



A publication of...

TRAVIS COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS

THE COMPOST BIN

December 2007



Come to the Holiday Party!

Tradition holds that the December meeting is a thank you to all TCMGA members for all that they do to make the organization the vibrant asset to community it is. The Master Gardener Organization will supply the main course, drinks, and condiments, and the membership is asked to bring their special appetizer or dessert to share with eight or so friends. Also, this year we are asking the membership to help set up and tidy up for the event. Carol Croft is in charge of the decorations and Anita Mapes is in charge of the food. Karen Banks and Ramona Urbanek are taking reservations and assigning tasks. If you have already signed up for food or helping you will get a call from Karen or Ramona. Will Grover and his band is providing the music. Austin Parks and Recreation is putting the lighting in the trees of Zilker, so the atmosphere is very festive. Hope to see everyone there!



Jerry Naiser

Message From the President

My final requests as president to all of you:

Please don't stop reaching out to the public and sharing your knowledge.

Your time spent at the phone desk and at plant clinics and giving talks through the Speaker's Bureau or our Public Seminar Series directly assists Extension and our community and is greatly appreciated by all. The public is very grateful for your advice, and at the same time you learn new things by researching the answers for others, so everyone wins!

Keep learning about what's new in horticulture so you can provide up-to-date information wherever you go.

It is easy to give out the same answers over and over, or to think we know everything about a certain topic, but gardeners are pretty aware that life in the garden, as with life in general, is somewhat unpredictable. And we know that there are horticulturists and gardeners out there constantly trying new plants and new techniques. Keeping up to date will help you feel more confident when talking to people about gardening, and that may even make you want to do more talking. Attend some of the classes for continuing education we will be providing next year, and try looking up information on the Central Texas Horticulture and A&M Horticulture websites—you may be pleasantly and educationally surprised at what you find.

Keep thinking of ways we can best serve Extension and evaluate what we do to make sure we are using our efforts for the greatest impact on our community.

Being complacent and resisting change can result in our becoming less valuable to our community, which is constantly changing around us. We should always be asking ourselves "what are we doing" and "why," and "so what if we do it, so what if we don't?" We need to make sure our projects and

efforts are in line with the goals and concerns of Extension, whether we need to make a bigger push to teach people about water conservation and water quality issues, or help a new generation of kids learn the joys of gardening and the benefits of saving the environment, or expand our programs to include more of the community in all parts of the county, or any number of big picture issues. Remember that our projects are meant to serve the public, not ourselves, and so if your favorite project has lost its impact and needs to end, know that you can still get satisfaction out of volunteering for our other wonderful projects, and who knows—maybe you'll find some new gardening friends and a new feeling of accomplishment.

Take the time to get to know someone new to the group and help them find a project on which they can best and most happily use their talents. It is hard for our new members to feel like they belong when they see that everyone knows everyone else but no one talks to them or includes them. Think about the time and talents and assistance these new folks can give us and say hello or invite them to join you in your own volunteer efforts.

Try to be flexible as we adjust to a new horticulture agent and be open to new ideas and directions. Not everything will change with a new horticulture agent, but we will need to respond to the priorities the agent will set for us, and I'm sure that we can rise to any challenges set before us. Gardening is all about change, and this is a chance for us to invigorate our program and set out on a path that pulls all of our gardening efforts together.

Thank you for all of your hard work this year—I truly think you are a fantastic group and I have been proud to serve as president. I will enjoy continuing to volunteer in any ways that will help us achieve our mission, and I look forward to a new year of learning, teaching, and gardening with you all.

Thank you so much,
Susan Decker
Out-going President

Plant Portrait: Purple Hyacinth Bean; *Dolichos Lablab L.*, or *Lablab Purpureus (L.) Sweet*

This beautiful annual or tender perennial vine, with bright purple to lavender blossoms, and bright purple beans is called lablab, bonavist, Chinese flowering, Egyptian, Pharaoh, shink, val, wild field, or Indian bean.

Believed to have originated in Asia, Purple Hyacinth Bean is grown for food over much of the world.

Popular in China, it has grown on fences and trellises in back yards there for hundreds of years. It is an important forage and food source in tropical Africa and Asia. It has escaped in many places and established in the wild, including in southern Florida in the US.



