside of the plant with jute twine, narrow rope, or strips of cloth so that individual branches can’t catch and hold much snow. Another technique is to tie the main leaders together, high up on the side of the shrub. The bindings may be left in place once the snow melts or until new growth begins in spring.

Clemson Cooperative Extension’s Publication on protecting evergreens from ice and snow damage recommends preventing storm problems in the first place by selecting evergreens with a single trunk or leader. Species with multiple leaders should be pruned to a single trunk or leader when the tree is young.

WINTER HOUSEPLANT CARE

Overwintering plants indoors needn’t be all that challenging. It’s simply a matter of understanding their requirements for water, humidity, temperature, and light. If you ignore these essentials, you’ll find that it’s quite easy to kill a houseplant. Let me count the ways:

- **Overwatering** (also known euphemistically as “killing with kindness”) – This is perhaps the most effective way to kill a houseplant. Overly saturated soil prevents the plant from taking up oxygen at the root level. Symptoms of overwatering include wilting and yellowing of the foliage. The proper way to water a houseplant is to give it enough water so that it drains from the bottom of the pot. Otherwise, salts in the water may build up in the soil, which will eventually harm the plant. Unless your plant is one that prefers consistently moist soil, like an African violet, allow the soil to dry out somewhat between waterings.
- **Lack of humidity** – The flip side of overwatering is not having enough moisture in the air. Once

we turn the heat on in our homes, the humidity in the air drops to well below 50%, which is the moisture level that most plants need to stay healthy. Browning of the leaf margins or tips generally indicates that the air is too dry. To remedy this problem, place the houseplant in a bathroom or kitchen where steam from showers or from boiling water will raise the humidity level in the room. Or, if you have a humidifier, try to position it near your houseplants. Another solution is to fill a pebble tray with water and set the pots on top of the pebbles so that they are not actually touching the water.

- **Exposure to direct heat** – Avoid placing houseplants near a vent or other source of direct heat. Hot air blowing on a plant can severely dehydrate it. An overheated plant will appear very limp.
- **Exposure to cold air** – If your house is not well insulated or sealed against cold drafts, your plant can suffer from exposure to the cold temperatures. You'll have the same problem if you place a tender tropical plant near a door that is opened frequently.
- **Direct contact with a window** – Although most houseplants need as much light as possible, don't let them have direct contact with a frosty window. Otherwise, the foliage touching the glass may freeze.
- **Not enough light** – Plants that aren't getting enough light will look pale rather than a healthy green color. New growth will look tall and leggy or spindly and the new leaves may appear smaller than normal. To solve the problem, move the plant to a brighter spot, preferably to a south or west-facing window. Give the plant a quarter turn once a week so that it grows evenly and doesn't lean or stretch toward the light.
- **Pest problems** – It may be wintry outside but that doesn't mean plant pests aren't an issue. Pests such as white fly, spider mites, aphids, mealy bugs, and scale can multiply very quickly on plants. Inspect your plants frequently for unwanted hitchhikers and deal with them promptly. For more information on houseplant pests, see Clemson Cooperative Extension's publication on common houseplant insects.

The holiday season is a great time to **share rooted cuttings from your houseplants** with friends and neighbors. Plants make wonderful "hostess" gifts and are a nice alternative to sugary sweets or scented candles. If your friends are (gasp) not "plant people," they'll appreciate your thoughtfulness if you include a few plant care instructions with your gift. As an aside, if you have never propagated a houseplant, then check out the University of Missouri Extension's article on home propagation of houseplants. It provides straightforward instructions and excellent photos to illustrate the propagation process.

DECORATING FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Celebrating winter holidays in December generally means decorating the house with greenery.

- ***Cut Christmas Trees*** – If you plan on selecting a cut Christmas tree, check out Holiday Decorating with Fresh Greenery, which appeared in the December 2015 issue of *The Garden Shed*. The article includes a table comparing the four most popular Christmas trees – Fraser Fir, White Pine, Scotch Pine, and Norway Spruce. If you're not sure which is which, here's how to tell the difference:

Fir – If the branches bear their needles individually rather than in groups and if the needles feel flat to the touch, the tree is most likely a fir.

Pine – If the needles occur on the twigs in groups of two, three, or five, it's a pine. To further distinguish between white pines and Scotch pines, white pines have longer, softer looking needles than Scotch pines. Scotch pines have dark green needles and stiff branches that can hold heavy ornaments better than white pines.

Spruce – if the needles have four sides and roll easily between your fingers, it's a spruce.

- ***Live Christmas trees*** – If you buy a **live Christmas tree with the intention of planting it** in your landscape after the holidays, keep it out of doors until you're ready to decorate it. Make sure it stays well watered and doesn't dry out. Once you move the tree indoors, keep it in a cool room for a few days only. As soon as possible, move it back outside and continue to keep it well hydrated until it can be planted in a permanent spot in the landscape.
- ***Poinsettias –*** These cheery tropical plants are a colorful way to decorate for the holiday season. However, they can rapidly wilt if not properly cared for. To keep poinsettias looking their best, pay attention to their light, water, and room temperature requirements. They prefer bright filtered light, but will also thrive in a sunny, south-facing window. Water regularly but check to make sure the water drains away from the roots. They like evenly moist but not soggy soil. Prolong the display by keeping the indoor temperature at about 68°F during the day and cooler at night.
- ***Evergreen Wreaths*** – If you're planning to use a freshly cut or ready-made evergreen wreath, store it in a cool location until it is ready to be decorated. Soak it in warm water for several hours to keep it moist. Drain it well and then spray it with an anti-desiccant spray to seal in the moisture. After the sealer has set, finish decorating the wreath and hang it, preferably in a shady place that doesn't receive sun.
- ***Boxwood Decorations*** – If you purchase ready-made wreaths, swags, and other decorations that contain boxwood clippings, **inspect the clippings for symptoms of boxwood blight** (*Calonectria pseudonaviculata*). Symptoms include leaf spot, leaf drop, browning, or black streaks on stems. Although reputable suppliers of holiday greenery are taking precautions to avoid spreading this disease, it pays to be cautious. After working with boxwood decorations, sterilize garden tools with alcohol or a chlorine bleach solution. Once the holidays are over, bag the decorations for disposal in the trash. Do not compost them. The VCE publication on boxwood blight provides more information on this disease.
- ***Pets and holiday greenery*** **– Keep pets away from holiday plants such as poinsettias, mistletoe, and holly. Ingesting poinsettia foliage is not normally life threatening to pets, but the sap can cause mouth and stomach irritation as well as vomiting. Also, if the plant has been treated with a pesticide, the chemicals in the pesticide may cause more serious medical problems for a pet than ingestion of the sap. Mistletoe and holly berries are more toxic than poinsettias and can cause more serious health problems for pets.**

INVASIVE PLANT CONTROL

Now that leaves have long since fallen, winter is an excellent time to identify invasive plant species. Many of them are evergreen and easy to spot. This is also a good time of year to treat invasives, particularly if you are using an herbicide. There's less risk of accidentally damaging native species that are dormant and protected by leaf litter. For more information on invasives, see the Blue Ridge Partnership for Regional Invasive Species Management's (PRISM) article on identification and control of invasive plants in winter. See also the Invasive Plant Control Calendar in the May 2022 issue of *The Garden Shed*.

