



Trumpet Vine

Knowledge for the Community from Loudoun County Extension
Master Gardeners

Summer 2022

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LOUDOUN COUNTY EXTENSION MASTER GARDENER LECTURE SERIES

FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC
7 P.M.

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Free In-Person Lecture Rust
Library:
July 12, 7:00 - 8:00pm
Culinary Herbs by Master
Gardener Thersa Hutton-
Sherman

August 9, 7:00 - 8:00pm
House Plants by Master
Gardener Pamela McGraw

Free Virtual Presentation via
WebEx:
September 1, 7:00 - 8:00pm
Carex--The Plant Your Garden
is Missing, by Wendy Brister

October 6, 7:00 - 8:00pm
Selecting Trees by Matt Bright,
Earth Sangha

Check the event calendar on
our website for updates on
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Summer Garden Maintenance

By now our spring gardens are well established and lush due to plenty rain. Regular maintenance can keep things thriving.

- Its time to prune the spring flowering shrubs. Azaleas should be pruned before mid-July to protect next year's blooms. Also prune forsythia, ninebark, fothergilla, and any other shrubs that bloomed in the spring.
- Check for dead plants. Identify crowded plants and move to fill holes while it's still early summer. Introduce a new plant.
- Where possible, deadhead your flowers to keep them blooming. Most perennials can be pruned to half their height mid-summer (July) to encourage new growth and blooms.
- Protect your plants from deer and rabbits with regular use of repellants.
- Stay ahead of the invasive weeds such as stilt grass that is getting established now.
- While we are expected to have a wetter than usual summer, a short period of no rain coupled with high temperatures can kill vulnerable plants if you don't watch closely and water.



Indian Pink in the Demo Garden *Spigelia marilandica* Photo by Rachel Healy

Master Gardener Demonstration Garden Turns 30!

VCE Loudoun Master Gardeners dreamed big back in 1991 and envisioned a demonstration garden that would educate the public on sustainable and organic gardening. Taking the initiative further to a field at Ida Lee Park, Leesburg, they got permission to begin in 1992. It all started with the tilling of a small plot of land--a 40' x 40' vegetable garden with ten raised beds.

Throughout the years, the garden grew and changed with horticulture needs of the community as well as the vision of the Master Gardeners. The one constant was the organic growing of produce that was donated to the local food bank, Hunger Relief (formerly called Interfaith Relief). Within 3 years, the number of raised beds increased to 16 and drip irrigation was added. After a few years, the annual produce donations averaged 1,000 pounds--and still average that today.



After 10 years, the garden expanded to include a



Butterfly Garden, fruit trees, a Children's Garden, brambles, an Ornamental Grass Bed, a Shade Garden, a Water Wise Garden/Drought Tolerant Garden, a Bulb Bed, an Evergreen Garden, and an array of compost containers. After another 20 years, expansion included a Wedding Garden, a Pergola Classroom, a Heritage Garden, a Kitchen Herb Garden, an Ornamental Border, turf plots, and garden signage. Irrigation was expanded throughout the garden. Water stations were added, and a strong, sturdy deer fence was installed around the vegetable gardens.

So many touched this garden with love and determination to educate. The vision of those few Master Gardeners in 1992 lives on, and the environment and residents of the community are better for it. It has stood the test of time through drought, rainy seasons, ice, and snow. Many lifelong friendships have resulted from working in the garden.



Come out to visit! Enjoy the celebration of 30 years of the VCE Loudoun Master Gardener Demonstration Garden at Ida Lee Park, Leesburg. For more information:

<https://loudouncountymastergardeners.org/demonstration-garden/>

All photos by Rachel Healy

Barbara Bailey, Community Engagement Coordinator, Master Gardener Coordinator

A Guide to Container Gardening with Annuals

Planting a variety of annuals in containers can add both joy and beauty to any outdoor living area.

Gardening in containers with annuals is not complicated. I will outline a few key steps to ensure success and then provide some lists of suggested plants for various growing conditions.

First let's talk about containers. Containers come in wide variety of types and sizes. Ceramic or pottery containers have the benefit of being beautiful and providing excellent temperature moderations, but they can be expensive, heavy, and may be prone to breakage. Plastic containers are lighter and less expensive, but may overheat and some lack the aesthetic appeal of a true clay pot. Newer faux pottery plastics are available that combine the best of both. Pots come in almost unlimited variety of sizes and shapes. Fancy pots with water reservoirs and wheels are available. Keep in mind the larger the container the more soil you will need and the heavier a pot will be to move. Larger pots with multiple plants may have a bigger impact, but a similar effect can be obtained by grouping several small pots together. Pedestal pots are striking in an entryway. Hanging pots or window boxes lined with coco liners are very attractive but the liners may need replaced each year depending on weather exposure. Unique containers like old metal buckets or troughs and various other whimsical containers can be found at antique fairs and various vendors. Regardless of the containers you choose one key shared point is drainage. All pots must have at least one (preferably more) hole in the bottom to prevent root rot.



Once you have your containers, the next step is soil. Excellent potting soil mixtures can be obtained at most garden centers. Potting soil is a mixture of bark, peat moss, compost and vermiculite. These ingredients ensure good drainage, good aeration, and adequate nutrients for your plants. Potting mix is NOT the same as seed starter. Potting mixture should be light and crumbly and is free of pathogens when new. You can reuse your container soil in subsequent years, but it must be broken up to relieve compaction and amended with slow-release fertilizer and perlite to restore texture and food. Follow direction on product for how much to add. It is possible to create your own potting mix by combining the components mentioned above, but, given the availability of pre-mixed in correct proportions, this is not recommended. If you have any issues with diseased plants, that soil should be disposed. One of the beautiful things about container gardening is we have total control of the soil composition and can ensure our plants always have excellent growing media.



Beyond your containers and soil there are a few necessary tools and additional nice to have tools. A small hand-held trowel and shovel, a flat blade, sharp shears or pruners, garden gloves, and a surface to work on. A potting bench is ideal but any raised flat surface will suffice. A wheelbarrow or plastic utility sink is excellent for amending soil and holding large pots.

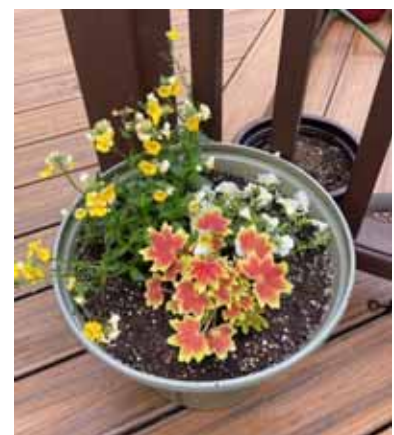
So now that you have your soil filled containers you are ready to plant! However, it is very important to consider your growing conditions to know which plants will thrive where. The old adage "right plant right spot" applies to containers as well as to in ground plants, but the beauty of a container is you can move it if the plant is not thriving in your initial choice of location! Take inventory of how many plants you will need. Approximate one four inch annual per each smaller (six to eight inch diameter) pot and two to four for larger (eight inches and up in diameter) ones. Carefully observe the sun and wind exposure where you intend to place your containers. Less than 3 hours sunlight for shade lovers, 4 to 6 hours for part shade, and 6 or more hours sunlight for sun lovers. Read the tag carefully when you choose your babies. Most annuals do not tolerate much wind especially when newly planted and will benefit from at least some protection by a structure. Since you are usually planting around house, deck, patio this usually works out well. Below I have provided a fairly comprehensive list of annuals with their preferred sun exposure. Many plants on this list are traditional favorites but there are many newer varieties to choose from and garden centers and nurseries are always getting new ones to try. Also, be certain you will be able to access your pots easily for watering with a hose and watering wand or watering can.

One critical point I cannot emphasize enough is to be patient with respect to your planting zone and timing. DO NOT be tempted to purchase and plant tender annuals too early as your investment may succumb to a late frost. Here in Northern Virginia Mid May is generally a safe time to plant. Mother's Day is popular time to purchase annuals but may still be too chilly for some of the more sensitive. If you are eager for some color earlier stick with cold hardy annuals like pansies, violas, snapdragons, and chrysanthemums. A reputable local garden center should get their plants shipped at the appropriate time. Bottom line is to know your spring frost date and respect it! These same cold hardy plants can be replanted in fall to give lingering late color.