Lablab bean is a twining vine with purplish green leaflets in threes and showy bright purple flowers and pods. The vine can become woody and reach more than 30 ft (9 m) in length when supported by a trellis or wires. In zones 7 and colder, the vine remains herbaceous and rarely exceeds 10 ft (3 m). The

leaflets are purplish green, broad oval or triangular in shape and 3-6 in (7.6-15.2 cm) long. The flowers are pea like, a rich, brilliant purple and arranged in loose clusters on long stems that extend above the foliage. The pods are just as showy as the flowers. They are flat and curved, about 3 in (7.6 cm) long and bright deep purple. The combination of flowers, purplish green leaves, and purple pods are gorgeous. The beans inside are black with a conspicuous white hilum, the elongate scar on the edge of the bean where it was attached to the inside of the pod.

There are several cultivars, some with white flowers and pale green pods; some with red flowers; some with long, thin cylindrical pods; and some dwarf forms. Some cultivars are grown primarily for the pods, some for the seeds, and some for roots. Some are day length neutral and some flower mainly as day length shortens.

Sow seeds after the ground has warmed to 60 degrees. Soak overnight in warm water before planting. It does well in average soil and will even tolerate dry, poor conditions but of course it will do better with regular watering. Hyacinth bean blooms well into the fall. Collect the seeds for planting next spring when the pods have turned brown and dry.

This beautiful flowering vine is grown as a tender perennial in zones 8-9 and is hardy above zone 9. It is more drought tolerant than most beans, and will grow in well drained soils, rich or poor, acid or alkaline. It is an excellent nitrogen fixer.



It quickly twists its way up trellises, poles or fences to cover thickly. Hummingbirds enjoy the pea like flowers and it often drones with bees. By November it begins to look straggly and thin and needs to be cut back.

Young immature pods are cooked and eaten like green beans (older pods may need to be de-stringed). They have a strong, beany flavor and some people like to mix them with other beans or green vegetables. Unfortunately, the purple color disappears during cooking. Young leaves are eaten raw in salads and older leaves are cooked like spinach. Flowers are eaten raw or steamed. The large starchy root tubers can be boiled and baked. The immature seeds can be boiled and eaten like any shelly bean. Dried seeds should be boiled in two changes of water before eating since they contain toxic levels of cyanogenic glucosides. In Asia the mature seeds are made into tofu and fermented for tempeh. Raw dry seeds are poisonous and can cause vomiting, labored breathing, and even convulsions and unconsciousness.

My purple hyacinth shaded the west side of my back porch, creating a lovely cool place (cool being a relative term here) to sit in the afternoons. The variegated purples and greens of the leaves, blossoms, and pods were a continual visual delight all through the summer for me, the bees, and the hummingbirds.

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Sherrill Nilson

In the Vegetable Garden

December is here, and it's time for a much deserved break. The fall vegetable garden is practically on auto-pilot now. I have weeded, seeded, watered and fertilized, and my beds are blanketed in layers of leaves that produce a nice crunch underfoot. In return, my garden is growing strong and demanding less of my attention.



A Blanket of Leaves

The fall harvest has begun, and it is a refreshing change from the spring and summer harvest. Fall's vegetables are well-behaved, orderly and considerate of their neighbors, whereas summer's plants are unruly, untidy and chaotic. Those warm season wonders produce so many "fruit" per plant (think okra, tomatoes, squash, cucumbers) that sometimes a bumper crop can be overwhelming to deal with. More time is involved to harvest, clean, and process, and more refrigerator space is required to store the bounty. And more willing recipients are needed to take yet another 'gift' of squash or cucumbers. On the other hand, most fall season crops politely produce one vegetable per plant (think broccoli, cauliflower, turnip), so unless you over plant from the beginning, harvest time comes a little slower and allows us to go at a more civilized pace. That in turn gives us a chance for reflection and planning for the season ahead.

If you are willing to bundle up and take the time to irrigate your garden during winter dry spells, lettuce, radish and spinach can still be planted and will continue to grow in these cooler temperatures. They grow well under row cover but can be damaged if temperatures drop into the 20's. The seed is cheap, so if you lose plants to negligence (it happens to the best of us!) or the cold, just toss them in the compost and plant again in January or February.



Lettuce likes it cool but benefits from protection during freezing weather

Sometimes it's nice to just take a break during the holidays, harvest and enjoy what you have, and give the garden a rest until early next year. Soon enough it will be time for seeding tomatoes and peppers and getting ready to plant onions and peas. In fact now is a good time to think about where you might plant your onions, potatoes, peas and other crops for spring, keeping in mind the importance of crop rotation.