Featured image: Holiday centerpiece composed of gathered plants. Photo: Cathy Caldwell

Upcoming Events

By Cathy Caldwell | December 2024-Vol.10,No.12

Native Ferns, a presentation by the Jefferson Chapter of Virginia Native Plant Society

Wednesday, December 11, 2024
7:00 pm – 8:30 pm

Ivy Creek Natural Area Education Building, 1780 Earlysville Road
Charlottesville, VA

Coming up in January . . .

Mt. Cuba Online Lecture Series: Sustainable Gardens in a Changing Climate
Saturday, January 11, 2025, 11 am-12:30 pm

Mt. Cuba Center's Online Lecture Series features ecologically-minded experts who work to prompt change in the landscape in a changing climate. All registrants receive a recording. $25 per lecture or $68 for the series.

Sustainable Gardens in a Changing Climate (Jan. 11, 2025) will focus on the intersection of climate change and gardening, Angelica Patterson, PhD will explore how shifting climate patterns affect plant growth and what steps can be taken to manage gardens and cultivated land sustainably. She will share practical strategies for mitigating climate-related risks and promoting eco-restoration in gardening practices.

⇒ Find out more and REGISTER HERE

Milkweed Research at Wintergreen, A Zoom Presentation hosted by Virginia Native Plant Society, John Clayton Chapter

Thursday, January 16, 2025 @ 7:00 pm – 8:00 pm via Zoom

Garden Basics: Indoor Gardening—You Don't Need a Green Thumb!

Saturday, January 18, 2025

Indoor gardening has been "growing" in popularity over the last several years. Join us to learn how to grow plants indoors to beautify your surroundings. By taking into account environmental factors, you will be well on your way to long-term "plant parent" success. We will focus on plant selection, repotting, containers, and ways to maximize your use of greenery indoors.

Space is limited. Please register below to reserve your place in the class. Registration will close at 5 p.m. January 17 or when the class is full. Garden Basics is a partnership with the Bread and Roses ministry at Trinity Episcopal Church in Charlottesville.

Free

⇒Find out more

The Edible Garden in December

By Ralph Morini | December 2024-Vol.10,No.12

This year's warm, dry fall has offered the opportunity to extend the outdoor growing season for interested gardeners. Nevertheless, we expect winter to arrive one of these days, signaling the end of the outdoor gardening season. Looking back, I hope you enjoyed both the gardening and the fruits of your labor this year. If you have cleaned up your beds, planted cover crops or mulched beds, and have protected cool weather vegetables that are still yielding, you have earned a break. In any case, now is the time to review this year's lessons and results while beginning to think about next year.

Reduce Chemicals, Build Soil, Add Diversity

The winter offers time to think about how to improve gardening techniques and be more ecologically responsible next year by:

Reducing chemical use through Integrated Pest Management (IPM). IPM is a process based on observing pest issues, understanding them, taking action only when the damage is significant and using chemicals as a last resort. It requires regular observation and a time commitment. But the environmental damage that is evident from preemptive chemical use makes it important. For information about

implementing IPM, check out the Garden Shed article Integrated Pest Management.

Building your soil. Healthy soil can reduce the need for chemical pesticides and fertilizers while reducing watering requirements and runoff. Insights about productive ways to improve soil naturally come from the Regenerative Agriculture movement. It is a soil focused approach to growing crops that advocates:

- Keeping the soil covered with densely planted crops and employing cover crops or mulching in the off season.
- Minimizing soil disturbance and preserving soil structure by minimizing tilling, adding amendments on or near the surface, relying on soil organisms to carry them deeper.
- Keeping living roots in the soil to reduce erosion, improve structure and add carbon-based nutrients.
- Add diversity by varying and rotating crops, interplanting, and utilizing diverse cover crops.
- If a soil test recommends raising pH to reduce acidity, add dolomitic limestone as recommended so that winter moisture can move it into the soil before planting in the spring.

While year-round soil management practices are not yet universally followed in commercial agriculture, their use is growing and providing guidance to home gardeners that is ecologically and horticulturally healthy. *The Garden Shed* article It's All About the Soil explores it more deeply. The YouTube video Healing the Earth Through Regenerative Farming with Gabe Brown is also a convincing summary of the practice by a commercial farmer.

Create a diverse home landscape. Creating a diverse home landscape, of native trees, shrubs, and flowering perennials is essential to reduce the decline in insects and birds in recent decades. It also builds their populations to help manage garden pests naturally. This has worked wonders at limiting cabbage moths and Japanese beetles in my own garden. Get guidance on how to start with a pollinator friendly landscape from the *Garden Shed* article Plant A Pollinator Paradise. If you need more convincing, watch the video Nature's Best Hope with Dr. Doug Tallamy, a leader in understanding and repairing native ecology.

Other helpful information, including video material, is available in the references at the end of this article and from the VA Cooperative Extension website.

As the interdependence of all aspects of our environment becomes increasingly clear, our need to integrate key ecological elements increases with it. Improving our practices in these three areas is a good start.

Other December Tasks

- If you haven't trimmed your asparagus fronds yet, you can cut them down to a couple of inches above the soil level. Mulch the bed to protect the crowns from extreme cold.
- If your soil isn't frozen, it is okay to plant garlic and shallots in December. Mulch them well to moderate temperature and moisture.

Winter greens with open row cover. Photo: B Gardino

- Placing spun fabric row covers over winter hardy vegetables adds several degrees to the temperature under the cover while allowing sunlight and water to reach the plants. For tips on constructing simple hoop style row covers, consult *The Garden Shed* article Row Covers: A Season Extender with Benefits.

