“No occupation is so delightful to me as the culture of the earth, and no culture comparable to that of the garden. But though an old man, I am but a young gardener.”

- Thomas Jefferson

Starting Transplants

If you are planning to grow transplants for your vegetable or flower garden, it is about time to start gathering supplies. Many types of containers can be recycled into pots or flats as long as they allow for good drainage. Start seeds in small containers or flats so the soil does not stay too wet. The most common problem encountered when growing seedlings is ending up with weak, spindly plants. The most common causes for this are inadequate light, too much water and warm temperatures. If you can not give the plants 8 or more hours of direct sunlight, supplement with standard cool white florescent bulbs held 3 to 6 inches above the plants. Set them up on a timer to burn 16 hours a day.

If possible, keep temperatures in the 70’s during the day and 55 to 60 at night. And do not over-water. Allow the soil to barely dry, then water in the morning so soil is not too wet during the night.

Normal March Weather

Weather Averages (1895 – 2007)
For Central and Southern Mountains

Courtesy of the National Climatic Data Center,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Normal March Average High</th>
<th>45.9°F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normal March Average Low</td>
<td>25.8°F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal March Precipitation</td>
<td>4.06&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hours of Daylight for Asheville, NC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sunrise</th>
<th>Sunset</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 1</td>
<td>7:01 am</td>
<td>6:25 pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 28</td>
<td>6:19 am</td>
<td>6:51 pm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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- Coming

North Carolina State University and North Carolina A&T State University commit themselves to positive action to secure equal opportunity regardless of race, color, creed, national origin, religion, sex, age, or disability. In addition, the two Universities welcome all persons without regard to sexual orientation. North Carolina State University, North Carolina A&T State University U.S. Department of Agriculture, and local governments cooperating.
CHORES FOR MARCH

LAWNS

• It will soon be time to crank up the lawn mower. Did you get the blade sharpened?
• If you have not yet gotten around to the spring fertilizer application, you’re almost out of time. Products containing slow release nitrogen should be put out no later than the first week of March. Quick-release products such as 10-10-10 can be applied through the end of the month.
• If crabgrass has been a problem, mid-March is a good time to spread “crabgrass preventer” for best results.
• It can be difficult to time applications of “weed and feed” products for good results. Early March would be only slightly early for the weed prevention and a little later than desired for the slow release nitrogen.

ORNAMENTALS

• Summer blooming shrubs and trees such as butterfly bush, rose-of-Sharon and crape myrtle can be pruned now.
• Do not prune spring blooming plants until after the flowers fade.
• March is a good time to do severe pruning when overgrown shrubs need to be renovated.
• When the weather breaks, plant trees, shrubs, perennials.
• Repot and trim up house plants. Rejuvenate hanging baskets and use cuttings to start new baskets.
• Sow seeds for larkspur, poppies and snapdragons.
• Check house plants for insect infestations. Plants can be taken outside on a warm day for spraying, but bring them in before dark.

FRUITS

• Remove straw or row covers from strawberry plants as soon as flowers appear.
• Plant all types of fruit crops.
• Prune fruit trees, grapes and brambles.
• The Extension office has video tapes on pruning grapes, blueberries and fruit trees that are available for loan.
• Fertilize all fruit crops.

VEGETABLES

• Plant English and edible-pod peas, onions, and kale.
• Wait until late March to set out potatoes and plants of cabbage, broccoli and cauliflower.
• Start transplants indoors for tomatoes, peppers and eggplants mid-month. They will need 6 to 8 weeks to be ready for the garden.

OTHER

• Bluebirds started scouting nest boxes last month. Clean old boxes and mount new ones ASAP
• If the soil is too wet to get into the garden, use the nice days to clean and repair garden tools.

Recommendations for the use of chemicals are included in this publication as a convenience to the reader. The use of brand names and any mention or listing of commercial products or services in this publication does not imply endorsement by the North Carolina Cooperative Extension nor discrimination against similar products or services not mentioned. Individuals who use chemicals are responsible for ensuring that the intended use complies with current regulations and conforms to the product label. Be sure to obtain current information about usage and examine a current product label before applying any chemical. For assistance, contact an agent of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension.
SPOTLIGHT: RHUBARB

When the strawberries begin to ripen in May, some of you will be lusting for that old fashioned dessert, strawberry and rhubarb pie. If you plan ahead and plant now, you can be eating pie a little over a year from now.