Consider the type of plants you want to grow based on growth habit. Annuals may be trailing or cascading which do best in window boxes or taller pots. They may be climbers which require a trellis or other vertical framework. They may be mounding or clumping which are versatile almost anywhere. Spike type plants can add a vertical accent to your pots. Most annuals are flowering but there are also many that provide interest without flowers due to interesting foliage color or texture. These are often referred to as accent plants. Consider height and spreading capacity when planting. A good rule of thumb when designing a large pot is to have one taller vertical plant, one mounding



plant and one trailing plant. In garden lingo this is often referred to as thriller, filler, and spiller. Of course, you can design to your own hearts content with a color palate, texture palate, or whatever suits your fancy, which is another delightful aspect of annual containers. It can be helpful to place the potted plants in your prospective containers prior to actual planting to get a good feel for how they will look together. This allows you to move and



rearrange until you are pleased. One overarching key to success with mixed container plantings is to be sure all of the plants you group together have the same light requirements. The variety of available annuals these days is astonishing. Gone are the days of our grandmother's geraniums

and petunias and impatiens being the extent of our selection. Not that those plants do not still have a place in our container gardens. They now come in new cultivars that sport better and longer blooms, more resistance to disease, and harsh conditions. Have fun shopping for your annuals. Try several different vendors or consider mail order plants. I prefer to design with small (four inch) containers, but you can buy larger annuals for more immediate impact. Or you can even buy pre-planted larger mixed containers but that is letting someone else have all the fun. Cell packs containing six to eight tiny annuals are very economical and easy to plant due to small size. At the bottom is a table with a summary of plants grouped by light requirements.

Now you are ready to plant! Remove an amount of soil similar to the size of the purchased plant and set aside in a small container. Then, gently remove the plant from the nursery pot by sliding a flat blade (I use a small flat metal kitchen spatula) around all four sides of the pot, then, squeezing the edges and slowly and delicately, turning it upside down until it slides out hopefully with at least most of the soil intact. Sometimes purchase plants are root bound and have to be extricated from the store pot. If the roots are grown into a tight mass, it is advantageous to make a few sharp cuts through the roots with a sharp knife. Place the root ball into the hole with the crown of the plant



level to just above the soil level then gently replace the soil and compact it very gently. You want to support the transplant but not compact the soil too much. Remove any diseased or damaged foliage. Water thoroughly after planting. Most annuals require very frequent watering in the summertime unless rainfall is generous. Plan on daily watering in the hot months if your plants are in full sun. Some plants, like climbers, may require a vertical support in the pot.

Care of your annual pots once established is pretty basic. If your soil was not fortified with fertilizer you will want to provide a bloom boosting liquid fertilizer every 2 to 4 weeks all summer. Nutrients leech out of containers rapidly and most annuals are heavy feeders. For the first month it is best to feed with a fertilizer that promotes foliar growth then switch to a product designed to optimize flowering. Dead heading, which means removing spent blossoms, can help rejuvenate your plants and encourage continued blooming. This is best done with a very sharp shear or snips versus a pruning tool. As the season progresses some plants may get scraggly or floppy or otherwise not look as attractive. Do not hesitate to give these a haircut. Remove any dead or diseased vegetation and spent blooms. If a plant or plants are languishing consider moving the container to another location and review the light requirements of the composite plants.

I hope you have as much fun as I do shopping, planting and caring for your annuals. I am like a kid in a candy shop each spring as the excitement of replanting grows close. In a future article I will discuss propagating your own annuals by starting seeds or taking cuttings late in the season.



Some suggested annuals:

Sun	Part Sun	Shade
Zinnia	Begonia(wax)	Impatiens
Marigold	Bacopa	Torenia
Salvia	Lobelia	Coleus
Bidens	Fuschia	Caladium
Cuphea	Torenia	Begonia(tuberous/rex)
Evolvulus	Nemesia	Ipomea
Lantana	Pansy	Purple heart
Portulaca	New guinea impatiens	Bromeliad
Pentas	Impatiens	Oxalis
Angelonia	Sweet pea	Cineraria
Dahlia	Browallia	
Daisy	Sweet alyssum	
Nasturtium	Viola	
Heliotrope	Dichondra	
Thunbergia	Stock	
Diascia	Polka dot plant	
Cosmos	Asparagus fern	
Dianthus	Spider plant	
Euphorbia	Ageratum	
Calibrichoa	Ornamental cabbage	
Nemesia		
Petunia		
Verbena		
Snapdragon		
Sunflower		
Geranium		

All photos were taken by Wendy Behm.

Wendy Behm, Loudoun County Master Gardener Intern

Asparagus: On-Going Care

Once the asparagus bed has been prepared and planted, the wait is on for the first spears. Be patient! The reward is in sight! Meanwhile, you must take care of the bed both before it starts to produce and on into the future, for as many years as you have the bed. It will take a little time, but the work isn't nearly as hard as the work required to put in the bed in the first place.

Watering: The first two years, asparagus needs to be watered during dry spells or whenever there is less than one inch of rainfall per week. Since it is a perennial crop, it is well adapted to trickle irrigation, which makes the job as easy as turning the water on and off. Because the roots are 5-6 inches below the surface of the soil, be sure to water deeply, but don't drown the plants.



A weed-free asparagus bed. Photo courtesy of Elaine Hilburn Walizer at <http://elaineinarkansas.blogspot.com>

Once asparagus has become established its roots can grow four feet or considerably more below the surface of the soil; with such a deep root system, it is fairly drought tolerant. However to keep the ferns healthy and vigorously growing during a severe drought, some supplemental watering may be necessary. Generally speaking, water is not required during the harvest season since (1) at that time of year rainfall is usually sufficient and (2) you are cutting off the spears and, the water requirement of the plant is reduced. Once ferning out begins watering is useful if the weather is unusually dry. The need for supplemental water in dry years continues through August when the crowns are actively growing and setting buds for the next year's

harvest. In the fall, starting the first week of September, withhold water to encourage asparagus to begin dormancy.

Fertilizing: It's almost impossible to make fertilizer decisions without a soil test. Follow the test's recommendations for fertilizer and lime application. Surprisingly enough, although asparagus crowns require extremely fertile soil when they are planted, they are not heavy feeders once they are established. Although you should take a soil test each year to be sure, generally only moderate amounts of fertilizer are needed on a yearly basis. If you apply well-rotted cow or horse manure to the bed each year, even this may not be necessary.

Most authorities recommend fertilizing either once, in early spring, before the spears begin to emerge, or splitting the fertilizer application between early spring and either right after harvest or in the fall, after the ferns have died back. Nitrogen (N), lime, and potassium (K) can be broadcast; they will eventually move through the soil to the root zone. Phosphorous (P), however, needs to be dug in since it doesn't migrate through the soil.

Weeding: Weeds and grass love asparagus beds! It can be a battle to keep ahead of the game and prevent weeds from competing with the emerging spears creating an unsightly mess in the garden and making it difficult to find and harvest the spears. You'll have to attack early, before the spears emerge from the ground. At this point you can use a hoe. As the spears emerge, you'll have to hand weed; otherwise you could break off the spears. Some large growers till the soil very lightly

between the rows in early spring (before the spears start to emerge), in early summer immediately after the harvest, and in late fall after the ferns have been cut down. (This practice, previously common, is now being

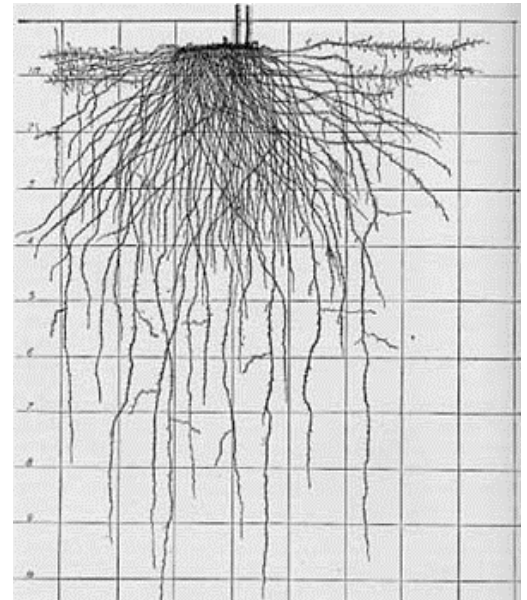
questioned. Research is on-going). If you try this, be sure your tiller doesn't cut deeply into the earth; keep it shallow (1-2 inches, maximum), just enough to nip off the weeds. Asparagus roots spread horizontally, creating an underground mat, and you don't want to damage them. The drawing at right shows how large these roots can grow. This is a 6-year-old plant with roots extending to 9.5 feet vertically, 3.5 feet on the left side and 4.5 feet on the right side of the crown.