Leaf mulched herb bed. Photo: R Morini

Put Your Leaves to Good Use:

- Chopping or shredding leaves is a good idea to help speed decomposition while allowing water penetration when used as a mulch.
- Leaves can be used to set up new compost batches, adding winter-generated fruit and vegetable scraps as they become available. When spring temperatures rise into the 50s, the batch's carbon-to-nitrogen ratio can be fine-tuned to stimulate decomposition. With good moisture and aeration management, you should have compost for use prior to planting summer vegetables. Find guidance for home composting in the article Home Composting: A Guide for Home Gardeners, from the Penn State Extension.
- Leaving your leaves: Leaves left in place provide excellent cover for over-wintering beneficial insects that will help build a natural pest management system in your gardens next year.

Small Fruits

- Blueberry bushes can be pruned any time from leaf drop to the start of spring growth. During the first 3 years, remove the low growing canes. After fruit production starts, prune out canes over 5 years old as close to the ground as possible. Aim for about 10-15 total canes, with equal numbers of 1, 2, 3, and 4-year-old canes.
- Strawberries should be protected from the cold; 6-8 inches of straw or leaf mulch works well. Plants growing in barrels or pyramids benefit from having the mulch covered with burlap as well.
- It is a good idea to prune diseased parts of fruit trees during cold periods to minimize the risk of spreading viral infections.
- Additional detail about caring for these and other small fruits is offered in the publication Small Fruit in the Home Garden from VCE.

Seasonal Tasks

- **Drain your hoses**. Disconnect them from faucets and lay them out on the ground, both ends open, to let them drain. Then roll them up for winter storage.
- **Drain rain barrels** and redirect downspouts to ground, rather than refilling the barrels during the cold months.
- **Review journal entries** and think about improvements for next year in plant selection, location, and techniques.
- Apply your learning when reviewing new **catalogs and communication from seed suppliers** for next season. It is fun to browse them, looking for new items to grow and assessing different varieties that help avoid disease and insect issues. Pay attention to "time to harvest" and "disease resistance" data. For help interpreting seed catalog and seed pack information, check out *Garden Shed* article Using Seed Pack Information to Help Your Garden Grow.
- Make a first pass at **laying out your crop arrangement for next year**. Remember to rotate specific plant families to different parts of the garden, preferably on a 3-to-4-year cycle. The benefits are disease and pest reduction and soil enrichment through plant diversity.
- **Care for your tools**. Clean, disinfect, sharpen, and generally prepare them for the work ahead. It is also a good time to **clean pots and flats** if you have a warm enough place to do the wet work. Come spring, you'll be happy you did it.

Winter gardening

Indoor Herbs. Photo: R Morini

- An enjoyable way to keep your hands in the soil during winter is to **grow herbs indoors**. You need a sunny window, preferably with a southern exposure. Use premium potting soil and add nutrients as recommended. It is best to use clean plastic or glazed containers to reduce watering. Be sure the container has drainage holes and use a non-porous dish to catch excess water. Keep the soil surface moist between planting and germination. Herbs do best with temperatures above 65 degrees, the warmer the better. Basil likes temperatures above 70 degrees, so doesn't want to be too close to the window during cold weather. Check out Garden Shed article "Be Inspired With Indoor Herb Gardening" for information on growing herbs indoors this winter.

In any case, enjoy your December gardening and happy holidays. Let's talk again next month at *The Garden Shed*.

References:

Featured photo: Vegetable Garden in December, R. Morini

Cool Season Planting Chart for Companion, Interplanting and Square Foot Gardening, Washington State University: https://s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/2056/2018/10/Cool-Season-Planting-Chart-for-Companion.pdf

Virginia Native Plant Society website: Resources for Creating Native Plant Habitats: https://vnps.org/

December Gardening Tasks | N.C. Cooperative Extension

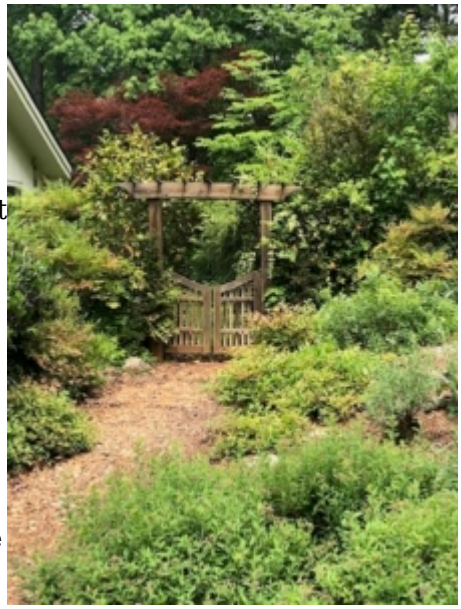
PMG Website Monthly Task List: https://pmgarchives.com/gardening-questions/monthly-gardening-tips/

A Visit to the Gardens of Julia Green

By Cathy Caldwell | December 2024-Vol.10,No.12

If you long to wander through the landscapes of talented gardeners, you're in for a treat. Join me as I recount my visit to the gardens of Julia Green, whose love of plants and of her family have been melded into a glorious landscape that is sure to inspire.

I met Julia many years ago; not long afterwards, I volunteered to work on the garden at our kids' elementary school. I shouldn't have been surprised that Julia had taken on the role of leader of this effort. At that time, Julia was a member of Piedmont Master Gardeners — as well as a busy mom and hard-working child psychologist. Over the years, I've been fortunate enough to visit her home gardens on several occasions. It finally dawned on me that others would find them as delightful as I did. It also occurred to me that gardeners could learn a great deal by studying Julia's designs and plant groupings. As a result, I recently found myself — camera in hand — wandering the paths of Julia's gardens at a most delightful time of the year — early May.



Garden Entrance

And yes, there's more than one garden! Julia likes small gardens, and over the years she has created quite a number of small gardens, all artfully connected by pathways among the trees. She has an artist's eye for combining plants and for assembling the ideal background of shrubs and trees. She's been working this one-third acre for many years, developing her knowledge of plants and her skills in nurturing those settings. I was eager to see what Julia had been up to lately.