Rhubarb is a perennial plant that originated in the colder parts of Asia. It is well adapted to cold winters and dry summers and grows quite happily in our area. Like asparagus, rhubarb is planted as crowns, or divisions. Unless you have a friend with a rhubarb bed that is in need of dividing, you will probably order crowns from a mail order catalog. March is an excellent time to plant rhubarb in western North Carolina, though it can also be planted in the fall.

Plant rhubarb in well drained fertile soil, in full sun to partial shade. In heavy clay a raised bed is a good idea. Incorporate enough lime to adjust soil to a pH of 5.5 to 6.5, or about 5 pounds for a 100 square foot bed if soil has not been tested, and has not been limed in several years. Work in plenty of organic matter such as composted leaves, pine bark soil conditioner and manure. Flower stalks can be removed to allow more energy to go into the crown.

Plant rhubarb crowns 3 feet apart and cover the crowns with 3 inches of soil. Rhubarb requires lots of fertilizer. Before new growth begins in the spring, apply composted manure or a complete fertilizer such as 10-10-10.

Do not harvest during the first growing season, and only pull a few stems the second spring. Once the plants are well established stems may be harvested for about 6 weeks in the spring. Rhubarb is easy to harvest by pulling the stems sharply to the side to detach them from the crown.

Always cut the leaf blade from the stem and discard it. Only the petiole, or leaf stem, should be eaten. The leaf blade contains high amounts of oxalic acid, which can be poisonous!

PERENNIAL PLANT OF THE YEAR: Nepeta ‘Walker’s Low’

The Perennial Plant Association has awarded the title of Perennial Plant of the Year to Nepeta ‘Walker’s Low’. Introduced in 1988 in Europe, Walker’s Low catmint has become increasingly popular with each passing year due to its lovely blue-violet flowers and its long bloom time, attractive grey-green foliage, ease of propagation, lack of pest or disease problems, and low maintenance requirements.

Nepeta is hardy to USDA Hardiness Zone 3. It grows 36 inches tall and wide. It will flower best and have dense form in full sun. ‘Walker’s Low reportedly blooms all summer if you keep cutting off the dead flowers. It will attract honey bees as well as butterflies. Leaves are fragrant when crushed.

ALMANAC GARDENER

The popular Almanac Gardener program returns to UNC-TV for the 24th season on April 7 at 12 noon. The program will air weekly through August 18.

GARDEN ALMANACS

Our Gardeners’ Almanac has been revised and is once again available at the Buncombe County Cooperative Extension Center. This “Guide to Environmentally Friendly Gardening in Buncombe County” provides lists of garden chores for each month, and a garden lesson each month as well as a guide to planting vegetables in western North Carolina, a garden glossary, and references to lots of helpful leaflets. Pick up your copy for only $5.
THE ORGANIC WAY:

What is “organic gardening”? Ask ten different gardeners and you are likely to get ten different answers.

The term “organic” is difficult to define because there are so many ideas of what should be organic. A simple definition might be “growing plants without the use of synthetic fertilizers or pesticides.” Yet organic growers commonly accept the use of some man-made products such as insecticidal soap and horticultural oil because they are so safe to use. Conversely, some of the packaged organic fertilizers and pesticides seem quite far removed from their plant or animal origins – both as far as processing and transportation.

The folks at Organic Gardening magazine expand on the definition; “When you garden organically, you think of your plants as part of a whole system within nature that starts in the soil and includes the water supply, people, wildlife and even insects. An organic gardener strives to work in harmony with natural systems and to minimize and continually replenish any resources the garden consumes.”

This later definition certainly embraces the philosophy of growing organically much more than a common misconception I often encounter. To some gardeners the concept of organic simply means replacing “synthetic” pesticides with packaged “organic” sprays to kill bugs – with no consideration as to whether the bugs are damaging or beneficial.

Whether you consider yourself an organic gardener or not, these days we all are hopefully becoming increasingly aware of how our landscaping and gardening activities impact the environment.

To learn more about organic gardening, plan to attend the 14th Annual Organic Growers School on March 10.

ASK A GARDENER: USING MANURE IN THE GARDEN

By: Glenn Palmer, Extension Master Gardener Volunteer

Q: With all the concern about E. coli and hepatitis, I wonder whether it’s safe to use manure in the garden anymore.