Don't forget to eat your black-eyed peas on New Year's Day. In a pinch you can open up a can, heat and eat, or use frozen ones, but I prefer the ritual that comes with using dried peas. The sorting, the rinsing, the soaking, the leisurely cooking and stirring. Below are two delicious recipes, either of which, if eaten on January 1st, is sure to bring you good luck. The soup recipe was published in the Austin-American Statesman in January 2005. The other recipe is how I usually prepare my black-eyed peas on New Year's Day and throughout the year. It's pretty simple, but good enough to win the Haverstock Drive black-eyed pea cook-off in our Houston neighborhood several years ago – for whatever that's worth!

New Year's Black Eyed Pea Soup

*Published in the Austin-American Statesman,
January 2005*

Courtesy of Dottie and Joe Wilkinson

3 c dried black-eyed peas, sorted and rinsed
1 meaty ham bone
3 c minced onion
3 c minced carrot
3 c minced celery
2 lb smoked sausage, diced
2 Tbsp chili powder

Place peas and ham bone in 3 qts water and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer until peas are soft, about 2 hours. Discard bone, leaving bits of ham in soup. Add vegetables and cook another hour. Add sausage and simmer 30 minutes. Add chili powder and season with salt and pepper. Add more water if needed. Makes 3-4 qts



As I am writing this, Thanksgiving is just around the corner, and that reminds me how grateful I am for all the wonderful pictures my husband has taken in our garden over the years. I can't imagine giving a vegetable talk or writing a Compost Bin article without the benefit of his photographic skills. Thank you, Bruce!

And thanks to all my fellow Master Gardeners who help make the Travis County Master Gardener Association one of the best in the state! It is a pleasure to work with each and every one of you. I wish you happiness and success in the year ahead.

Here's to a bountiful harvest,
Patty Leander

Simple Black Eyed Peas

16 oz dried black-eyed peas
2-3 slices bacon
1 Tbsp sugar
1 Tbsp white vinegar
1 tsp each salt and pepper
1 minced garlic clove (or ½ tsp garlic powder)

Sort and wash peas. Cover with water and soak 4-6 hours. Bring to boil with remaining ingredients. Lower heat, cover and simmer about 2 hours. Serve with cornbread. Serves 8-10.

**Mustard, collard or turnip greens would be a great addition to either of these dishes. Just tear into bite size pieces, blanch in boiling water 2 minutes, drain and rinse with cold water. Add to black-eyed peas during last 15 minutes of cooking.

Special Feature: Smoke Detectors and Fire Extinguishers

The holiday season is a time to share and build happy memories. It is a custom to have a conifer tree as a Christmas tree. These contain highly flammable resinous chemicals. Rosemary is sold trimmed in the cone-shape for use in place of conifers and is used to make wreaths. It is also resinous and highly volatile.

The tree lights need to be inspected for damaged wiring that would short out and ignite the tree. Leaving the tree lights on when away from home or left on overnight is discouraged by the fire department.

The burning of scented candles add to the ambiance of the holidays. But again, be cautious and don't leave candles unattended.

The kitchen is the most common place for fires to start in the home. Extra baking, cooking and rushing about goes with the festivities. Check and make sure the smoke detectors are working. Keep a fire extinguisher in or near the kitchen – just in case needed.

May you all have a safe holiday season with more happy memories! May the emergency crews on duty have a very safe and cool holiday season, too!

Jane Bramlett

The Greenhouse Bench

Thanks to everyone who came by to lend a hand during our two Greenhouse Workdays in November (including many new interns).

The Greenhouse Workdays saw lots of activity at the potting bench. Many cuttings of perennials and shrubs from the mist system were transferred to 4" pots. And many flats of 4" pots, long overdue for transplanting were put into gallons.

One of the biggest jobs tackled during the Greenhouse Workdays was to remove the decomposed granite from the main walkway of the greenhouse. This was removed to provide a base for a new cement path. Four inches of decomposed granite were excavated (down to the road base) and redistributed outside the greenhouse. Thanks are extended to Don Telge for operating his cultivator on the path to loosen the material for removal (and for the use of his heavy duty wheelbarrow). Many people pitched in to shovel during the two work days. Thanks go to Mike McGiffin, Lisa Graybill, Molly Clark and Kay, Joyce and John Fox for their enthusiasm, energy and muscle power to complete this project. Jackie Johnson did a great job heaving a pick axe to chip out the worst of the compacted granite. The project also involved picking up and moving eight benches so that their legs were no longer in the pathway. Don Freeman, Ron Miller and Mark Berthiaume also helped with the bench moving activity. The finishing touch for the excavation was to finish the framing in two areas for the new cement path.