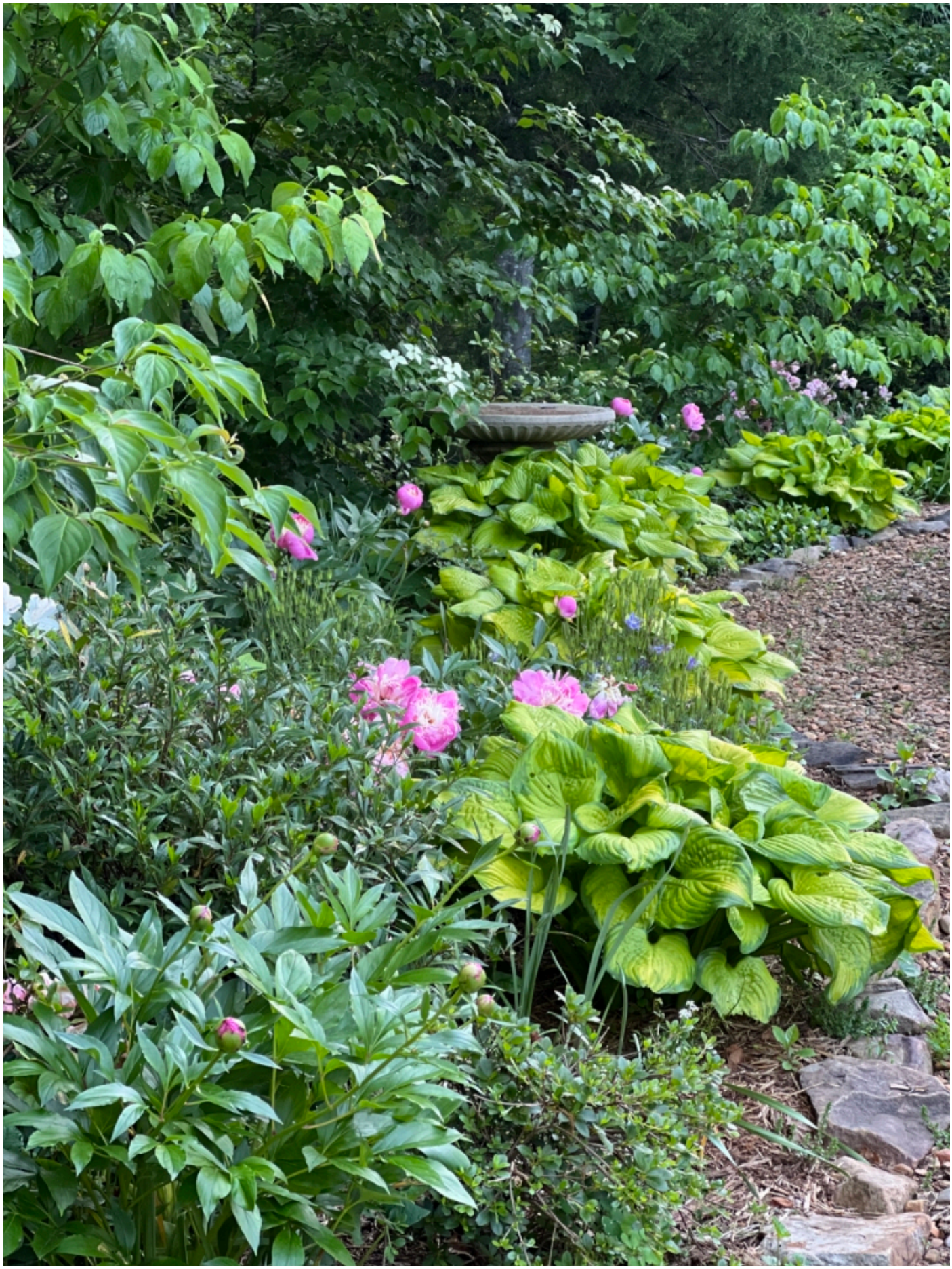
I stepped off the back deck into a small yard, and the first thing that caught my eye was a round bed enclosed in a rock wall — Julia refers to it as a "spiral garden" — which had been Julia's pandemic project. During the pandemic, she had spent those long stay-at-home hours gathering rocks from around the property and using them to build a low circling wall, now filled with petunias and pansies. At least two types of ground covers hugged the rocks and nearby perennials –creeping thyme and creeping phlox. This garden also includes two non-plant elements that Julia often employs — a container and a sculpture/garden ornament. Although it was the latest addition, Julia had neatly fit it into the maze of pathways that connect all the gardens on the property.

A path connects the spiral garden to the pool. Photo courtesy of Julia Green.

I discovered a path at the back of the Spiral Garden and headed along to study another new feature — a salt water swimming pool. And it was clearly a gardener's pool, bordered by plant-lined paths and decorated with container gardens.

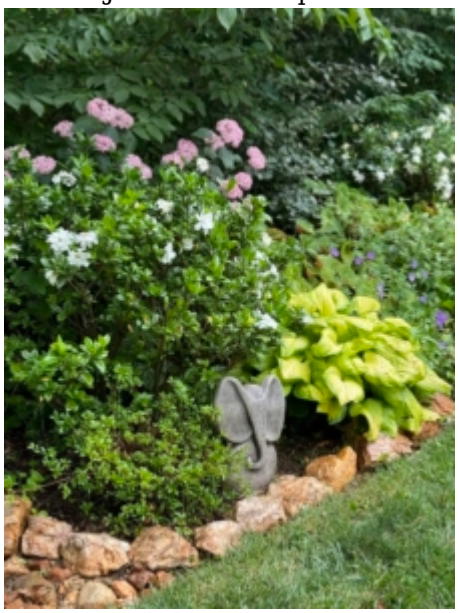
I soon encountered a magnificent mountain laurel, which, frankly, filled me with envy. Mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) is a native, but can be difficult to grow and is fussy about soil. But here it was, boldly blooming and looking right at home. Next I came upon a hammock under a bit of shade, followed by small vegetable patches full of tomato plants.

Everywhere I looked, there were a wide variety of perennials, both native and non-native, as Julia likes playing with texture. There were a number of hostas, which would ordinarily be a surprise in this area of heavy deer browse, but there's a good reason for this: Julia installed a deer fence 15 years ago, prior to inclusion of the garden on the Historic Garden Tour of Virginia. She was amazed at the number of plants that popped up after that — not dead, but ready to thrive again!



Gardenia (Gardenia jasminoides 'Frostproof' and "Chuck Hayes'), peonies (Paeonia lactiflora "Bowl of Beauty'), 'Stained Glass' hostas, and 'Appalachian Spring' dogwood. Photo courtesy of Julia Green.