Following the harvest, mulching with weed-seed free hay, wheat straw or oat straw, chopped leaves, or dried grass clippings is extremely helpful both for weed prevention and for conserving soil moisture. If you use herbicides, consult with your Extension office for up-to-date recommendations and follow the recommendations and product labels. There is one non-chemical herbicide which could be used: corn gluten meal, a pre-emergent herbicide that must be applied at specific times in the spring and fall to control weed seedlings. For more information about corn gluten meal, see *The Trumpet Vine*, Fall 2013, page 10, at <http://loudouncountymastergardeners.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/2013-Fall-TV.pdf>

Because asparagus is salt tolerant and many weeds aren't, in the past, dousing the soil in asparagus beds with salt was common practice. This is no longer recommended! First, the salt can form a surface crust and prevent water from penetrating into the soil. Second, the salt can migrate from the asparagus bed into nearby soil, ruining that soil for other, less tolerant crops

Fall care: In late fall after the foliage has yellowed, you can do one of two things:

- If the foliage is disease and pest free, you may leave it standing through the winter and cut it down in late winter or very early spring. Foliage left in place will trap snow, which will act as a blanket and shield crowns from severe temperatures. After you cut back the dead foliage and stems you may dig them into the soil or leave them on top of the soil as mulch.
- If diseases or insects have been a problem, you should cut the stalks down to the ground and mulch with four to six inches of compost, chopped up leaves, or thoroughly rotted manure to add organic



Drawing from *Root Development of Vegetable Crops*, John E. Weaver and William E. Bruner, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1927, from *The Soil and Health Library, Tasmania*, <http://www.soilandhealth.org/index.html>



Fall foliage. Photo from "Vegetables for Wisconsin Gardens", University of Wisconsin Extension <http://fyi.uwex.edu/sewmaq/files/2011/02/Veq4W11.pdf>

matter to the soil and control weeds. If you have female plants, you'll have to cut the stalks by hand, being careful not to shake the red berries loose as you cut the plants down; you'll end up with unwanted seedlings if you're not careful. If you have male plants, you can cut them down with a string weed trimmer.

Diseases: The most common diseases attacking asparagus are asparagus rust (*Puccinia asparagi*), crown rot, (*Fusarium* spp. and *Phytophthora* spp.), and Cercospora leaf spot/blight (*Cercospora asparagi*). The best defenses against these diseases are:

- Selecting a well-drained site for the bed where asparagus has not been planted previously;
- Preparing the soil properly before planting;
- Planting resistant varieties, such as Jersey Knight, Jersey Giant, or Jersey King;
- Obtaining your crowns (or seeds) from a reputable source;
- Maintaining soil fertility but not overdoing it with nitrogen, which can worsen diseases if they are present;
- Maintaining soil pH of 6.5 to 7.0;
- Encouraging strong plants by not overharvesting;
- Controlling insects and weeds, which can weaken the plants, leaving them susceptible to disease;
- Watering deeply, but not waterlogging the soil, during extreme droughts;
- Learning more about these diseases; see <http://ag.umass.edu/fact-sheets/asparagus-fusarium-crown-root-rot>;
- Finally, spraying with approved fungicides if plants are attacked in spite of your precautions.



Asparagus rust. Photograph courtesy of Dr. Mary Hausbeck, Michigan State University Extension



Common asparagus beetle. Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Hahn, University of Minnesota Extension

Pests: Asparagus beetles are the most serious insect pest of asparagus and appear in April, feeding first on the spears where they lay their eggs, and then on the ferns once they develop, causing them to brown and lose their leaves. While there are insecticides which will keep them in check, unless you are overwhelmed with an invasion, handpicking and dropping them in a bucket of soapy water is the best way to deal with them, along with cutting asparagus stalks down and removing the debris from the garden in the fall. Other pests, such as cutworms, aphids, leafhoppers, and Japanese beetles may turn up occasionally but are usually a minor problem. For more information on asparagus beetles, see



Spotted asparagus beetle.
Photo courtesy Jeffrey Hahn,
University of Minnesota
Extension

https://ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/444/444-620/ENTO-243NP.pdf

Lina B. Burton, Loudoun County Extension Master Gardener

Aster 'Raydon's Favorite' Is a Winner for the Fall Garden

Symphotrichum oblongifolium 'Raydon's Favorite' (Aromatic aster)

(Formerly *Aster oblongifolius* 'Raydon's Favorite')

(sim-fy-oh-TRY-kum ob-long-ee-FOH-lee-um)

Aster 'Raydon's Favorite' has become one of the best known, most widely grown of our fall-blooming asters for good reason. It's simply a superb plant, giving our gardens a last blast of gorgeous color and offering our pollinators, particularly bees and butterflies, a final meal before winter sets in. According to a Penn State study, 'Raydon's Favorite' is the last of the favored pollinator plants in their study to bloom during the growing season.

In my own garden, it starts blooming the first week of October and continues until the top growth is killed by frost, which in some recent years has been well into November, a blooming period that spans four and sometimes even six weeks if frost is delayed. During that time, it is covered with bees, butterflies, and other pollinators.

The plant: 'Raydon's Favorite' was a top performer in both the Chicago Botanic Garden aster trial (see https://www.chicagobotanic.org/downloads/planteval_notes/no36_asters.pdf) and the Mt. Cuba Center aster trial (see https://issuu.com/mtcuba/docs/mt_cuba_report-asters_for_mid-atlantic?fr=sYjg2YTIONjAxNDg) for exceptional flower production, cleanliness and attractiveness of foliage, hardiness, disease resistance, and plant habit. It truly is a star in the garden: low maintenance, pest and disease resistant, and tolerant of juglone from black walnut trees. The plant spreads slowly by underground rhizomes. It is not aggressive, is easy to keep under control, and blooms like crazy!

It grows 2 to 3 feet tall by 1 to 2 feet wide. Both the Chicago Botanical Garden and Mt. Cuba Center, however, found that theirs grew much wider. It can, of course, be kept smaller by simply dividing the plant if it starts to crowd its neighbors. As to height, cutting it back by half in June (but no later) will result in a shorter plant (if you *need* a shorter plant); however this is by no means necessary.

In the garden it plays well with other plants but doesn't like to be near more aggressive, taller plants; it is stunning against the golden fall foliage of *Amsonia hubrichtii*. The plants are highly floriferous, blooming magnificently throughout the late fall on plants with a mounding, billowing habit.



Aster 'Raydon's Favorite.' [Photo by David J. Stang, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.](#)

The flowers: The word “aster” comes to the English language via Latin, and originally from the Greek word *aster*, which literally means “star,” and the flowers do have a star-like appearance. The ray flowers have been described as violet-blue, blue-purple, light blue, medium blue, and lavender-blue. Obviously, it depends on your definition of these various colors, but to say the least, it’s a



Photo by Lina Burton

stunning shade of *something* on the blue-purple spectrum. The 25 to 30 or more showy ray flowers, each roughly the size of a quarter, appear at the end of each branch and surround yellow disk flowers that turn reddish-purple as the flowers age. New flowers continue to bloom throughout the fall, and a plant will simultaneously display buds yet to bloom, fresh blooms with the yellow disk flowers, and older blooms with the reddish disk flowers. They are lovely in a bouquet or you can just put a few sprigs informally in a mason jar to enjoy. It mixes especially well with *Solidago*, black-eyed Susans, and other late-summer and fall-blooming plants and is perfect for mass plantings, in traditional perennial gardens, in wildflower or pollinator gardens, in meadows, in large containers, or for erosion control projects.

The foliage: For the most part, aster foliage, including the foliage of ‘Raydon’s Favorite,’ isn’t one of its main features. It grows along all summer, attractive but unobtrusive, not calling attention to itself by, for example, an unusual color, texture, or size. The oblong, slightly sticky leaves can range from ½ inch up to 3 inches in length and roughly ½ inch wide, becoming

smaller as they ascend the stem. The common name, aromatic aster, comes from the leaves and stems, which when crushed have a faint balsam-like fragrance.

Obtaining plants: ‘Raydon’s Favorite’ is widely available in local and online nurseries or from a neighbor who’s dividing a clump. Plants need to be divided every three to five years in the spring. Because of their fibrous root system, they are easy to dig and divide and they adapt to their new situation easily. You don’t need a large clump; even a very small sprig with a root attached will transplant well and if kept watered until it has a good start, will grow nicely into a new, large plant over the summer.

Siting:

Symphotrichum oblongifolium is native to parts of the Eastern and Central United States, including Virginia, where it grows in dry upland prairies and slopes, open woods, rocky bluffs, and over limestone. ‘Raydon’s Favorite’ itself is believed to have come from a population of wild plants in East Tennessee and possibly has some *Symphotrichum grandiflorus* genes mixed in. Both species grow in the same area, so natural hybridization wouldn’t be unexpected.

Given its native habitat, it is obvious that it would naturally prefer dry to medium, well-drained soil; however, it is actually very adaptable and grows well in clay soil, sandy soil, or any good garden

soil as well. Avoid wet soils. It will be very unhappy under those conditions. Optimum soil pH for asters is 5.5-6.5, but 'Raydon's Favorite' is adaptable.

It does require full sun; at the very least six hours a day is necessary. It will tolerate part shade but won't give the best bloom under those conditions.

Caring for: 'Raydon's Favorite' is pest and disease resistant and is an easy plant to grow. While it spreads, it is not aggressive and any strays that show up where you don't want them can easily be pulled out (and perhaps moved elsewhere where they will settle in nicely if kept watered until they have taken hold).

Planting: Transplant 'Raydon's Favorite' from its nursery pot as you would any other perennial. It requires no special treatment during the transplanting process.

Watering: As with all transplants, it's a wise idea to water 'Raydon's Favorite' until it has settled into its new home. Thereafter, it is drought tolerant and rarely needs water.

Fertilizing: While a dose of a good, well-balanced fertilizer won't hurt, it rarely is necessary.

