

THE GARDEN PATH

MARCH 2013

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PLANT OF THE MONTH FOR MARCH

By Marty Finkel, Extension Master Gardener

Two variegated leaved irises, *Iris pallida* 'Argentea Variegata' and *Iris japonica* 'Variegata'



Iris japonica 'Variegata' in January 2013 with 'Crimson Pygmy' Loropetalum (M.Finkel photo)

The reason these plants were chosen as plant of the month is that as long as they have been in my garden in Oxford, the leaves have remained a joy in all seasons as they brighten any area they inhabit.

There are two variegated cultivars of *Iris pallida* that are fairly hard to differentiate but both have lovely gray-green and white foliage with typical, rather nondescript bearded, fragrant, lavender iris flowers. The striking foliage is nearly evergreen in mild winters, with *I. pallida* 'Argentea-variegata' having flattened leaves of silvery white and green stripes. *I. pallida* 'Variegata', also known as Zebra iris, is a very old garden plant and is as popular as ever with its showy white and cream streaking on blue-green leaves. They bloom in summer and get about 24-36" tall by about 24" wide. Of course, as with all iris, the clump gets wider as the rhizomes multiply. One or both of these cultivars occasionally can be found at local box stores and/or garden centers.

The other variegated-leaved iris in my garden with just as beautiful leaves is *Iris japonica* 'Variegata', and it is difficult to find. It does well in morning sun and also likes part shade to shade, blooms in the spring with 2-inch wide orchid-like



lavender-blue flowers, and spreads by thin, creeping rhizomes just below the mulch. Its 10-12" tall leaves make a striking blue-green and white variegated groundcover, and it is this feature that keeps it in my garden. My plant was purchased at a Paul J. Ceiner Botanical Garden in Kernersville, NC. I have not seen it at local retail box stores or garden centers but that doesn't mean it can't be found at those sources.

GARDEN TO DO –MARCH

By Carl Shafer, Extension Master Gardener

For March: Finish pruning fruit trees. (1)

Start your fruit spray schedule before bloom. Do not spray during bloom – save the bees! See the NC Chemical Manual and Fruit disease Fact Sheets, *Disease and Insect Management in the Home Orchard* for spray schedules. For a small number of trees it is easier to use a Home Orchard Mix which contains an insecticide, a fungicide and a miticide. Follow the label instructions. (1)

Continue to plant cool season vegetables. In addition to *Central North Carolina Planting Calendar* see *Planting and Harvesting Guide for Piedmont Vegetables and Herbs* (<http://growingsmallfarms.ces.ncsu.edu/growingsmallfarms-plantingguide/>) for planting dates. The last guide gives expected harvesting dates and times when season extension steps will be needed. This guide also has *Crop Notes* at the end and in the *How to Use This Guide* section a *Vegetable Variety List* which gives some recommended varieties, plus other useful links. Also see *Home Vegetable Gardening* AG-06 for recommended varieties, but note that these rather dated. (1) Also consider recent All-America selections. You can find complete lists of the selections at their web site (www.all-americanselections.org).

Set out broccoli, cabbage and cauliflower plants about mid month or when you can get them. (1)

For interesting salads, try a Mesclun mix. Sow a short wide row every week or so and shear off when

they reach about 3 inches tall. It should regrow so that you can get several cuttings.

The last frost date is late April, so wait to put warm season crops in the garden.

For April.

Maintain your spray program for apples, nectarines, peaches, and plums. Follow label instructions and observe waiting times before harvest. See above.

Apples, nectarines, peaches, and pears need to be thinned to produce the best crop of full sized fruit. Fruit should be thinned by the time they are nickel size so that they are spaced 4 to 8 inches apart along the branch.

If you have blueberries, cherries, or strawberries, have bird netting ready unless you want to share your crop. If you are thinking of starting or expanding small fruit plantings, it is getting late for bare root plants, but local retailers have many contain grown plants. Before buying, check that varieties are appropriate for this area. Everbearing and day neutral strawberries are not recommended for this area because of the summer heat.

Avoid working in your garden when the soil is wet. A late planting of cool season vegetables can be tried this month. As long as we do not have an early hot spell, you will get a late harvest. Try to provide partial afternoon shade by planting on the east side of tall plants or by using shade cloth on hoops or other frames.

If possible avoid planting related vegetables in the same location more often than once every three years. This will help prevent the buildup of insect and disease problems.