One of Julia's favorite plants is the Chuck Hayes gardenia, which winters over and blooms in both spring and fall. She's also a fan of a variant of our native hydrangea known as Invincible Mini Mauvette. Its official name is unusual, and the Missouri Botanical Garden explains it as follows:



> *"Ncha7′ is a compact selection of smooth hydrangea that features dark mauve-pink sterile florets. The dome-shaped, mop-head type inflorescences can reach up to 5.5″ wide and are made up of both sterile and fertile florets. Mature plants will reach up 3′ tall and spread to fill a similar area. Commonly sold in nurseries and garden centers under the name INVINCIBELLE MINI MAUVETTE. Plant patent number PP30358 applies to this cultivar."*
>
> —*Missouri Botanical Garden PlantFinder*

I was soon on the lookout for the water feature that Julia had installed when we were considerably younger. When I came upon it, I was taken by surprise. It now appeared as if it were a natural occurrence. The small trees, shrubs and perennials were now mature and framed the little brook perfectly. And lo and behold, there was another mountain laurel. As is the case throughout these gardens, there were places to sit down and enjoy the view.

Photo: C.Caldwell

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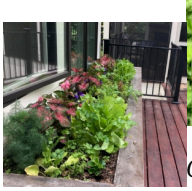
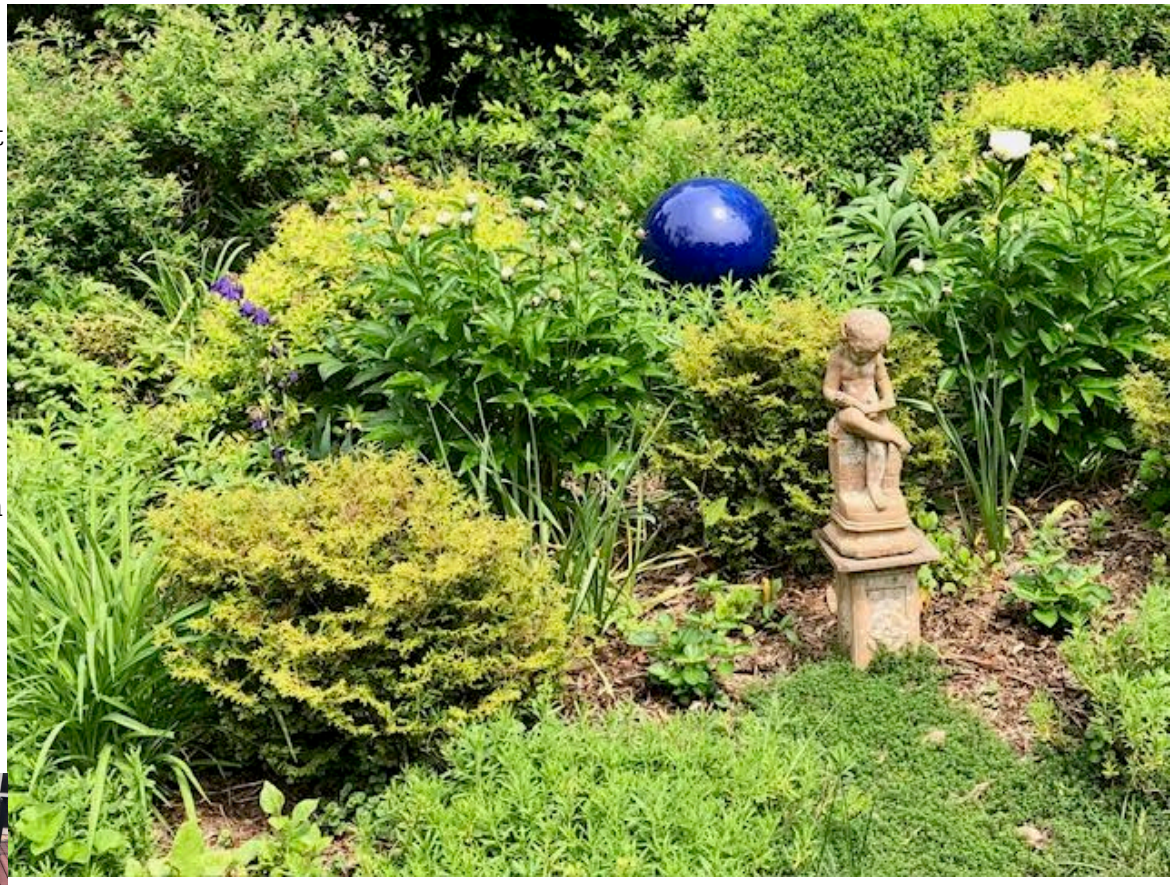
One of the more beguiling aspects of Julia's gardening is that she creates a special garden for each of her grandchildren. Some of these are still in the works. And the family's beloved departed dogs are not forgotten either. Julia has planted new trees with their ashes.





Grandchild garden. Photo: C.Caldwell

The gardens don't end when you climb up the steps to the back deck. There you find lettuces and herbs in a long raised bed near the kitchen door. Oh, and some caladiums, too!

So how did this amazing series of gardens get their start? With snowdrops, as it turns out. That's because her older son's birthday is in late January when snowdrops start to bloom. Julia plants 20 to 30 snowdrops every fall, seeking out different varieties every time. It was succession of bloom that intrigued her — the goal of a series of blooms that followed each other over time. A daffodil bulb would be placed in the bottom of a planting hole, and other bulbs added above it. Before long, Julia's succession efforts included dogwoods — as her younger son was born in April — so she planted natives, cultivars and hybrids with varying bloom times.

Spring brings oakleaf hydrangea (Hydrangea quercifolia), camellias, candytuft, coral bells, and a variety of spring-blooming bulbs, including Virginia bluebells, Photo courtesy of Julia Green.

I'm always curious about how a gardener got started. In Julia's case, it was working alongside her grandmother in the garden on the family farm in Pennsylvania. Her father Bob Hammond, a country veterinarian, also had a role, and Julia fondly remembers working the PMG Help Desk with him for many years. His bluebird houses line the paths of Julia's gardens.

I asked Julia if she had any advice for new gardeners. Her answers came quickly. As it turns out, this is a subject she's been dealing with recently; three nieces have taken up gardening, and who do you think they turned to for advice? "Start small," she said. "Find an area in your yard that you like — under a tree, or

with a view you admire. A tree is ideal. Then plant an arc of evergreens for background, and next add bulbs, plus a container for annuals, like pansies, so you'll always have some bloom. Perhaps add a bluebird house. Then grow from there!"

