



# Extension Gardener

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

NORTH CAROLINA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

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Empowering gardeners. Providing garden solutions.

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## Beautiful food gardens

If your backyard is too shady to grow your own food, but you're concerned that a vegetable garden in the front yard would be messy and unattractive, take heart. With proper planning and effort, you can grow seasonal vegetables that will enhance the entrance to your home—and your dinner plate. Keep in mind three key components: edging, evergreens, and upkeep.



Jeana Myers

First, pay attention to bed edges and keep them clean. Defined bed edges make the garden appear more managed and contained. You can create a clean garden edge with a heavy layer of mulch at the lawn line or by using stone, brick, or wood. Once the edge is defined, a regular run-through with a weed eater will keep that neat appearance.

Another way to define the edges is to garden in raised beds constructed of wood or stone that complement your home in color or form. Blend raised beds into the landscape by planting perennials or small shrubs on the side facing the street. Vegetables can also be grown in attractive pots, but remember that bigger is better for growing vegetables, and containers will likely need daily watering.

Evergreens are the second component to an attractive edible landscape. Because vegetables grow to maturity quickly, die, and are then replaced, there will be times when beds are empty or

plants are past their peak. Having evergreen plants and shrubs in place around the garden will hold the structure through the growing season. Rosemary and bay laurel are excellent evergreens for this purpose—and both are edible, too! Adding perennial flowers will tie the whole image together, especially when color, plant height, and flowering time coordinate beautifully with the vegetables.

The final important component of successful front yard gardens is upkeep. Because the vegetables are visible to you and your neighbors, keep dead leaves picked, old plants pulled, and gangly plants staked. A two-inch layer of mulch will keep weeds at bay and reduce your labor. If you grow vining vegetables or tall tomatoes, choose trellises that are sturdy and match the style of your home.

With neat garden edges, supporting evergreen structures, and regular upkeep, you can grow a beautiful food garden in the most public part of your landscape. Share the bounty with your neighbors and it won't be long before they have fresh vegetables gracing their entrances too!

— Jeana Myers



Jeana Myers

## Extension Showcase

## Gaston County Master Gardeners Plant Sale

Each year the Master Gardener Group of Gaston County (MGGGC) holds a large plant sale. Proceeds are used to fund gardening educational programs in the community.

Everyone gets involved in this grand collaboration. Early in the year, the vice president of the group begins canvassing the county's nurseries, greenhouses, and farm centers for donations of plants and garden items. Members of the group simultaneously divide and conquer their own lovely landscapes for donations. Behind the scenes, a member takes down old blinds and cuts them into "labels," while another member gathers empty containers from last year's purchases.

The Friday before the sale, volunteers descend on the conference rooms of the Citizens Resource Center, transforming it into the most organized, luscious plant haven you can imagine. Trees, shrubs, and flowers of all kinds are arranged in preparation for the doors to open at 7:00 a.m. the next morning.

Supporters of the sale are recognized and rewarded with invitations to the scrumptious November luncheon. Attendance at this feast almost ensures a donation the following year!

Mark your calendar now to take advantage of high-quality, low-price plants. Always held on the first Saturday in May, the sale falls on May 4 this year.

— Julie Flowers

## Smart Gardening — Designing a vegetable garden

No matter how large or small the space, the principles of laying out a vegetable garden are the same. Once you have chosen what you want to grow from all those awesome seed catalogs that fill your mailbox during winter months, you are ready to design your garden. If this is your first garden don't start too big—you can always expand later.

Consider what kind of equipment you have and how much time you will spend in the garden. Will you use a rototiller or work by hand? If you have a tiller, consider starting with a 25 ft. by 25 ft. space. If working by hand, raised beds are a great way to begin gardening; 4 ft. by 8 ft is a common size. Once you have decided on the size of the garden, calculate its area in square feet. This will help you determine lime and fertilizer rates and figure how many seeds and plants you need.

You now need to consider your garden's location. First, look at sunlight. A productive garden needs six to eight hours of sunlight as well as easy access to water and the house. A

garden out of sight is out of mind. Next, design your garden on paper. Sketching out where things will go helps you decide what to plant where and provides a record for future years. Orient your garden so rows run north to south for optimum sun exposure. Plant taller crops on the north side of the garden to avoid shading shorter plants.

Plan what you will plant for an early spring crop, summer crop, and fall crop. It is possible to get production from your garden eight to ten months out of the year with careful planning. A recent article from Oregon State University claimed the average amount of money saved by first-year vegetable gardeners ranged from \$148 to \$518 depending on the size of the garden. And the amount of money saved increases in production years two, three, and beyond. To learn more, download the Extension publication *Home Vegetable Gardening* from <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/ag-06.html> or contact your local Extension office.