“Warm weather” vegetables (Green beans, sweet corn, cucumbers, melons, squash, and tomatoes) can be planted after the average last frost date in late April. Wait until May for “Hot weather” vegetables (Lima beans, eggplant, okra, southern peas, peppers, and sweet potatoes). See *Home Vegetable Gardening* AG-06 for fertilizing and pest control recommendations. If you just cannot wait, make only a small planting and have frost protection handy. See the Feb. issue for the average last frost date and last “freeze” date. The average high

temperature in our area goes from about 56° F March 1st to 67° F April 1st to 75° F May 1st. The corresponding low temperature goes from about 29° F March 1st to 37° F April 1st to 46° F May 1st. To get the range in which 2 out of 3 years are expected to fall; for high temperatures, add and subtract 11° F for March and April and 9° F for May, for low temperatures use 9° F for all three months.

(1) See Feb. 12, *The Garden Path*, Fruits & Veggies for web links that are not listed here.

CHECKLIST FOR MARCH

By Mary Jane Bosworth, Ext. Master Gardener

Where flowers bloom, so does hope.
Lady Bird Johnson

- ✓ Fertilize fescue lawns by mid-month.
- ✓ Crabgrass preventers should be applied to lawns while forsythia is in bloom.
- ✓ After early blossoming shrubs have flowered, cut 1/3 of the oldest canes to the ground.
- ✓ Fertilize fig trees when buds swell.
- ✓ Apply slow acting fertilizers to shrubs, trees and evergreens.
- ✓ Set out transplants of herbs.
- ✓ Trim ornamental grasses close to the ground before new growth starts.
- ✓ Prepare soil for plantings.
- ✓ Water new planting if the weather is dry.
- ✓ Deadhead spring-flowering bulbs to prevent seed formation. Leave the foliage until it is dry.
- ✓ Protect tender plants from possible late frosts.
- ✓ Trim beautyberry and butterfly bushes to keep them compact.
- ✓ Divide established perennials. Share them with friends.
- ✓ Repot houseplants. Scrub pots with a mild disinfectant solution and repot with commercial potting mix.

INTERESTING TID-BITS FOR MARCH

By Marty Finkel, Extension Master Gardener

An ideal shrub? Try the native inkberry holly, also known as gallberry, if you are looking for deer and rabbit resistance, glossy evergreen leaves, spring flowers for bees and other pollinators, food for birds

during the summer and into early winter, and insect and disease resistance. The native tall species, *Ilex coriacea*, can get to 15' while *I. glabra* gets about half that height. In addition, several outstanding cultivars can be found in the nursery trade, such as 'Shamrock' and 'Compacta'. Both these are sturdy and attractive and are slower-growing and denser forms than the species. They grow in full sun to light shade and prefer moist sites. (Adapted from an article by Patricia R. Drackett, Director of the Crosby Arboretum, Mississippi State University Extension Service)

The way Kristin Green, Interpretive Horticulturist at Blithewood Mansion, Gardens, and Arboretum in Bristol, R.I. grows roses without using pesticides and fungicides is to grow disease resistant varieties such as *Rosa* 'Champlain', 'Panda Meidiland', 'Livin'Easy' and 'Lady Elsie May' in nutrient-rich compost with applications 3 times during the growing season of an organic slow-release fertilizer. In addition, to reduce stress, the roses are given about an inch of water a week during droughts. The roses are grown in a mixed garden rather than a monoculture, which probably helps. Planted in the 80-rose garden are alliums and other bulbs, annuals and tender perennials, perennials, and shrubs. The garden is full of color, health, and pollinators during and between the roses' peak bloom times. (Adapted from an article by Kristin Green: both articles are in the Jan/Feb 2013 issue of Horticulture magazine.)

Purple crossed with green equals green – asparagus, that is. The purple asparagus variety 'Purple Passion' is being used in crosses with green asparagus by plant breeders at Rutgers University to improve the earliness and tenderness of green varieties. 'Purple Passion', from northern Italy, is up to two weeks earlier than 'Mary' or 'Martha Washington' asparagus, and has more tender spears. After the 3rd season, 'Purple Passion' has a tendency to produce many spears up to 1½" in diameter, and they are reported to have a crisp, nutty flavor when eaten uncooked. What a way to liven up salads!

If you have had trouble with mildew (the grey coating on the leaves that turns the plants brown) on the large-flowered zinnias, try 'Benary's Giant Series' double-flowered zinnias. They start flowering within 75 days from seed and continue summer to frost with clean foliage and blooms, get about 40" tall, and the flowers are up to 6" across.

This series is recommended by the Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers. (These last two paragraphs have been adapted from the August 2012 issue of the *Avant Gardener*)

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