Pests and Diseases: All asters are susceptible to two specific diseases: mildew and rust, particularly in areas with poor air circulation or if they are crowded. Even if attacked, neither of these diseases will kill the plant although they will mar the appearance of the leaves. Both the Mt. Cuba Center and the Chicago Botanical Garden studies found 'Raydon's Favorite,' fortunately, to be highly resistant to both of these diseases. Nevertheless, if either one *should* strike, cut the plant back to about two inches in the fall after the top growth has been killed off by frost and haul the branches and any fallen leaves out of the garden. Don't compost them.

All members of the aster family, including not only asters, but chrysanthemums, goldenrod, black-eyed Susans, and many others, are attractive to lace bugs, most commonly the chrysanthemum lace bug. Lace bugs, however, are preyed upon by a number of natural predators, such as ladybugs, assassin bugs, parasitic wasps, pirate bugs, and others that usually keep them in check on perennials.

They are ignored by rabbits, deer, and groundhogs while other plants only a few inches away are nibbled or decimated.

Deadheading: Deadheading is not necessary and, in fact, it would be difficult to find and cut off faded flowers among the dozens of flowers covering the plant. At the end of the season, you can either cut the stems back to about 2 inches or, if healthy, leave them on the plant over the winter, cutting them back in early spring before new growth starts.



New flowers (with yellow centers), old flowers (with reddish-purple centers), a tiny bud in the upper right hand corner, and if you look closely, a bee. Photo by Lina Burton.

Future hopes? A plant called 'Raydon's Birthday Pink' has been mentioned occasionally in the horticultural press, but at the moment it's impossible to find it for sale. According to the Chicago Botanic Garden, it has 1½-inch light pink flowers, blooms slightly earlier than 'Raydon's Favorite,' and is larger--32 inches tall by 84 inches wide. Hopefully it will eventually be available to us so we can try it in our own gardens.

'Raydon's Favorite' offers splendid possibilities for hybridizing with other species to bring us asters with the disease resistance of 'Raydon's Favorite' plus the colors of these other species--without their drawbacks. Stay tuned. Hybridizers are working!

Lina Burton, Loudoun County Extension Master Gardener



Central Park - Conservatory Garden, South Garden, Symphyotrichum [Aster] 'Raydon's Favorite', Aster 'Jindai', Hydrangea 'Mariesii Variegata', Astilbe cv in late October. Photo by EM at <https://flic.kr/p/AiafQY> .

'Raydon's Favorite': From North Carolina, to Texas, Back to North Carolina, and Then to Our Gardens

'Raydon's Favorite' was brought to market by Allen Bush, who was one of the first plantsmen to offer perennials by mail order, back in the 1980s, from his nursery, Holbrook Farm, near Asheville, North Carolina. Allen introduced a number of perennials to gardeners and has had a fascinating life in the plant world. In fact, *The New York Times* found Allen's life so fascinating that it wrote an article about him in 2014 at <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/10/garden/plants-with-roots-attached.html?searchResultPosition=1>

It is through Allen Bush's efforts that 'Raydon's Favorite' came to market. In 1991, Raydon Alexander had been a horticulturist at Milberger Nursery in San Antonio, Texas, for more than 30 years, so clearly he knew his plants. It was he who recognized the plant had special qualities and brought it to Allen's attention. Allen clearly knew his plants also.

On January 15, 1991, Raydon wrote a letter to Allen about an aster that was growing in the San Antonia area and being shared among gardeners as a "pass-along" plant. It was not commercially available. Raydon sent Allen a plant. He recognized its unique qualities, and 'Raydon's Favorite' was offered in the Holbrook Farm catalog in 1992. The rest is history.

Allen Bush is now one of the writers of the gardenrant (<https://gardenrant.com>), one of the best and most highly rated of the garden blogs, and on March 9, 2016, he wrote an article about 'Raydon's Favorite' for the blog, which included Raydon Alexander's letter to him from 1991. Allen has now granted the *Trumpet Vine* permission to publish this 1991 letter in our newsletter.

So, here's the story of how 'Raydon's Favorite' traveled from North Carolina, to Texas, back to North Carolina, and then on to our gardens.

January 15, 1991

Dear Mr. Bush,

I am taking the liberty of sending you an aster that should, I think, be more widely distributed.

*I can see from your catalogue that you have a healthy interest in the genus. I was especially delighted to find *A. grandiflorus*.*

If you find the item I am sending as garden worthy and distinctive as I have, it seems only natural that you should be the one to offer it to the world of perennial lovers at large.

This particular variety...I will call it 'Raydon's Favorite' (for it certainly is) you may call it what your will...has been passed from garden to garden in South Texas for at least 50 years but until very recently was not available in nurseries even locally and remained unidentified.

*Since no other asters are commonly grown here it has been known just as the 'fall aster' and the few growers who offer it for sale have mislabeled it *Aster x frikartii*, since they do not know that aster but often see it pictured!*

*In 1989 I made it my project to identify it. On close horticultural inspection it seemed clearly a form of *Aster oblongifolius*. So I proceeded to grow all of the species I could find, from Wisconsin*

to East Tennessee, the major areas of its range. I also corresponded with horticulturists of these areas.

My conclusion is that it was probably an especially fine clone brought to Texas many years ago from East Tennessee, the eastern limits of its range (and the range of *A. grandiflorus*) and has languished, enjoyed but unpromoted in this horticultural backwater that is South Texas.

Aster oblongifolius is quite variable and has a western form *rigidus* 12" – 18" and an eastern form *angustatus* 24"–36." The former is low and slow, the latter tall and aggressive.

'Raydon's Favorite' is intermediate in height 18"–24" but similar in its growth and look to the eastern *Aster oblongifolius* var. *angustatus*.

The exciting difference is the size of the flower. The type has flowers the size of a dime. 'Raydon's Favorite' has flowers the size of a quarter or larger, entirely hiding the foliage and blooming in late September to early October.

Almut Jones, a specialist in the genus at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign suspects some *A. grandiflorus* in its history, and has collected similar strains on Lookout Mountain, Tennessee.

Besides the compact, floriferous nature of this aster, it is almost indestructible and performs with great enthusiasm in the worst extremes of soil and weather (we have all of them here!); thin rocky soils, alkaline soils as well as the humidity and acid soils of Houston and the cold of Dallas.

Interestingly, after years of sterility, my clumps of 'Raydon's Favorite' near the imported species are beginning to set seed.

As with other fall blooming plants in our area of erratic temperatures, this aster is now and again tricked into blooming in the spring, a pleasant bonus.

I would be interested to know if you or any of your gardening friends in Tennessee (where it should be known) have grown this plant.

Of course it is possible that it will not perform for you in North Carolina, and perhaps that is why it is of such local interest.

I hope you enjoy it.

With every good wish, I am sincerely yours,

Raydon Alexander

Lina Burton, Loudoun County Extension Master Gardener

Letter reprinted courtesy of Allen Bush at <https://gardenrant.com/2016/03/when-the-aster-hitched-a-ride.html> .

Outstanding Groundcovers, continued: Pussytoes and Lyreleaf Sage

Continuing our discussion of native groundcovers, this article introduces two hardy native groundcovers that can take the heat of the sun in Northern Virginia. Most groundcovers we may be familiar with are best in shade and part sun, but that leaves out the sunny and drier areas where we would like groundcovers rather than turf or mulch.

Two excellent choices for sunny spots are pussytoes (*Antennaria*) and Lyreleaf sage (*Salvia lyrata*). These plants are very different looking but can provide attractive contrast when planted in proximity to each other. Both have the added benefit of doing well in shade: the Lyreleaf sage can take part to full shade, and pussytoes can grow in part shade. Both can survive in dry as well as moist areas.

PUSSYTOES (*Antennaria*)

Pussytoes has two leaf types, plantain pussytoes (*Antennaria plantaginifolia*) (wider) and field pussytoes (*Antennaria neglecta*) (more narrow). They are in the Aster (*Asteraceae*) family.



Plantain pussytoes on the left and **Field pussytoes** on the right. Both are good spreaders when they are in the right place. *Photo by Carol Ivory*

Both types of pussytoes have silvery gray leaves which appear in a basal rosette. Both do well in lean, gritty to rocky well-drained soil with dry to medium moisture in full sun to part shade. They will also grow well in dry, shadier locations. Pussytoes do not do well in fertile, humusy soils, particularly if drainage is poor. They spread by stolons which are horizontal stems that grow on the soil surface and take root at intervals, similar to the way strawberries and spider plants spread. At nodes on the stolon the plant grows roots and a rosette of leaves and then sends up a stem where the flowers appear. The flowers look like little cat's paws, hence the common name. Each flower cluster has over 20 small unscented flower heads. Flowers are crowded into terminal clusters (corymbs) atop the flowering stems.

As natives, pussytoes are resistant to disease and pests. Both deer and rabbits will avoid this plant. To keep pussytoes looking tidy and promote denser leaf coverage, trim off the spent flowers just before summer. It does well in rock gardens and as a replacement for turf areas. It's a go-to as a

ground cover in a sunny border with native shrubs and trees. It's also a good choice for a sunny dry "devil strip" between the sidewalk and the street if nothing else will grow there.