Exploring Julia's gardens was pure pleasure. No doubt Julia's family and friends find deep contentment along these paths. It was a joy to talk with Julia about plants, and about this wonder-filled work we gardeners engage in. I discovered that, just like me, Julia's morning routine is to walk all through her gardens, delighting in new shoots and sprouts and the glories of nature as she goes.

SOURCES:

Photos by C.Caldwell and Julia Green

Book review: “The Shepherd’s Life” and “English Pastoral” by James Rebanks

By Chris Stroupe | December 2024-Vol.10,No.12

As winter approaches and gardening activities ramp down somewhat, I wanted to write about a couple of books I've read recently that I think have some useful lessons for gardeners seeking to use more nature-friendly methods. They're also an amazing read, a fascinating story of a farming tradition that's trying to modernize while remaining true to its past.

Sheep grazing on a fell. Photo: Andrew Smith. CC BY-SA 2.0

James Rebanks is a shepherd in the Lake District in northwestern England. The Lake District is a mountainous region – in the local dialect, mountains are "fells" – of about a thousand square miles, roughly the land area of Rhode Island, surrounded on three sides by the Irish Sea. Tourism is now the main industry in the Lake District, but agriculture, in particular shepherding, remains vibrant and widespread. In 2017 the Lake District became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in recognition of its "continuing distinctive agro-pastoral traditions based on local breeds of sheep including the Herdwick, on common fell-grazing and relatively independent farmers."

This is a mouthful. Fortunately for us, in *The Shepherd's Life* and *English Pastoral* Rebanks writes bluntly and vividly to relate his upbringing in a Lake District farming family and how he and his family balance traditional shepherding practices with the constraints of the modern world.

The Shepherd's Life is straightforwardly autobiographical. Rebanks was born in 1974. He grew up on a small farm owned by his grandfather and maintained by both his grandfather and father. He was, in his own telling, an indifferent student at best, preferring to spend his time and energy on farm work. Shepherding was a central activity of his family's farm, but really the farm grew a little of anything that was likely to generate income and feed livestock: cattle, eggs, hay, barley.

Herdwick sheep. Photo: Alexander Baxevanis. CC BY 2.0

Rebanks left school at 16, glad to dedicate himself to his family farm. The basic rhythm of the work would probably have looked familiar to a medieval shepherd, or even to a Viking invader a thousand years ago. In the summer, sheep mostly graze on commonly-held land in the fells, with occasional roundups for shearing or medical care. In autumn, farm auctions are the main activity. Sheep are judged before they're sold, and the competition is fierce for the best ram ("tup"). Herdwick sheep have white faces, and it's an open secret that shepherds can spend hours plucking unwanted black strands from their show tups. Winter is long, wet, windy, and cold. Sheep stay on fields at the foot of the fells, eating hay and grain grown over the summer. Snow can be deadly, but Herdwick sheep are hardy; in a pinch, they can survive by eating their own wool.

Spring, of course, brings lambing season. In easily the best few lines of *The Shepherd's Life*, Rebanks tells of helping a ewe to deliver. Normally lambs emerge toes first, followed by the front legs and then the head – but suffice it to say, sometimes they need help assuming this position. A few moments later the lamb is nursing, none the wiser. Later, he coaches his daughter, six years old, as she delivers a lamb herself.

Herdwick lamb. Photo: Shaun Dunmall. CC BY-SA 2.0

A challenging life, to be sure, but it wasn't all a slog. His grandfather had taught him to leaven the everyday labor of farm work in a cold, rainy climate with brief observations of natural beauty and harmony: a sunset (or equally likely a sunrise), a leveret (baby hare), a fox ("Reynard"), salmon swimming up the streams ("becks") to spawn, the birds feeding on earthworms in a newly "ploughed" field.

Midway through *The Shepherd's Life* comes an enjoyable plot twist. It's common for young farmers to spend time off the farm; sometimes the farm needs extra income, sometimes there's conflict between older and younger farmers. Rebanks and his father increasingly butted heads after Rebanks left school and developed stronger opinions about how to manage the farm. Reading became his escape at the end of the work day. His mother was "bookish" and had inherited a substantial library from her own father, a grammar school teacher. Rebanks tore through this library and anything else he could read; at one point he nicks a book used for decoration in the local pub.

Oxford, UK. Photo: David Price. CC BY-SA 2.0

After a few years Rebanks tried school again. He'd realized he enjoyed learning; meeting his future wife might have increased his motivation. Rejected from night school because he'd failed his final exams in his teens, he talked his way into the class anyway. His teachers told him he was university material and eventually the idea took hold. He won admission to Oxford and graduated four years later with an "honours" degree (two firsts, to be precise) in history.

Rebanks then – and this is the plot twist – returned to his family farm. After foot-and-mouth disease wiped out his family's flock in 2001, he focused on breeding Herdwicks. At the same time, his university degree led him to a "desk job" as a consultant, helping local communities as far away as southern China to balance tourism with preservation of cultural heritage. Both are full-time jobs.

In *English Pastoral*, Rebanks movingly describes this effort to balance the traditional and the new. Farming practices changed enormously between the 1980's and the early 2000's. Put simply, productivity came to matter more than anything else: food quality, the environment, living conditions for animals. Productivity was boosted in two ways: larger scale and increased use of inputs like pesticides, herbicides, artificial fertilizers, and grain feed. Neither is feasible for a family farm with a limited income.

Nevertheless, Rebanks and his family tried to keep up. They pulled down ancient hedges and stone walls to make plowing more efficient. They brought in new practices like silage – fermented hay that's more nutritious than dry hay because it's more easily digested – and "improved" sheep breeds that put on weight faster. They used herbicides to keep weeds out of their fields. They added chemical nitrogen fertilizers to grow more grass.

And it worked – from a certain point of view. The farm churned out more sheep, more cattle. But are these the right quantities to measure? Higher productivity didn't result in higher income. One example: the waste from silage-fed cattle is more acidic – and, shall we say, more liquid – than waste from cattle fed on hay. In the past, farmers saved the manure and straw bedding from cattle overwintered in barns ("byres"). They called it "muck" and let it compost a bit, then spread it on their fields as fertilizer. But the acidic waste – "slurry" – from silage-fed cattle only reduced their fields' productivity. The solution: buy more nitrogen fertilizer. The new practices gave with one hand but took with the other.