The culmination of a very productive and physically demanding workday took place with the removal of the greenhouse shade cloth. It took less than a minute to pull the black mesh shade cloth from the roof (after the ties were undone) but the folding process was much more challenging. First an area the size of the greenhouse roof was needed to stretch out the shade cloth so it could be folded. Folding was done in a way that it would be easier to unfold it and install it next spring. Thanks to Don Freeman and Ron Miller for orchestrating this process.

Thanks are also extended to Jackie Johnson and Don Telge for traveling to Schumacher's Hill Country Gardens and arranging for a sale price for the greenhouse to purchase plants. Many treasures were brought back to the greenhouse and divided or repotted for future plant sales in 2008.

The Greenhouse Technician training is continuing thanks to Holly Plotner and the guest presenters (Don Telge – irrigation systems, Wizzie Brown- entomology, and Don Freeman – maintenance systems). More sessions are upcoming including rose propagation.

Marian Stasney initiated the replacement of the plastic around the propagation bench. It was very opaque with dirt and algae. The new plastic is a big improvement.

Marian, Molly and Anne





Over the Fence: In Praise of Bees

Where's the best place to observe nature in your garden? Gunther Hauk, a beekeeper and biodynamic farmer who recently came to Austin to talk on the subject, knows from experience that the ideal view is from a hammock. He explains that from this reclining state of observation, one can develop a more spiritual reverence for nature's dance, and if you watch very carefully you'll see that the bee is clearly the hardest worker and most deserving of praise.

Did you know that 80% of the world's crops depend on bees for pollination? A 1999 Cornell University study found that the direct value of bee pollination each year to U.S. agriculture is \$14.6 billion, including almost every kind of agri-business from pecans to blueberries. Without bees our gardens and a good part of our agricultural industry would collapse. In fact, it is the humble, diminutive bee that sustains plant life for the entire planet. And that's good, as long as our bees keep buzzing.

Unfortunately, that's not the case. Today, bees are disappearing in record numbers. And without bees our gardens and fields will not proliferate, which also affects our livestock and many of our plant-based food sources. They call this crisis of nature *colony collapse disorder*, which has killed off billions of bees throughout the U.S. and has experts guessing as to its cause.

Today, most large-crop farmers rent colonies of bees to pollinate their crops. Even though other insects can do the job, honey bees are the most efficient. Despite their starring role in the new animated film *Bee Movie*, the life of the honey bee is not glamorous. Many beekeepers haul their hives across the U.S to pollinate crops. Bees travel packed in boxes and are pulled out to "do their work," then packed up and sent on the road, continuously traveling from one location to another. During the process, many die off and entire colonies have vanished.

For the last few years, scientists have seen a continuous and escalating drop in bee populations. The reason, however, remains elusive. No hive attacks have been sighted, no stockpiles of dead bees have been found and no clear culprit identified. Theories vary, from parasites to viruses, pesticides, cell phones, and the excessive stress caused by the way bees are raised. Yet despite such abuse from all directions, bees continue their pollination work while also producing enough honey for themselves and us humans. It's a sweet story with a sad prognosis.

So what can a Central Texas gardener do to save our bees?

- 1) Show some respect. Bees are generally not aggressive unless provoked, so move slowly and give them time to fly away and do their work.
- 2) Use pesticides or fertilizers strictly as labeled, and when in doubt (say, while near a bloom that might attract a bee) keep your powder dry and move on.
- 3) Feed the bees a tasty medley of blue, purple and yellow flowers. Favorites include many familiar native and well-adapted bloomers including poppies, thistle, asters, Black-eyed Susans, purple cone flowers, sunflowers, lion's tail, salvias, butterfly bush, coreopsis and lantana.

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- 4) Your cultivated plantings are not the only blooms. Let your dandelions and clover blossom, and sleep better knowing you're feeding the bees with weeds.
 - 5) Share your backyard - consider starting your own beehive or two.
 - 6) Bring a little one to see *Bee Movie*. (Come on, it can't hurt.)