— Elizabeth Ayers

## Food Production — Thyme

Do you have thyme? Thyme is a wonderful perennial herb to plant in your vegetable garden, use in containers and window boxes, or grow as a groundcover.

Thyme is adaptable to temperature, soil pH, and rainfall amounts and can be grown all across North Carolina. Propagate thyme by seed or by division. In the garden, space young plants or divisions 1½ feet apart. Growth is slow in the beginning, but be patient. It is worth the wait.

Thyme requires minimal care. Like many perennial herbs, thyme grows best in well-drained soil and full sun. You can select from more than 400 *Thymus* species. A few to consider for your garden include creeping thyme, lemon thyme, nutmeg thyme, silver thyme, and woolly thyme (pictured).

The flowers of all species of thyme attract bees and pollinators. Creeping thyme produces

rose-colored blooms and forms a dense, dark-green mat that makes a perfect groundcover. Lemon thyme will develop into a small bush 4–12 inches tall and is excellent to use in cooking and teas. Nutmeg thyme only reaches 4 inches in height, but it is a fast creeper and has a spicy scent. Silver thyme grows to 10 inches tall with white-edged leaves and can be used in hanging baskets or as a single plant. Woolly thyme reaches 2 inches in height with soft, hairy leaves that are wonderful to touch and are perfect as a groundcover.

For culinary use, start with common thyme, *Thymus vulgaris*. The harvested leaves are wonderful in teas, sachets, and potpourris and can be used to flavor poultry, fish, stews, soups, tomatoes, cheese, eggs, and rice.

— Jan McGuinn



## Pest Alert — *Eastern tent caterpillars*

As the weather warms up over the next couple of months, insects will become active again. Most of these bugs will go unnoticed, but a few will become obvious. One of the most noticeable insect pests we see in the spring is the eastern tent caterpillar.

The most visible indicator of tent caterpillar infestation is the tent-like webbing produced by newly hatched larvae. These tents are formed in tree crotches, where the caterpillars spend most of their time. At certain times during the day and night, the caterpillars will venture out from the tent and feed.

Although the webbing itself may be unsightly, the caterpillars rarely cause damage to large trees. Of greater concern are small or young trees, which can be completely defoliated. Although the trees will put out new growth after the caterpillars are gone, repeated defoliation may eventually weaken the tree.

Removing and destroying the tent when the caterpillars have returned from

feeding can eliminate an infestation. Do not burn the tents while they are still in the tree, as this can cause significant damage to the tree.

A number of insecticide options are available for tent caterpillar control, including organic sprays containing *Bt*, spinosad, or pyrethrin. The key for controlling caterpillars with insecticides is to treat when the caterpillars are young. The older the caterpillar, the less effective the pesticide application will be.

— *Bill Hanlin*



## Carolina Lawns — *Spring lawn care*

As spring approaches, many homeowners begin to think about lawn care. Most lawns in the mountains of North Carolina are tall fescue or a fescue/bluegrass mix. These cool-season grasses grow primarily during the spring and fall and generally do not do well during hot, dry weather.

Tall fescue is a fast-growing turfgrass, so make sure you are mowing every five to seven days as the spring progresses. Mow at a height of 2.5–3.5 inches, being careful to remove no more than 1/3 of the grass height in one cutting. While tempting to remove clippings, it is best for the health of the lawn to leave the clippings where they lie. Clippings can provide as much as 25 percent of a lawn's fertilizer needs.

Resist the urge to fertilize your cool-season turfgrass at this time of year. Fertilizing after March 15 encourages new vegetative growth during the time when turfgrass is transitioning

into the stressful summer season, and this practice is NOT recommended.

Water is vital to your lawn. Most cool-season turfgrass varieties and mixes require about 1 inch of water per week. In clay soils, water only until runoff is detected, allow water to absorb, and then water again until the desired 1-inch level is reached. To avoid any extra problems, irrigate in the early morning before 8 a.m. or 9 a.m.

Spring is a good time to apply pre-emergent herbicides to help control crabgrass, goosegrass, and foxtail. It is also the right time to check for white grub activity just under the soil surface. For pesticide recommendations, contact your local Cooperative Extension office or check out NC State's TurfFiles website at <http://www.turf-files.ncsu.edu/Default.aspx>.

— *Kerrie Roach*

# Tips & Tasks

## Lawns

- Fertilize cool-season lawns like tall fescue before mid-March.
- Apply crabgrass preventer before weed seeds germinate.
- Get the mower ready by sharpening blades and changing the oil and air filter.