Hedgerows: not just a barrier but also a spot for biodiversity. Photo: David E. Smith. CC BY 2.0

The environmental degradation was harder to quantify but equally obvious. Rebanks notes that birds stopped following the tractor when he plowed: no more earthworms – a sure sign of degraded soil. The birds were fewer in number too. Rebanks realized that the hedgerows he and his father had removed were in fact rich habitats for birds: fieldfares, pipits, redstarts, wrens. Why so much emphasis on birds? Birds eat flies, and flies are serious pests of sheep. The solution: insecticides, and more time spent treating infected sheep.

Redstarts eat insects. Photo: Jerzy Strzelecki. CC BY 3.0

Rebanks eventually determined to stop, or at least minimize, his use of modern industrial farming methods. Interestingly, one key step was to rebuild the farm's fences and hedgerows. This allowed him to rotate his sheep from field to field, grazing for a day or two, then letting the grass recover. Feeding the sheep primarily with grass meant less need for silage and the plowing, fertilizers, and herbicides used to produce it.

Rebanks is open that the rebuilding required grants from a local conservation organization. This might seem hard for a "relatively independent farmer" to swallow. But in reality, farmers in the Lake District have always had a strong ethic of communal action. His books are full of stories of neighbors working together to bring sheep out of the fells, or finishing a harvest, or repairing fences, or loaning tups with desirable traits for breeding. If the benefits extend beyond the farm, why not?

This, I think, is what we mere gardeners can learn from Rebanks's books: we can try to see our gardens – vegetable and landscape – as part of a larger world. Put another way, our decisions matter. We can:

• Build healthy soil to reduce erosion and the need for fertilizers.
• Employ integrated pest management (IPM) principles to minimize pesticide and herbicide use.
• Plant trees, perennials, and heirloom vegetables that are adapted to the local environment – and that can handle a warming climate.
• Remove invasive plants.

Like the fell shepherds, we can work with nature rather than trying to fight or control it.

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The Shepherd's Life: Modern Dispatches from an Ancient Landscape. (Flatiron Books, ISBN 9781250060266, 2015)

English Pastoral: An Inheritance. (Allen Lane, ISBN 9780241245729, 2020) (Published in North America as *Pastoral Song: A Farmer's Journey*. Custom House, ISBN 9780063073272.)

Featured image: Voello. CC BY 4.0

Invasives Watch

By Cathy Caldwell | December 2024-Vol.10,No.12

There are a number of invasive shrubs that can be controlled in winter, including:

burning bush (*Euonymus alatus*)

Japanese barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*)

multiflora rose (*Rosa multiflora*)

Chinese privet (*Ligustrum sinense*)

> *"All these shrubs can be treated in winter by cutting and immediately treating the cut stump with a recommended herbicide. Treat as long as the shrub is not frozen and the herbicide does not freeze when applied. For shrubs that retain their leaves, a foliar spray will work while the weather is above 45F. Spray on a sunny day with no wind. Alternatively, you can pull small saplings and seedlings out when the ground is moist (bag and dispose)."*
>
> —Blue Ridge Prism, January 2022 Newsletter

Autumn Olive *(Elaeagnus umbellata):* According to the Blue Ridge PRISM, "Autumn olive can be controlled at any time of year, except during spring growth, by cut-stumping or hack & squirting."

–Cut-Stump method: "Cut or saw all stems to several inches from the ground and immediately spray cuts with a concentrated recommended herbicide."

–Hack & Squirt method: "Make hacks 2 inches apart in stem circumference and apply concentrated herbicide."

Other plants that can be effectively controlled in winter include :

—**garlic mustard** (*Alliaria petiolata*) "If opting for manual control, carefully hand-pull the rosettes when the soil is moist. If the plant does not come up easily, or if there is a lot of it, a foliar spay of herbicide is recommended to control this plant. The pulled rosette can be left on-site. A spot spray of a foliar application of herbicide should be applied on warm and sunny winter days." Blue Ridge Prism, Jan. 2022 Newsletter.

For detailed guidance, review Blue Ridge Prism/Control Methods/Controlling Invasive Plants Effectively and Safely With Herbicides and this herbicide chart prepared by the Virginia Department of Forestry: Blue Ridge Prism Live/Non-Native Invasive Plant Species Control Treatments: Timing, Methods and Herbicide Rates.

Featured Photo: Garlic mustard by Rob Routledge, Sault College, Bugwood.org

PESTICIDE WARNING

Pesticides (which include herbicides, insecticides, rodenticides, etc.) are poisonous. Always read and carefully follow all precautions and safety recommendations given on the container label. Store all chemicals in the original labeled containers in a locked cabinet or shed, away from food or feeds, and out of the reach of children, unauthorized persons, pets, and livestock. Consult the pesticide label to determine active ingredients, signal words, and proper protective equipment. Pesticides applied in your home and landscape can move and contaminate creeks, lakes, and rivers. Confine chemicals to the property being treated and never allow them to get into drains or creeks. Avoid drift onto neighboring properties and untargeted areas.

Spear into Spring with Asparagus

By Cathy Caldwell | December 2024-Vol.10,No.12

Editor's Note: This classic Cleve Campbell article on his "asparagus horticulture journey" from 2015 is not to be missed. We have made a few necessary updates.

Several years ago, I was informed by my wife that we were going to plant asparagus. My response was: what are we going to do with asparagus? I was gently informed by my gourmet wife that asparagus was a very versatile vegetable, that it can be steamed, sautéed, roasted, grilled, stir-fried, featured in a salad or soup, or even eaten raw; in other words, the possibilities are endless. In addition, it is one of the earliest spring vegetables, and it would be nice to have something fresh from the garden in the spring. Naturally I concurred with my wife, and suggested that she order some seeds and we would plant them in the garden where we had planted corn the prior year.

But my wife's response to my seed-purchasing proposal was "That dog isn't going to hunt" — because asparagus is a **perennial**, and once planted, it can keep producing for 15 years or longer. Well, so much for that brilliant idea of crop rotation. I needed to find a permanent location for the asparagus. After thinking for a moment, I came up with the perfect location — a spot on the northwest corner of the lawn that was out of the way, and most importantly, it would cut out a little lawn-mowing. Perfect! Well, not exactly. When I proudly informed my wife of my proposed location, she got that look — you know the one — like when you go shopping and you are wondering if you left the oven on. I can still hear her words: "Incredible, under the oak tree … and where you got the mower stuck last spring…" plus a few other dangling modifiers that I

didn't care to catch. So on that high note, I figured I had better do a little research before offering any additional suggestions. Following is a summation of my remarkable asparagus horticulture journey.

