



Extension Gardener

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

NORTH CAROLINA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Spring 2011

Empowering
gardeners.
Providing
garden
solutions.

Japanese Maples

It's easy to fall in love with Japanese maples. In the spring and fall, the rich colors of the leaves defy description. In winter, many have bright red stems or interesting branching habits. And in the summer, a tree in full leaf is a sight to behold.

The history of the Japanese maple is as rich as the leaf color. Japan's love affair with maples goes back to the seventh century, when the trees became the subject of poetry and art. Sadly, the lovely little trees became unexpected victims of two world wars due to food and fuel shortages. Imagine seeing your ancestor's collection of old trees burned as firewood! Not surprisingly, many cultivars disappeared by the end of the 1940s. Fortunately, a resurgence of interest occurred in the 1960s, and more than 320 cultivars of *Acer palmatum* have been developed from the original native trees.

Japanese maples provide a wide range of size possibilities, from dwarf to large varieties that reach to around 30 feet tall. These maples prefer a slightly acid soil but are adaptable. They do not have invasive root systems, nor are they guilty of strong root competition. So they are compatible with most plants. They do best in sandy loam with a low to medium amount of organic material and should be mulched with 2 inches of mulch. They initially have a shallow, fibrous root network, so mulch and

uniform watering is needed for several years to get a tree established. Because of this shallow root system, keep grass and weeds outside the drip line to avoid competition for moisture and nutrients.

Most Japanese maples adapt well to containers and can be potted for many years without the necessity of repotting or root pruning.

I have never needed to treat for pest or disease problems. But I keep my eyes open — since Japanese maples can be damaged by insects usually found in the garden, such as aphids and spider mites. The worst enemy of maples is the sun, especially in the NC coastal plain.

Most cultivars do well and produce their best color in full sun, but they all benefit from some shade in the heat of the afternoon. Red cultivars of the *dissectum* (lace leaf) group do need some shade, but the green varieties tolerate sun very well.

And the final good news — if you enjoy wielding sharp instruments, Japanese maples thrive on pruning. You can prune a maple virtually year-round to maintain shape, but save the major work for the dormant season. Remove twiggy growth to reveal each tree's beautiful branch structure, and open-up the interior to prevent insect and disease problems. You *will* be rewarded!

— Cyndi Lauderdale



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Master Gardener Plant Sales

Contact your local Extension office for details.

www.ces.ncsu.edu/counties

March 19

Beekeeping Class

Union County Ag Center, Monroe

- Learn everything you need to know to start keeping honey bees. A \$10 fee includes membership in the Union County beekeeping association.
- Call (704) 283.3801

March 22 (10 AM)

Fruit Tree Pruning Workshop

Mitchell Orchard, 178 Beth Rd, Madison

- Contact Rockingham County Extension Center
- Call (336) 342.8230

March 22 (5:30 PM)

Tips and Strategies for Growing Fruitful Pecans

Rockingham County Extension Center, 525 Hwy 65, Reidsville

- Call (336) 342.8230

April 5 (6 PM)

Post Harvest Handling of Fruits and Vegetables

Rockingham County Extension Center, 525 Hwy 65, Reidsville

- Call (336) 342.8230

April 7 (7 PM); April 9 (10 AM)

Family Food Gardens

Union County Ag Center, Monroe

- Grow and eat local food from your own yard as you and your family learn great ways to grow fruits and vegetables for a bountiful home harvest. Fees apply
- Call (704) 283.3822

April 24 (2 PM)

Growing Mushrooms in the Home Garden

Carver School Rd Library, Winston-Salem

- Learn the basics and see a demonstration of growing Shiitake mushrooms in the landscape.
- Call (336) 703.2852

May 5 (7PM)

Home Composting

Union County Ag Center, Monroe

- Today's kitchen scraps and yard waste can be tomorrow's soil amendment if you apply what you learn in this \$10 class.
- Call (704) 283.3822

Smart Gardening — *No-till garden beds*

Every year, gardeners who want to create new beds in their gardens often haul out the tiller and work the soil into a nice fluffy structure. Other methods can give you good results, however, while saving time and effort in the garden as well. “Lasagna gardens,” mulch beds, and “lazy beds” are just a few of the many common names for garden beds that are not tilled at all.

No-till beds use such common garden waste as leaves and wood chips, which keeps all those materials out of the landfill. With area landfills reaching their capacity, this is no small benefit. It also cuts down on the labor and equipment that municipalities must use to gather and haul away all that material.

Some gardeners think that no-till methods are easier to build than traditional dug beds. What do you find easier—digging by hand, digging with a heavy machine, or moving leaves and wood chips that you probably have to move anyway?