Pussytoes is a good replacement for lamb's ear, which is native to the middle east, not North America. Pussytoes has the same grayish-green rosettes with white flowers.

Plantain-leaf Pussytoes (*Antennaria plantaginifolia*)

Other common names are Everlasting, Ladies Tobacco and Mouse Ear.

Plantaginifolia leaves form basal rosettes and are more paddle-shaped than *neglecta*. They can be up to 3 inches long and 2 inches across. *Plantaginifolia* is semi-evergreen. The whole plant is wooly and grayish, including the leaves and flower stalks. *Plantaginifolia* does well in dry woodland settings with dappled shade as well as in the sun

Plantaginifolia is dioecious (male and female flowers on separate plants), with male flowers typically appearing on shorter flower stalks. Flowers are somewhat less showy than *neglecta*. It blooms in March through June in ¼ inch clusters. Flower heads are fuzzy and whitish, the female flowers tinged with pink bloom in spring. Flowering stalks can be up to 10" and rise from the basal rosette. The flowers are visited primarily by small bees and flies. The plant is host to several fly, moth, and butterfly larvae, including Everlasting Tebenna Moth and the American Painted Lady butterfly.

Field pussytoes (*Antennaria neglecta*)

Also called Prairie Everlasting and Early Everlasting.

Field pussytoes (*Antennaria neglecta*) grows 6 to 12 inches tall and wide. *Neglecta* is smaller than plantain pussytoes with narrower leaves. Leaves are 2 inches long and ½ inch wide. Leaves form an attractive mat. *Neglecta* can cover an area quickly. *Neglecta* is more typical of open sunny habitats, rather than woodland areas.

Neglecta has showy white flowers which appear on upright stems in April to June and attract butterflies. The plant is also a host for the American Painted Lady butterfly. *Neglecta* plants are dioecious (male and female flowers on separate plants). Fruits on female plants are seed-like achenes, with the fruiting heads resembling the fruiting heads of miniature dandelions.



Field pussytoes flower
Courtesy Terry Glase, Lady Bird Johnson
Wildflower Center

LYRELEAF SAGE (*Silvia lyrata*)

Lyreleaf sage is in the mint family, and as such will spread to fill an area where it is planted. The native form has dark green leaves with purple along the mid ribs. Most nurseries carry hybrids that have burgundy leaves. It is a good ground cover for difficult areas. It is tolerant of well drained wet and dry soils and can grow in shade, part shade or sun. It can tolerate periodic flooding and drought conditions. The burgundy-colored hybrid is an eye-catching accent in a native plant or rain garden. Lyreleaf sage is an excellent choice as a turf replacement because its basal leaves and spreading habit discourage weeds.



Lyreleaf sage
Courtesy Joseph A. Marcus, Lady Bird Johnson
Wildflower Center

Lyreleaf sage forms a rosette of leaves from which flower stalks rise several inches in spring and early summer. The flowers are light blue to violet and are arranged around the leaf stem in whorls. The flower is typical of mint with a lower lip longer than the upper, providing a platform for pollen loving insects.



Lyreleaf sage

Courtesy W.D. and Dolphia Bransford, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center

Lyreleaf sage is a good replacement for non-native ajuga: both sport reddish-purple leaves in basal rosettes, with blue flowers on stalks above the rosettes. Ajuga is invasive in parts of North America. Lyreleaf sage attracts bees, hummingbirds, and butterflies.



Lyreleaf sage flowers

Courtesy Charmaine Richardson, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center



Burgundy leaf color

Lyreleaf Sage photo by Sharon Perryman

Lyreleaf sage can take mowing and can be walked on. When it has filled the area you want, run a mower over it to remove the spent flower stalks before they form seeds.

All photos from Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center can be found at www.wildflower.org

Sharon Perryman, Loudoun County Extension Master Gardener

What's that Prehistoric Looking Bug?



Triceratops figure

ARG! There's a miniature triceratops on my front door! What is that fierce-looking bug? Is it good? Bad? Dangerous?

Look closely but don't intrude! This largest of the terrestrial true bugs, order, Hemiptera, can be up to 1.5 inches long, grey or brown, and is a member of the large group of assassin bugs, named because they will attack and kill their own species. Other assassin bugs include ambush bugs, damsel bugs, big-eyed bugs and pirate bugs, all beneficial bugs.

The wheel bug, *Arilus cristatus*, is named for the wheel-like structure on its thorax. It's the only insect in North America with such a structure. It has large bristly front legs for capturing and holding prey. A sharp, downward facing curved beak pierces the prey and injects enzymes that paralyzes the prey and dissolves its innards so the wheel bug can suck up the nutrients. Wheel bugs are very indiscriminate and will pierce anything that happens by including a human finger or arm. It is known to be THE MOST PAINFUL bite or sting of any animal including snakes, hornets, scorpions, fire ants, etc. It is described as a sharp, burning sensation that reaches a crescendo in about 5 minutes and stays at that level for several hours. While poison is not involved, the wound continues to be painful and can take as much as two weeks to heal. Wheel bugs are not aggressive so be on the lookout for them and when you see one, leave it alone, it does good work.

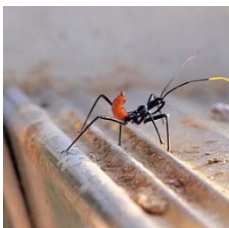


Mature Wheel bug *Courtesy Extension Texas A&M Mike Merchant*

The wheel bugs are predators on Japanese beetles and pine sawflies. They also eat aphids, caterpillars, cabbage worms, potato beetles, leafhoppers, flies, leafminers, and the hairy caterpillars that defoliate forests. They are also one of the few predators to attack brown marmorated stink bugs. Unfortunately, prey include beneficial lady beetles, honeybees, and butterflies and butterfly larvae.

The wheel bug has one generation per year and overwinters in masses of 10-40 eggs cemented together in a honeycomb often on shrubs and trees. The eggs hatch in May and June, and nymphs soon begin hunting for prey. The nymphs go through 5 instars. By mid-summer they are mature adults who mate and lay eggs. Nymphs in the 1st – 4th instar stages march around on long, spindly legs with their curved abdomens tipped-up causing them to superficially resemble spiders.

Instar photos below by Katie Conaway.



1st Instar



3rd Instar



5th Instar

Carol Ivory, Loudoun County Extension Master Gardener



Illustration by Melissa J. Will, "[Empress of Dirt](#)"

FACT OR FICTION? The Truth Behind Garden Myths

When you ask people where they learned about gardening, many will tell you that they got their love for digging in the dirt from their parents or grandparents, who in turn learned about growing things from their parents or grandparents. As a result, decades of gardening folklore, myths, stories, and tips have been passed down from generation to generation. We've probably all followed someone's gardening advice at one time or another without knowing if it was based on scientific fact or was just something somebody's grandfather's uncle told them at the Christmas celebration last year. You really shouldn't believe every bit of gardening advice that you hear, even if you heard it from Grandma herself. So as you spruce up your garden this year and prepare to plant your seeds, consider if that bit of advice Grandma told you is simply a myth passed down through the generations or if it is a good practice based on solid science. Here are a few of the more popular myths and whether they are fact or fiction.

MYTH: You can make a weed killer using dish soap, salt, and vinegar.

TRUTH: Sure, you can mix Dawn dish soap, salt and vinegar together and call it a weed killer, and it might kill the top layer of weed growth. But it won't kill the roots of the weeds so they will come right back. And along the way, spraying this concoction around your flowerbed could kill earthworms, ruin the soil structure, damage your lawn, and burn our eyes. **FICTION**

MYTH: Coffee grounds are good for the garden.

TRUTH: Most definitely yes, they are. Used coffee grounds contain a lot of nitrogen as well as potassium and phosphorus. Just sprinkle the grounds on your soil and lightly rake them in. They add organic material to the soil and help with water retention, aeration, and drainage. Acid-loving plants such as azaleas and rhododendrons love coffee grounds. You can also make a liquid plant fertilizer using leftover diluted coffee. Just mix two cups of brewed coffee grounds with five gallons of water in a bucket overnight and put the mixture on your garden the next day. Coffee

grounds also attract worms to your garden and help absorb heavy metals. Coffee grounds are great for your compost bin as well, but limit them to about 20 percent of your compost. FACT

MYTH: Salt is a good weed killer.

TRUTH: Simple answer—yes, it is, provided you use it cautiously. Salt dehydrates plants and causes a disruption in the internal water balance of plant cells. It's best used in small-scale gardening where rain and watering will dilute it. To kill weeds, use a 3:1 ratio of water to salt. Use rock or table salt and increase the amount of salt as needed to kill weeds. FACT

MYTH: Epsom salt is good for plants.

TRUTH: Using Epsom salt in the garden is not a new idea. It's probably the most famous garden myth around. But does it work? It appears to help improve blooming and enhance a plant's green color. It can even help plants get bushier. Epsom salt is composed of hydrated magnesium sulfate (magnesium and sulfur), which is an important nutrient for plant growth. And if the soil becomes magnesium deficit, adding some Epsom salt can help. Since there's not a danger of overuse as there is with commercial fertilizers, it can be used safely on just about everything in your garden. So whether you believe it works or you don't, it can't hurt to give it a try. THE JURY IS STILL OUT

MYTH: Avocado seeds are safe to eat.