## Ornamentals

- Prune summer-blooming plants like abelia and crape myrtle before they leaf out.
- Prune spring-flowering shrubs like forsythia and spirea as soon as possible after they finish blooming.
- Prune roses when buds swell but before they break.
- Plant zinnias, dahlias, and sunflowers to use as cut flowers after danger of frost has passed.
- Transplant perennials you didn't have time to move in the fall.

## Edibles

- Order seeds for the vegetable garden.
- Start seeds of warm-season vegetables, such as tomatoes and peppers, indoors for transplanting in spring.
- Clean up the vegetable garden and draw a garden map for this season.
- Plant asparagus crowns when ground can be worked.
- Divide such herbs as chives, mint, and thyme when new growth emerges.
- Apply a dormant oil spray on fruit trees before they leaf out to smother overwintering insects.
- Prune fruit trees and grape vines to improve production.
- If not done in fall, prune raspberries and blackberries by removing dead canes.

— *Amanda Taylor*



J.C. Raulston Arboretum

## Helping You Grow

### Extension Master Gardener Conference

Everyone is invited to attend the 2013 North Carolina Extension Master Gardener Conference, taking place June 6-8 at the Union County Agricultural Services Center near Monroe.

Gardeners from across the state will come together to learn how to “Master the Garden Harvest” through workshops taught by nationally known speakers including Tony Avent from Plant Delights Nursery, Peter Hatch of Monticello, and chef and restaurateur Jim Noble.

For more information on this event, please visit [mastergardenersunioncountync.org](http://mastergardenersunioncountync.org) or email us at: [ucmgwebsite@gmail.com](mailto:ucmgwebsite@gmail.com)

— Donna Teasley

### Showstopper — ‘Aztec Fire’ anise

‘Aztec Fire’ anise (*Illicium mexicanum*) is a large-leaved evergreen shrub with handsome dark-green foliage. In addition to attractive foliage, ‘Aztec Fire’ anise produces showy burgundy spring flowers, often blooming intermittently throughout the summer and fall as well.

‘Aztec Fire’ grows best in partial shade, but give this Mexican native plenty of room. Typically this anise will reach a height of eight feet and a width of six feet, with a naturally pyramidal growth habit.

An evergreen beauty, ‘Aztec Fire’ mixes well with other shade-loving shrubs and perennials. Plants also fit nicely in naturalized landscapes. Anise shrubs grown in full sun will develop lighter green foliage than those grown in partial shade. Consider this winner for your home landscape. Hardiness zones: 7 to 9.

— John Vining

### Edibles — Mesclun

Mesclun is the perfect plant to kick start the spring vegetable garden. A mix of salad greens, mesclun packs a lot of variety in one planting. Mesclun mixes include greens such as leaf lettuces, spinach, mustard, kale, arugula, radicchio, and endive.

When purchasing mesclun seed, gardeners can choose between spicy mixes and those with milder tastes. Mesclun can be sown in early spring and again in late summer. Grow mesclun as you do loose-leaf lettuce, sowing seed in a well-prepared seedbed in the garden or in a container.

Mesclun grows and tastes best under moist, well-drained conditions, so water carefully to prevent water stress. Begin harvesting with scissors when young leaves reach 2 inches tall. Cut above the growing point so the crop will continue to grow and can be harvested multiple times. Sow successive plantings every 10 to 14 days to ensure a steady supply of tender greens.

— Lisa Rayburn

### Sustainability — Organic insecticides

Recently, the number of natural insect-control products available from garden centers has increased. These products, derived from plants, microorganisms, and other naturally occurring materials, can control insect pests when applied properly. Simply substituting natural products for synthetic pesticides rarely produces good results.

One of the biggest differences between natural and synthetic pesticides is how long they last after application. Generally, natural pesticides break down very quickly once applied, sometimes in less than a day. Thus,

they have to be applied more often and should be sprayed only when a pest problem has been properly identified.

Most natural pesticides are less potent than their synthetic counterparts and work best as part of an integrated plant health system. This includes improving the soil to provide good growing conditions for plants, choosing plants adapted to your site, applying water and nutrients when needed to prevent plant stress, and encouraging beneficial insects by planting a diversity of plants and flowers.

Natural insecticides that are available from most garden centers include insecticidal soaps and horticultural oils. Both control a wide range of pests but to be effective, oils and soaps must be applied directly to and thoroughly cover insect pests. Bt, a bacteria, is used to control caterpillars, while spinosad will control caterpillars, fire ants, and Colorado potato beetle. Neem oil and pyrethrins will control many common pests, but like all insecticides, work best when applied while pest populations are low.

— Charlotte Glen