To build a no-till garden bed, decide on

the shape and size, then cover the soil with cardboard or newspaper. Wet that layer down thoroughly. Next, add a thick (6 to 8 inches) layer of organic material. If you can let this bed sit for a bit without planting it, you will give the critters in the soil time to work on it. If you need to plant right away, you can pull back the mulch and plant right in the soil if you like, or create pockets of compost to put your plants or seeds into.

For the first year, the bed will dry out more quickly until more of the mulch materials break down. You will probably need to add more material during the year because the soil organisms will be chowing down on all that great soil food. At the very least, add more mulch layers every year to keep the beds in shape.

No-till gardening is great for the garden and great for the planet. What better way to be a smart gardener!

— Jeff Rieves

Food Production — *Spring fever*

The first warm days of spring trigger the urge to garden in many of us. That is always a good feeling, but Mother Nature wants us to pay attention to what we are doing, so she often throws in a few frosts and freezes after those warm days. How do we handle these early bouts of spring fever while being careful about the weather?

Knowing the average last frost date for your area will certainly help. For the NC piedmont, mid April is considered the average last frost date. Note that is the average of several years' data. Remember the big Easter freeze of a few years ago? That was well after the average last frost date.

Another factor in successful food gardening is knowing how tender your vegetable varieties are. Extension publishes an informative bulletin, Home Vegetable Gardening (available at <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/ag-06.html>),

which provides suggested planting dates for over 40 different vegetables. Vegetables that can tolerate light frost can be planted earlier, while the tender types such as tomatoes and peppers should be planted after all danger of frost has passed.

If you have gardened in an area for several years, you might have noticed cool, frost-prone areas in your yard. You will need to delay planting or make sure that you cover your plants in case of a later frost. You might be fortunate enough to have a garden spot that warms up early, such as a protected area next to your home or a south-facing slope with good air flow. You could possibly plant your first crop there, but you must pay attention to these so-called microclimates.

As the first symptoms of spring fever appear, step outside and enjoy the warmth—but take a moment to observe before you plant.

— Jeff Rieves



Garden Spot — Charlotte Botanical Gardens

The greenhouses, glen, and gardens at UNC Charlotte offer a wonderful opportunity to experience the plant kingdom right inside the Queen City.

Each main area offers something unique. The McMillan Greenhouse Complex exhibits orchids, desert plants, carnivorous plants, and tropical wonders year round. The peaceful setting of the 7-acre Van Landingham Glen lets you wander through or focus on native wildflowers, trees, rhododendrons, and everything else that is in bloom. Moreover, the intimate, artful settings of the 3-acre Susie Harwood Garden include a winter garden, Asian garden, water garden, and a great deal of rockwork throughout.

Outdoor areas of the botanical gardens are open every weekday during daylight, while the greenhouses allow visitors from 10:00 a.m. till 3:00 p.m. Monday through Saturday and from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. on Sundays. Workshops, guided tours, and university courses are available



This Corpse Flower (*Titum arum*) bloomed in 2007 and reached 60 inches tall.

on site. Three plant sales each year offer unique and exquisite specimens.

Gentle touching and smelling is always allowed. That is why 4,000 visitors came to see and smell a rare, putrid, 3-foot tall Titan Arum bloom for a brief time in June of last year. Visit the website or grounds at <http://gardens.unc.edu> to see what plants are on display.

— Mark Blevins

Environmental Stewardship — Constructing a rain garden

Rain gardens can be both beautiful and functional parts of your landscape, providing visual appeal while filtering and slowing storm water impacts.

Once the location and size of the rain garden have been determined, it is time to start digging. It may help to outline the area using string, a flexible garden hose, or spray paint. Dig the garden 4 to 6 inches deep with a slight depression in the center. The dug-out soil will be used to create a berm along the low side of the rain garden, which will allow water to be retained during a storm. To prevent erosion, cover the berm with mulch or grass.

If you have well-drained soil, adding compost to the top layer of the garden will allow plants to establish themselves better and also allow the garden to retain more water. If your soil is compacted, add fine gravel or mulch to

improve infiltration, or consider installing a backyard wetland in areas where water stands for long periods after storms.

Plants in a rain garden must be able to tolerate fluctuating levels of soil wetness. To help plants survive extended wet periods, it may help to plant them high on the edge of the rain garden or on mounds within it to elevate the roots above the water level. Plant lists are available from your local Extension center or online at <http://www.bae.ncsu.edu/topic/raingarden/plants.htm>.

Finally, cover the area with 2 to 3 inches of hardwood mulch. Lighter mulches will tend to float, so avoid pine bark and pine straw mulches. Mulch is important in pollution removal, in maintaining soil moisture, and in preventing erosion.