TRUTH: This one is not really garden related but interesting, nonetheless. Simply put, eating avocado seeds is currently not recommended. If you must eat them, keep your intake to a minimum to reduce any potential negative side effects. And make sure the seeds are dried, chopped, and blended before you eat them, although, unfortunately, the drying process might significantly reduce their antioxidant content. FICTION

MYTH: If you cut an earthworm in half, you will have two earthworms.

TRUTH: No! It doesn't work that way! You'll have a dead worm and one that starts to repair itself right away. Earthworms are simple organisms and can regenerate after severe damage, but they still need a brain, a circulatory system, and nerves in order to survive. The top half of the worm (with the head) would survive and mend itself, but it would be impossible for the other half to do anything except rot on the ground. It's hard not to injure earthworms when you're digging in your garden, but the least we can do to help out our favorite aerators and composters is to not injure them intentionally. And here's an interesting tidbit. The worms in our gardens today are not native worms. Species brought from other parts of the world are now our worm friends. The worms that inhabited North America thousands of years ago are long gone. Luckily, the new guys work just as well in the garden. FICTION

MYTH: Pennies will repel flies, and compact discs will repel deer.

TRUTH: Many people swear by these ideas, and no one has found any scientific evidence that disproves these theories and that gives them some credit. Fill a zip-top sandwich bag with water and a few pennies and put it in your garden. Supposedly the refracting light from the sun hitting the water and pennies will scare away flies who will think it is some weird predator. For deer, the slowly spinning shiny compact discs will disorient and confuse them and prevent them from snacking on your plants. The neighborhood deer love my veggies so I'm definitely going to find some old cd's and give this one a try! FACT

MYTH: Add pennies to the hole when planting hydrangeas to make them blue.

TRUTH: And here's another garden myth about pennies. Hydrangeas turn blue when the soil is acid and pink when the soil is alkaline. It would take a lot of pennies to lower the pH enough to turn the blooms blue. It's much better to buy a bag of sulfur and spread it around the hydrangea.

FICTION

MYTH: Sitting on the ground on your bare butt will help you determine if it's safe to plant seeds.

TRUTH: So this is one bit of advice that I've never heard before. There's certainly nothing wrong with sitting down in the garden. I love to sit on the ground and weed. However, I like to do it with my pants ON (and my neighbors appreciate this). This myth comes from the fact that the soil needs to be within a certain temperature range for planting seeds without fear the cold ground will kill the roots. Making that determination with your naked butt is interesting but not as accurate as using a soil thermometer. The premise of this myth is that if the ground is warm enough to sit on comfortably without your pants, it would also be warm enough to plant seeds that will successfully germinate. This has some small basis in fact, although one person's definition of comfort is no guarantee that it's safe to plant seeds or plants. Better to use a soil thermometer. THE JURY IS STILL OUT

MYTH: Your plants will grow better if you talk to them.

TRUTH: Prince Charles told an interviewer in 1986 that it was very important to talk to your plants. According to Dr. Rich Marini at Penn State University, the sound of our voices can have a positive effect on plants. Plants react to environmental stressors like wind and vibrations by growing stronger, and our voices are essentially vibrations. Bottom line? The best thing you can do for your plants is provide them with water, sunlight, and nutrients. There's no evidence that the sound of your voice spurs your plants to faster growth. But there's also no evidence that it doesn't, and just being in your garden is relaxing. So go ahead and tell your lima bean plants how beautiful they are and what beautiful beans they are growing. Sing them a happy song. It can't hurt them and it may make your day a little bit brighter and happier. Some gardeners bring out their radio and play classical music for their plants. FACT

MYTH: Putting out beer traps for slugs will end your slug problem.

TRUTH: This one actually kind of mostly works. I've successfully used it. Pour the (cheap) beer in a bowl. The yeast in the beer attracts the slugs, which fall into the bowl. What makes this myth valid is that you have to be quick to remove the trapped slugs and get rid of them another way. A few might drown but most will be able to climb up the sides of the bowl and head back down the road (probably feeling quite happy with a little buzz from the beer). FACT

MYTH: Banana peels are good for your garden.

TRUTH: YES! Bananas contain about 42 percent potassium. Potassium helps move nutrients and water between cells, strengthens plants' stems, and fights disease. Potassium is important in creating flowers and it makes fruits and berries taste better. In short, potassium helps plants that are grown for their fruits and flowers such as roses and fruit trees but plants grown for their foliage like spinach, lettuce, and Swiss chard are not affected by potassium levels. You can also make a banana "tea" by putting banana peels in a jar of water and letting it steep for a couple of

weeks. Pour the resulting “tea” on your plants, and the nutrients go directly to the plant’s roots. Toss the used peels into the compost. FACT

MYTH: Eggshells are good for your garden.

TRUTH: Eggshells are definitely beneficial to your garden. Rinse and crush them and you have a great no-cost fertilizer, and pest and cat deterrent, and they are a great addition to your compost. Adding eggshells to your soil will help prevent blossom end rot by adding calcium to the soil. For maximum effect, sprinkle eggshells into the hole for new plants. Also spreading crushed shells around your garden can help control slugs, cut worms and snails. And for some unknown reason, cats hate stepping on egg shells, so spread them around your garden to prevent Ms. Kitty from using your flower beds as a litter box. FACT

MYTH: Should I use compost tea?

TRUTH: Compost tea can provide huge health benefits to most plants. It has good microbes that overcome the bad microbes that cause disease. If you use compost tea regularly, these good microbes increase. The tea also helps the soil retain water, reduces your use of commercial fertilizers and the resultant salt accumulation, and improves pH to a level that helps plants absorb moisture and nutrients. The best time to apply compost tea is in the morning when the plants are most ready to receive it. FACT

MYTH: Bury rusty nails, pins, and other metal objects near plants to promote growth.

TRUTH: This myth is really not a myth at all. It’s true! The chemical process that produces metallic rust releases tiny bits of iron into the soil, increasing its acidity, which is particularly good for carrots, tomatoes, and garlic. The rusting process itself is great for ericaceous plants such as blueberries and azaleas because it increases the acidity of the soil. However, think about the wisdom of burying small metal objects in the soil and allowing them to rust. This is a definite recipe for injured fingers and a trip to the doctor for a tetanus shot. For safety, use larger items like rebar, which won’t get lost in the soil and surprise you later! FACT

MYTH: Nothing grows near a black walnut tree.

TRUTH: Not true. The roots of a black walnut tree release an allelopathic chemical known as juglone that can inhibit the growth of some plants, and they will wilt, turn yellow, and die. However, there are many plants that grow beneath and around black walnut trees, such as tulips, daffodils, Japanese maple, lilac, foxglove, purple coneflowers, begonias, impatiens, elderberry, Joe Pye weed, bee balm, and serviceberry. Help your plants grow by adding lots of organic material to the soil under the tree. FICTION

MYTH: Paint tree wounds after pruning.

TRUTH: This is an old practice which is no longer considered good for the tree. It serves no purpose and could actually harm the tree and prevent the pruning wound from healing as it should. And there is no evidence that pruning tar prevents disease or insects from entering tree wounds. One exception is if you are pruning a tree that might be threatened by disease-carrying beetles or other bugs that are attracted to the fresh cut, paint can help prevent the spread of disease. If you prune in late winter when diseases and insects are dormant and make clean cuts using sharp tools the chance of damage is minimal. FICTION

MYTH: Irish spring soap keeps flies from your porch and patio and deer from your yard.

TRUTH: Irish Spring soap is known for its strong and invigorating smell. It can be added to your garden as an inexpensive animal repellent because animals hate the strong scent. Slice the soap into half-inch cubes (you'll need many small chunks to spread around the garden.) Drop two pieces of soap into a drawstring pouch and tie the bag shut securely. Put wooden stakes at 5- to 10-foot intervals around the area you want to protect and staple one pouch to each stake. For more discreet protection, lay the pouches on the ground around the vegetation. The amount of soap you'll need depends on the size of your garden and how much the wildlife snacks on your plants and veggies. I've tried this and found that it works fairly well. The biggest problem is that you need a lot of soap and you have to replace the soap after a few rain storms. **FACT**

MYTH: Add sand to loosen clay soil.

TRUTH: Absolutely, positively NO NO NO! Do not ever do this! Adding sand to clay soil and then watering it will turn it into rock-hard adobe, making it even tougher for plants to grow. Instead, add compost to clay soil. Compost will improve the soil structure, creating more pores, improving drainage, and allowing plant roots to work their way through the soil. Compost will also feed the millions of microbes in the soil, helping to drive the soil food web. **FICTION**

MYTH: Grass clippings cause thatch.