A: Although it has nutritional benefits for the plants, manure can indeed contain a number of pathogens of concern in addition to variants of E. coli. Here are some of the current recommendations on handling manure in our gardens that can reduce the possibility of food contamination:

- Compost the manure properly. Heat will kill most pathogens, but the temperature must reach 130 to 140°F for at least two, five-day cycles. Mix the compost between cycles so that the entire pile is included. You’ll need a thermometer with a long probe, and to keep records to do this right.
- After composting, allow the manure to cure for at least four months before applying it to the garden or making manure tea to allow beneficial bacteria to do their work. Till the manure into the soil, don’t leave it on the surface.
- Do not use manure or tea in areas where edible crops are grown close to the ground, such as lettuce and other leafy vegetables and root crops that are eaten raw. The tools used to handle manure should not be used elsewhere unless cleaned thoroughly.
- Compost made from just plant material without manure is generally safe.

You should be looking at your personal hygienic practices, too. Remember things like washing well after handling manure, washing your hands before harvesting crops, using clean containers and not intermixing other garden chores while you’re on a harvesting mission.
SPEAKERS BUREAU

Need someone to speak to your club or organization? The Extension Master Gardeners Speakers’ Bureau offers a number of garden related topics. There is no fee for this educational service. For further information on available programs, contact the Buncombe County Cooperative Extension office at 255-5522.

DON’T PLANT GOOSEBERRIES

Gardeners planning to order small fruit plants for their gardens find that catalog listings for currants and gooseberries indicate the plants can not be shipped to several states, including North Carolina. The reason for this is that these plants serve as “alternate hosts” for a disease called white pine blister rust, which can kill white pine trees. North Carolina regulation NCAC48A.0401 states in part: “No person shall knowingly and willfully keep upon his premises any currant or gooseberry plant, or permit such plants to mature seed or otherwise multiply on his land.”

Here is the current statement from the North Carolina Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services – Plant Industry Division – Plant Protection Section:

White Pine Blister Rust

Currant and gooseberry plants (the genus Ribes) cannot be legally imported into, or grown in, North Carolina because they serve as alternate hosts to the plant disease know as white pine blister rust. This is an old regulation established when young white pine plantations were threatened by this disease because of infected, wild currants growing in close proximity to them. There still is an active eradication program in the western area of North Carolina to eliminate wild currant hosts within a certain distance of white pine plantations. It is provided as a service by the N.C. Forest Service.

Popular magazines and plant catalogs claim that the cultivated varieties of currants and gooseberries are resistant to the disease and do not pose a threat to white pine. These claims have yet to be backed by scientific evidence. Researchers in other states are currently testing various varieties for resistance. Their findings will impact what North Carolina does in regard to amending this regulation. Another option is to designate only certain areas of the state as regulated areas and limit movement of currants and gooseberries into these areas only. Currently, the entire state is regulated.

The Mountain Gardener is a newsletter produced by the Buncombe County Center of North Carolina Cooperative Extension. The purpose of this newsletter is to inform and educate Buncombe County residents about issues related to home lawns and gardens.

Editor:

Linda G Blue

Linda G. Blue
Extension Agent – Agriculture – Urban Horticulture

Check out Buncombe County Center’s website at…..

http://buncombe.ncsu.edu
March 10


March 13

**Gardening In The Mountains “Backyard Composting”**.
Presented by Extension Master Gardeners at [The North Carolina Arboretum](http://www.ncarboretum.org/). 10:00am. Free admission, no pre-registration.

March 30 – 31

**BBQ and Jamboree** at the [WNC Farmers’ Market](http://www.wncfarmersmarket.com/). Extension Master Gardeners will staff a garden information table and plant clinic.

April 14

**Plant Problem Clinic**, by Extension Master Gardeners, [WNC Farmers’ Market](http://www.wncfarmersmarket.com/), 11:00 – 2:00 in the breezeway between the retail buildings.

April 28

**Plant Problem Clinic**, by Extension Master Gardeners, WNC Farmers’ Market, 11:00 – 2:00 in the breezeway between the retail buildings.

*Individuals with disabilities who would like to participate in any program mentioned in this newsletter, but who need special assistance to do so, should call the Extension Center at 828-255-5522 at least five days prior to the event.*