The mystery of bees: Modern day canary or unexplained phenomenon?

During an evening lecture at Austin's Waldorf School, Gunther Hawk cited a quote often attributed to Albert Einstein: "If the bee disappeared off the surface of the globe, then man would only have four years left to live," a statement that makes us wonder what Einstein knew then about what is happening now. Hawk believes that it's the exploitive and mechanistic beekeeping methods that are causing the colony collapse syndrome, and that it is up to man to change the way we raise and treat bees. So, is the bee our modern-day the canary in the coalmine, warning us to be more aware of man's effect on our environment? Or is there a single cause to the billions of lost bees? To learn more about Gunter Hawk's viewpoint, go to www.spikenardfarm.org.

Diana & William Hyland

Scratching the Surface...Finding Your Roots!

Master Gardeners know all about the importance of roots - plant roots that is, but what do you know about your own roots - your Family Tree? Who were your earliest ancestors in this country, where did they come from, when, where did they first settle, who were their children and what paths did they take trekking to new frontiers? How were they affected by major events in our nation's history?

Genealogy requires research, documentation of your findings, and most importantly, affords you a unique understanding of history via your own ancestor's footsteps! Start with your family and work your way back through grandparents, great grandparents, etc. Be prepared for "brick walls", some on mine have stood for 10 years before a newly found "cousin" helped me break through, now I'm "off to the races" tracking down new leads! Also be aware that spellings of surnames can differ between census and local records, for example, my maiden name of Harrell can be found as: Harrel, Herrell, Herrel, Harold; if you can't find your ancestor's family, just vary the spelling. The most important rule is "Don't Give Up"!

It's easy to get started for free! See www.rootsweb.com for tutorials and access to family tree searches (those submitted by generous researchers), message boards and databases. GOOGLE searching is an equally "free" research tool that's been very "fruitful" for me turning up many links to information I would've missed otherwise, but always attempt to trace and verify the references, make every attempt to verify research posted by others.

Another free resource is the USGenWeb project found at www.usgenweb.org - it offers access to state and county web sites offering genealogy information. The Texas State Genealogy Library & Archives in Austin offers free access to



TexShare databases where you can view census data, just visit them in person to sign up for remote access from home, and check out the Genealogy Library. Paid subscription sites such as www.ancestry.com or www.genealogy.com offer access to census and other databases; access to their message boards is free.

If you want to compile your family history you will need to purchase a computer program such as "Family Tree Maker" to make the process easy. A cardinal rule is "Make Backup Database Copies Every Time You Add Research", a computer hard drive crash can wipe out decades of research! I currently have 2694 persons in mine plus many word document folders and pictures; back ups are imperative.

This hobby is great for those days when it's too hot or cold to garden outdoors! Give it a try; dig for your roots grow your own Family Tree. Save those family bibles, pictures, letters, wills, marriage, birth and death records – once lost most can't be replaced. Ask older relatives to write down their memories of grandparents and relatives. You may have a family member that has already compiled a genealogy, ask them for pointers and help; if they aren't in a sharing mood just keep lines of communications open, they may change their opinion and come through especially if you find something to share with them!

The Holidays are here, a wonderful opportunity to begin wearing your "family historian" hat!

Happy Holidays,
Tommie Clayton

Closing the Garden Gate...

Closing the Garden Gate

This time of year we spend more time with family and friends. We reminisce about childhood and old friends we haven't seen in awhile. We vow to next year be a better person, lose weight, drink less, exercise more, be nicer, volunteer more, make a budget and watch less TV. If you are like me, the list is endless. I'm over 50 and still haven't become this fabulous person I dream of every December. Maybe 2008 will be different and if not thank goodness there is always 2009!

Happy Holidays!

Rebecca Matthews
Editor

Garden Trivia

Christmas trees are edible. Many parts of pines, spruces, and firs can be eaten. The needles are a good source of vitamin C. Pine nuts, or pine cones, are also a good source of nutrition.

An artificial spider and web are often included in the decorations on Ukrainian Christmas trees. A spider web found on Christmas morning is believed to bring good luck.

Mistletoe, a traditional Christmas symbol, was once revered by the early Britons. It was so sacred that it had to be cut with a golden sickle.

In Closing

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. . . . He lives, and he lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay ten times ten thousand years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood.

- - - Francis Pharcellus Church "The Sun" Sept 21, 1897



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