— Kelly Collins

Tips & Tasks

Winter Chores

- Examine the limb structure of your shade trees. Remove dead, diseased and storm-damaged branches.
- Chickweed and other broadleaf weeds are continuing to grow and mature. A liquid broadleaf herbicide can be used if the daytime temperature is warm enough. Consult the pesticide label on the product before applying.
- Some plants that should be pruned in late winter or early spring are hydrangea, butterfly bush, Rose-of-Sharon, hibiscus, and other summer-flowering shrubs that flower on new growth.
- Check all five growing factors if your house plants are not growing well: light, temperature, nutrients, moisture, and humidity. Plant growth can be retarded if a plant lacks any of these factors or experiences an excess of the factors.
- Do not overly mulch newly planted trees and shrubs. Two to three inches of mulch is best. Use either organic mulches (shredded or chunk pine bark, pine straw, composts) or inorganic mulches (volcanic and river rocks).
- The usefulness of a garden tool can be obtained only by keeping it clean and sharp. Learn the techniques of sharpening each tool, and practice them frequently. Professional gardeners sharpen their tools at least daily. Clean your tools after each use, and oil the blades.

—Scott Ewers



Showstopper — ‘Greensleeves’ dogwood

The Kousa dogwood is a handsome small- to medium-sized tree reaching a mature height of 30 feet. Sometimes referred to as the Chinese dogwood, it is an Asian cousin of our native flowering dogwood.

Our native dogwoods flower in April, while the Kousa dogwoods bloom nearly a month later, in May. The Kousa dogwood has attractive peeling bark on mature tree trunks and produces berries in autumn that resemble raspberries.

A great addition to any Carolina landscape, Kousas can be grown in full sun or partial shade. The soil should be well drained but moist. There are several named selections in the nursery trade, such as ‘Greensleeves’, ‘Satomi’, and ‘Blue Shadow’. All are hardy in zones 5 to 8. Don’t let this opportunity to transplant a real showstopper pass you by.

– John Vining

Edibles — Blueberries

Blueberries are not only delicious and nutritious – they are also easy to grow in most North Carolina yards. To grow well, blueberry bushes need acid, well-drained soil, and sun at least half of the day. Before planting, test your soil pH by submitting samples to your local Cooperative Extension center. If your soil pH is lower than 4.5 or higher than 5.5, an Extension agent will recommend ways to adjust it. Improve growing conditions by mixing composted organic matter into the soil at least 6 inches deep. In clay or heavy soils, plant bushes on a mound to improve drainage. Make sure to plant varieties suited to your area by checking with your local Extension center for recommendations. Homeowners in the NC coastal plain and piedmont should plant rabbiteye varieties such as ‘Columbus’ and ‘Climax’, while mountain gardeners can grow highbush varieties such as ‘Blueray’ and ‘Jersey’.

– Charlotte Glen

Pest Alert — Brown marmorated stink bug

Since last autumn, the brown marmorated stink bug (*Halyomorpha halys*) has been invading homes and other buildings throughout the state. The stink bug feeds on a variety of hosts in the landscape, including—but not limited to—*Buddleia* sp., pawlonia, hibiscus, zinnia, and sunflower. Both commercial and ornamental fruit trees, such as apples and peaches, can also serve as host plants. Stink bugs inflict leaf and fruit damage primarily from feeding with needlelike mouth parts.

The biggest problem for homeowners is the bugs’ overwintering behavior of collecting inside structures and homes when seeking shelter, much like the multicolored Asian lady beetle.

They do not harm people, but they can emit an unpleasant odor when crushed or vacuumed. Appearance in homes usually begins about late September or early October.

The *North Carolina Agricultural Chemicals Manual* suggests either malathion or permethrin as a control agent for ornamentals and vegetables. For homes, sealing and caulking all entry spaces usually keeps stink bugs at bay. If they are found inside, hand removal and vacuuming are the best options. A piece of ladies’ hosiery over the vacuum’s nozzle allows for easy disposal of the insects and keeps the odor from lingering in the vacuum canister.

— Will Strader



Brown marmorated stink bug
Halyomorpha halys

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Sustainability

Western Carolina Community College

What does *sustainable* mean? Something is sustainable when it meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Western Piedmont Community College, located in Morganton, NC, is now offering an associate’s degree in applied science in its new Sustainable Agriculture program. The two-year program is designed to teach students how to produce their own fruits, vegetables, livestock, and poultry in a way that will generate income and, at the same time, be safe for the environment. Although the program is young, interest has been high. Classes have already built a 3-acre homestead where students can learn how to use alternative techniques when growing their crops. For more information about this program, call program chair Chip Hope at 828.448.3554.

– Donna Teasley