The most critical decision a gardener must make, once he or she decides to grow asparagus, is **site location**, because, as I mentioned, asparagus is a perennial, so the site should be thought of as a permanent location. Like most vegetables, asparagus will not tolerate wet soggy soil. Select a site that receives full sun and that is well-drained or use a raised bed.

Okay, but how do I know if the location is too wet? Well, after a rainfall, if water stands in the spot selected for more than an hour, it's probably too wet for asparagus.

The bed should be prepared as early as possible by amending the soil with organic matter such as manure and compost. A soil test should be performed, as **asparagus does poorly in soil with a low pH** (high acid); the Virginia Cooperative Extension recommends a pH range of 6.0-6.7. However, some researchers suggest an even less acidic, higher pH, because fungal diseases that contribute to asparagus decline — *Fusarium* crown and root rot — survive better in more acidic soil. Increasing the soil pH level to 7.0-7.5 reduces the survivability of *Fusarium.* For additional information on pH levels for asparagus, take a look at the Southeastern US Vegetable Crop Handbook (p.42 of the 2024 edition). The higher pH level does not appear to affect the productivity level of asparagus, only the fungal diseases.

Good soil build-up is important with asparagus. We only get one chance — and that's before planting — to adjust soil root-zone depth to 12-18 inches. If this opportunity is missed, it becomes very difficult to move nutrients deeper into the soil without disturbing and damaging the roots.

Asparagus may be planted 4-6 weeks before the final spring frost, which historically in our area is the last week in April.

Although it is possible to grow asparagus from seed, most home gardeners prefer to plant one-year old crowns because of the additional time and maintenance required to grow asparagus from seed. For additional information on how to grow asparagus, see VCE Publication No. 426-401.

For asparagus beginners, the second critical decision is what variety to select. There are two major categories to choose from:

1. open-pollination varieties, which include Mary Washington and Martha Washington, or

2. all-male hybrid varieties, such as Jersey Knight and Jersey King.

Asparagus is a dioecious plant, which is just a fancy way of saying that there are both boy plants and girl plants; thus, male and female flowers are produced on separate plants. The flowers on male plants are small, bell-shaped, whitish-green and more conspicuous than female flowers. Following pollination of the female flowers by bees, a round berry containing one to eight seeds is formed and turns red at maturity.

In the late 1800's, Professor William J. Green, a horticulturist at the Ohio State Research Station, discovered that male asparagus plants are about 50% more productive than female plants. I'm not making this up! More information about Professor Green's research and about early 1900's growing techniques can be found at http://www.gutenberg.org/files/31643/31643-h/31643-h.htm.

One of the conclusions that Professor Green made was that the lower productivity of female plants is the result of energy allocated to seed production. The fruit produced by the female plant competes with the crown and roots for nutrients. Since asparagus is a perennial, the plant depends on the nutrients stored in the crown and root for next year's spear production; therefore, the female plant is storing up less energy in

the form of sugar and nutrients, resulting in lower yields than their male counterparts. For additional information about the advantages of male asparagus plants, see Asparagus, Oregon State Dept. of Horticulture.

Being something of a history buff, I wanted to find out a little about when and how the male hybrid plants were developed. In the 1980's Rutgers University began releasing what are called "supermale" hybrids developed by Dr Howard Ellison, a horticulturist at Rutgers University. Dr Ellison is regarded as the pioneer in the breeding of the supermale plant. A brief overview of Dr. Ellison's work may be found at http://vegnet.osu.edu/sites/vegnet/files/imce/Asparagus trial.pdf

After reviewing the attributes of the hybrid male asparagus plants versus the open-pollinated plants, I elected to go with the all-male hybrid plants, and chose Jersey Knight F1. The VCE document Vegetable Varieties for Virginia currently suggests two varieties for our area: Jersey Knight F1 and Jersey Gem F1. Please note, however, that these Jersey varieties could be in short supply as production was halted a few years ago and it's unclear whether it has been restarted. For more about this, see "Jersey asparagus varieties being discontinued – next steps," *Fruit & Vegetable News*, University of Minnesota Extension, University of Minn. Ext. and Millennium is the New Leader in Asparagus, S.Dakota Ext.

Next, I identified a dry, well-drained location, amended the soil with organic matter, and planted and covered the crowns. Here's where patience comes in handy. I needed to wait until the **second spring after planting** to harvest any spears. The first harvest should be not more than 2 or 3 spears per plant. But patience paid off. Nowadays, I harvest young spears for a period of 4 to 8 weeks.

Is it "OAD" (one and done)? Well, not quite. Asparagus is a poor competitor with weeds; therefore, in order to have a successful asparagus bed, I needed to maintain the asparagus bed by keeping it as weed-free as possible. I accomplished this task by hand-weeding and very light cultivation with a hoe; I avoid the use of a tiller or digging deep to avoid damaging the crowns. Organic mulches such as "weed free" grass clippings, leaf mulch, wood chips, "clean" straw or compost can be applied up to 2-3 inches deep to suppress weeds. Weed-free grass clippings and clean straw? No, I elected to use leaf mulch mixed with wood chips. I recall being told by an elder Madison County gardener to use common rock salt as a weed control because asparagus, being deep-rooted, can tolerate some salt, but I elected not to follow this advice because salt can damage soil structure by creating a crust that impedes water infiltration. In twenty years or so, when it comes time to start another asparagus bed at a different location, what would I plant in the old location with its salty soil?

Asparagus plants are heavy feeders, meaning they require a lot of nutrients, so every 2-3 years I take a soil sample and send it off to the Virginia Tech soil lab to determine any nutrient deficiencies or pH adjustments that may be needed.

Now each spring when I go out to harvest those first asparagus spears, I think back on my amazing journey with asparagus. Sometimes I pause to imagine the reaction of our colonial ancestors when they walked out to the garden and found those first green spears after a long winter without fresh vegetables. No wonder asparagus was one of the first vegetables brought to this country by our forefathers.

SOURCES:

Featured Photo: by R. Morini

Video: "Asparagus" by Ohio State University Extension,

https://www.facebook.com/OSUExtension/videos/1178252452855758/

"With the right care, asparagus beds will produce for decades," Oregon State University Newsroom

"Asparagus" VA. Cooperative Extension, Pub.No. 426-401

Growing Asparagus in the Home Garden, Penn.State Ext.

"Asparagus," Clemson Coop.Ext. Home & Garden Information Center