TRUTH: Clippings will not cause thatch on your lawn. Thatch is caused by the below-ground lateral growth of rhizomes and the above-ground growth of stolons. Turf-like creeping bent-grass and Kentucky bluegrass produce rhizomes and stolons and cause the most thatch in your yard. Grasses such as rye grass do not have rhizomes or stolons and do not produce large amounts of thatch in your grass. Mulching as you mow the lawn puts back essential nutrients into your grass. **FICTION**

MYTH: Pine needles will make your garden soil ph too acidic.

TRUTH: The easy answer is no. This is another myth that's been out there for a long time. If you want to leave pine needles on the ground where they fall (if you're not in a wildfire-prone area), eventually they will start to break down naturally and the microbes/decomposers in the soil will neutralize them. Pine needles are good mulch that will keep the moisture in, suppress weeds, and eventually add nutrients back to the soil. You can add them to your compost pile and they will slowly break down over time. Don't add more than 10 percent of pine needles to your compost though. And run them through the shredder to break them down faster. **FICTION**

There is so much garden lore and so many home remedies out there that it's impossible to capture them all in one article. Some of the advice is true or partly to mostly true and some of it is just plain hogwash. But all of the myths and advice give us an appreciation for the great history of gardening and remind us that all the tips and legends still hold some value. And proving or disproving them is a way to get us outside and into the garden, which is really the best place on Earth to be, isn't it (besides the beach)?

Jayne Collins, Loudoun County Extension Master Gardener

Eastern Bluebirds' Competition for Nesting and How Nesting Boxes are Helping Even the Playing Field

Prior to 1900, eastern bluebirds were one of our most common and familiar birds, but by 1934 their populations had plummeted due to human activities and the introduction of the European starling and house sparrow.

The bluebird with its gentle demeanor, delightful musical songs, and pleasing colors, are among the most beloved birds in North America. The eastern bluebird, one of three bluebird species in North America, ranges over the entire eastern United States and southern Canada and is native to Loudoun County. If you live near an old farm field, orchard, cemetery, or golf course, you may have a good chance of attracting bluebirds.



Eastern bluebirds are known for the males' plumage of vivid cobalt blue, pale gray throat, and rusty breast. Female eastern bluebirds' duller plumage faintly echoes the males' coloring, though with more subtle hues. Bluebirds used to be a common sighting. However, with human activities and the introduction of non-native species, bluebirds have become rarer.

By the mid 1970's, the eastern bluebird population had been experiencing a decades long decline. In part, this decline can be attributed to fierce competition for nesting cavities. Bluebirds do not nest just anywhere. They need open, grassy space for foraging and prefer to nest nearby in a



habitat with scattered trees rather than backyards with multiple trees. Bluebirds seem to nest earlier than most birds, and they often are looking for nesting holes during the lengthening days and warming sun of February and March. They must rely on other species used nesting cavities, as the eastern bluebird lacks strong bills with which to excavate their own. The bluebird will nest from March through July or August.

However, the nesting cavities preferred by eastern bluebirds, are also sought for nesting by European starlings and house sparrows. Not only do these two non-native species force the bluebirds from their nesting areas, they have been known to kill baby bluebirds and adults sitting on the nest.

In addition to the competition bluebirds face from other birds, decaying trees, once a favorite nesting spot for bluebirds, are becoming harder to find. Human activities have also impacted the eastern bluebird. Often sprayed with pesticides and fertilizers, lawns and manicured green spaces have replaced meadows, the eastern bluebirds preferred habitat. These lawn chemicals, which are highly toxic to nestlings and adults, are often used in lawn maintenance. Native shrubs, which provided berries for the eastern bluebird throughout the winter months, have been replaced by non-native plants with little or no nutrition.

Efforts to restore the eastern bluebird population began in 1978 with the setting up nest box trails. Populations increased significantly since the introduction of bluebird nest box campaigns and nesting trails. Setting up a nest box is a relatively easy project that anyone can complete. By providing the bluebird with an ideal nesting cavity, in its preferred habitat, you can help with the effort to restore the population.

To construct a nesting box for eastern bluebirds, it is important to make the birdhouse with birds in mind. While it may be fun to adorn the nesting box with the colors of your alma mater with paint from the craft store or to utilize a decorative Victorian house made of metal, these would not be proper housing for the birds. The appropriate birdhouse for an eastern bluebird will have the following features, though generally these features are ideal for any birdhouse:

- Be made of either natural wood, at least $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick, ideally red or white cedar which weathers well;
- Pieces joined together with screws, not small nails, staples, or glue;
- Inside dimensions appropriate for the intended species. For eastern bluebirds, the dimensions would be an interior floor size of four by four inches (4x4"), and internal height of 12 inches;
- Dimension of entry hole large enough to admit the targeted species; but small enough to prohibit larger nest competitors and predators. For eastern bluebirds, the dimension of the entry hole would be 1 and one-half inches (1.5").
- Outside surfaces painted or stained to be weather resistant;
- Inside surface natural, not painted or stained;
- Roof slanted to shed rain and snow, with a long enough projection in front to overhang the entry hole;
- Small drainage holes in the corners of the floor and larger ventilation holes at the top of the walls, beneath the roof;
- Recessed floor to help keep water from seeping in the floor seam;
- Be openable, with a front or side hinged panel for conducting nest inspections. Top-opening boxes are harder to check unless you are very tall.

Nesting boxes for bluebirds are most successful if placed in open land with scattered trees and elevated about five to six feet off the ground. The pole should be a baffled metal to prevent predators from easily accessing the boxes. The boxes should not be placed on trees and fenceposts as those locations are easily accessed by predators. Placing boxes at least 25 feet from trees and shrubs will encourage eastern bluebirds to utilize the boxes and discourage other competitors such as the house wren.

Additionally, tree swallows, another native species, have a similar habitat to bluebirds. Because of this, tree swallows often take nesting boxes from bluebirds. To help both species, you can put up another box 25 or so feet away and usually the neighbors get along. Mounting boxes in pairs, 15 to 25 feet apart, can satisfy both species.

Other native species that may attempt to nest in bluebird boxes include tree and violet-green sparrows, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, wrens, and flycatchers. These native species should, under federal law, be left undisturbed.

Nest boxes do require regular maintenance and care. As mentioned previously, nest boxes should be openable, ideally from the front or the side. Because other species compete with eastern bluebirds and utilize nest boxes, it is important to periodically check the boxes. If you see tree swallows, tree and violet-green sparrows, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, wrens, and flycatchers



in your nesting boxes, they can be left alone. However, house sparrows and European starlings should be evicted.

The starling is often too stocky to gain entry to a hole 1 and 9/16 inches or smaller, but the house sparrow cannot be stopped from entering the boxes. House sparrows will throw out the bluebird eggs and young, and sometimes trap and kill adult bluebirds on the nest. Try to never allow house sparrows to use a box. Throw out their nesting material, which includes weed seed heads, feathers, straw, and trash. It is best to avoid putting up boxes near barnyards where animals are fed, for house sparrows are dependent on a steady source of grain.



Nesting boxes are a great way to help the eastern bluebird population recover. If you are unable to create a nesting box for your home, there are grassroots outreach campaigns that you may be able to become involved with or support.

The North American Bluebird Society sponsors the Transcontinental Bluebird Trail, which includes more than 18,000 nesting boxes across North America. With increased media exposure and attention, bluebird boxes began appearing in appropriate habitats all over North America. This has helped in the rebound of their populations. Thousands of miles of blue bird trails have been established across the continent. A bluebird trail is a series of nest boxes placed in ideal bluebird habitat that is maintained and monitored by a trail operator.

Locally, the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy maintains an extensive trail system of monitored bluebird nest boxes. These trails can be found along a highway, around the edge of a golf course, or on the edge of a hayfield. The trail operator collects data to keep seasonal nesting records for each box and each nesting attempt. This data is invaluable in determining eastern bluebird success, population stability, and the effects of predators, weather, food shortages, pesticides, and other issues facing the bluebird. Bluebirds owe much of their current population stability and expansion to the thousands of bluebird trail operators across the continent who have erected and maintained millions of nest boxes specifically for bluebirds.

Trails in Loudoun County are monitored in conjunction with the Virginia Bluebird Society. The Society receives data from Loudoun County each fall so bluebird populations can be tracked regionally and nationally. Public trails are monitored in teams of four, so each person monitors approximately once per month from April through August. Each trail has a team leader who has various responsibilities including creating the monitoring schedule, identifying trail repairs, and compiling data at the end of each season.

If you are interested in constructing a nesting box for eastern bluebirds, the North American Bluebird Society has plans available to the public. These plans are available on their [website](#).

All photographs by [Liz Guertin](#)

Heather Keith, Loudoun County Extension Master Gardener

Floriography The Language of Flowers

For thousands of years humans have assigned meanings and beliefs to plants and flowers. Plants and flowers have been used to mark life events such as births, marriages, and deaths and used in religious and spiritual ceremonies. They've been used for medicinal purposes and, during the 19th century in particular, flowers were paired or grouped to use as a form of communication because outward signs of emotion were frowned upon. With thousands of flowers from which to choose, here are a few that are likely to be discussed during the hot summer months.

Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*)

Associated with divination and fortune telling, the dandelion "puffs" that appear after the flower goes to seed are often blown into the wind as a person makes a wish. Dandelions are edible, and the leaves are frequently used in salads and sautés. If you pick your own, pick the leaves young, and make sure you're not using any chemicals on the yard.

Dandelions can be used to predict the weather. Their puffs will stay closed in inclement weather and will open for clear sunny skies.

Meanings:

- Divination
- Faithfulness
- Healing
- Intelligence
- Clarity
- Survival

Possible Powers:

- Calling Spirits
- Divination
- Oracle
- Purification
- Wishes



https://free-images.com/display/dandelions_flower_dandelion_seeds.html

Folklore: Bury a dandelion seed ball at the northwest corner of your house to bring "desirable winds"

If you blow the seeds off the stem, you will be granted a wish.

Visualize a message to a loved one, then blow on the seed ball in their direction to send the message.

How to grow in Northern Virginia: Dandelions are perennial and grow in full sun. They can be found most especially in places you don't want them.

Magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*)

Magnolia grandiflora is the “Southern magnolia” and is native to the Southeastern United States. Fossils prove that magnolias existed during the time of the dinosaurs and is among the oldest flowering plants in the world. They can grow up to 80 feet tall with a spread of 40 feet, but there are smaller cultivars available. The Magnolia is the state tree of Mississippi.

- Meanings:**
- Beauty
 - Determination
 - Dignity
 - Magnificence
 - Nobility
 - Perseverance

Possible Powers: Fidelity



https://free-images.com/display/southern_magnolia_775528.html

Folklore:

Place *Magnolia splendens* (laurel magnolia) under the bed to ensure faithfulness.

If a magnolia is planted in the back yard, the owner will benefit financially.

Pair with olive branches as a reminder to maintain your dignity in difficult situations.

How to grow in Northern Virginia: Magnolias grow best in moist, well drained, slightly acidic soil, but are able to grow in neutral or slightly alkaline soil. They take up to 15 years to bloom when grown from seed, so if planting, purchase one and plant in a sunny location that is slightly sheltered as frost can damage the blooms.



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Sunflower (*Helianthus*)

Prior to the invasion of Francisco Pizarro in 1532, the Incas decorated their bodies and temples with images of the sunflower, which they believed represented their god, Inti. Incan priestesses, the "Maidens of the Sun" wore large sunflower disks made of virgin gold on their breasts. These disks became the most sought-after plunder of the Spanish conquistadores. Upon their arrival, they saw fields of sunflowers and mistakenly thought they were actual fields of gold. This error led to the flower's association with "false riches".

Sunflower seeds were also sacred to the Plains Indians of the prairie regions of North America. Bowls filled with sunflower seeds would be left at the graves of the dead to sustain them on their dangerous journey to the Happy Hunting Grounds.

The faces of sunflowers follow the sun across the sky during the day.

Meanings:

- Ambition
- Devotion
- False Riches
- Good Luck
- Healing
- Nourishment
- Opportunity
- Power
- Spiritual Attainment
- Strength
- Unhappy Love
- Vitality



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Possible Powers:

- Longevity
- Power
- Wisdom
- Wish Magic

Folklore:

Growing *Helianthus* will bring the gardener very good luck.

If you put a *Helianthus* flower under the bed, you will dream about anything about which you need to know the truth.

If you cut a *Helianthus* stalk at sunset while making a wish, the wish will come true before sunset of the following day.

How to grow in Northern Virginia:

Sunflowers can grow in most types of soil as long as the soil is not waterlogged. Plant about and inch deep about 6 inches apart in full sun. Thin, leaving the strongest plants, about 12" apart. For continuous blooms, stagger the plantings every two to three weeks.

Tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare*) ☠

Tansy is an herbaceous flowering plant native to temperate Europe and Asia. It contains a poisonous chemical called thujone. People have used tansy to treat stomach and intestinal ulcers, gallbladder conditions, nerve pain, joint pain and migraines. No studies have proved these treatments to be effective.

“In the Middle Ages, tansy was used in high doses to induce abortion and treat intestinal worms. Because the plant made people ill, in Victorian times, sending a bouquet of tansy flowers was a way of declaring that the recipient had made the sender sick to their stomach.”¹

Meanings: Courage
Declaration Against You
Declaration of War
Hostility
Immortality
War

Possible Powers: Attraction
Friendship
Healing
Longevity



https://free-images.com/display/tansy_alternative_medicine_common.html

Folklore:

Carry tansy to extend the length of your life

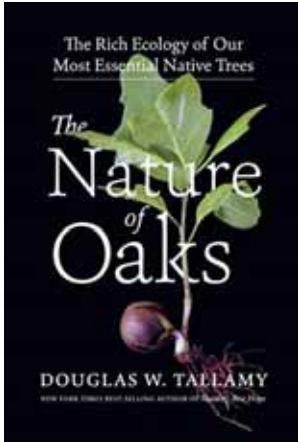
How to grow in Northern Virginia:

Tansy does best in fertile, well drained soil, and can be planted in sun or partial shade. “Tansy is an aggressive reseeder and in some areas it is listed as a noxious weed. Growing tansy is prohibited in Colorado, Minnesota, Montana, Wyoming, and parts of the state of Washington, as well as the Alberta and British Columbia provinces in Canada”^{.2}

Elizabeth Campanella, Loudoun County Extension Master Gardener

1. Roux, Jessica. *Floriography: An Illustrated Guide to the Victorian Language of Flowers*. Kansas City, Missouri, Andrews Mcmeel Publishing, 2020. Page 166
2. <https://www.growveg.com/plants/us-and-canada/how-to-grow-tansy/>

The Nature of Oaks: The Rich Ecology of Our Most Essential Native Trees by Douglas W. Tallamy



For years I have appreciated the shade provided by my neighbor's pin oak trees. Over 30 years old, these trees line our property, and their shade enables us to enjoy our patio on the hottest of afternoons in the summer. What has not endeared me to their existence is the fact that unlike other trees that simply get the shedding over with by the end of November, oaks shed leaves all winter long. After reading Doug Tallamy's latest book, *The Nature of Oaks: The Rich Ecology of Our Most Essential Native Trees*, I have learned that this is known as "marcescence." While there are several theories as to the purpose of marcescence, it remains a mystery that ecologists and botanists have yet to solve. But what is not a mystery is how those leaves support biodiversity, the variety of life in an ecosystem.

As with his previous books, noted entomologist and conservation author Douglas Tallamy, continues to create awareness of the vital role people can play in maintaining biodiversity. Tallamy once again demonstrates how small actions can have long lasting impact on sustaining the diverse web of life, specifically by planting oak trees. Many of us now use native plants in our gardens, knowing that they will thrive in our area of Virginia, and encourage the local ecosystem. Tallamy effectively shows however, that "...even if dozens of native plant genera are present" there still will not be the sheer number and variety of insects "...necessary to sustain viable food webs." An amazing 75% of the insect food necessary for wildlife comes from what Tallamy refers to as "keystone plants": oaks, cherries, willows, maples, and birch trees found throughout the United States. He states: "[t]hese tree genera are keystone plants because they play the same support role that a keystone in a Roman arch plays...take the keystone away and the arch collapses." On that list of trees oaks are "...the top life-support trees in 84% of the counties in North America, which is just about every county in in which they occur."

This is an entertaining read as Tallamy takes us through a year in the life of an oak, going month by month starting in October. He builds his case for planting oaks by sharing entertaining stories of the animals and insects that thrive in and around oak trees. For example, after purchasing a barren ten-acre property in southeastern Pennsylvania that had previously used to grow hay, he and his family cleared the property of invasive brambles and vines. The author was amazed the following spring to see white oak seedling popping up, as there were none on the property or nearby. Setting out to solve this riddle, he discovered that during a single fall season a jay can gather and bury up to 4,500 acorns. Blue jays have evolved an expanded gular pouch that enables them to carry up to five acorns at a time. Once buried the blue jay may forget where they planted the acorns or meet their unfortunate demise, leaving plenty of nutritious acorns for many other bird species and mammals to feast upon.

The book includes helpful sections on how to plant an oak, and the best options for oaks in any area of the United States, and a list of oaks native to North America. Tallamy includes an extensive list of possibilities for the Mid-Atlantic region, divided into large, intermediate, and small size trees. By the end of the book, the reader is ready to charge off to the garden center to purchase a tree.

Tallamy cautions against buying a large transplant (1" caliper or more) that has had its roots pruned and then been wrapped in burlap for delivery to the garden center. Instead, he advocates for "...starting with the youngest tree you can find because you will end up with a far healthier tree that will catch up with and even outstrip in size, any larger specimen in short order."

So now, instead of bemoaning the continually falling leaves, I'll be planting oaks on my side of the fence to support the food web. And I'll be leaving those leaves in place until Spring clean-up!

Jan Lane, Loudoun County Extension Master Gardener



Rounded lobes of white oak leaves Photo: Carol Ivory



Pointed leaf tips of Southern Red Oak Photo: Carol Ivory