Say “vegetable garden” and chances are the image that comes to mind is a large rectangular space with furrows between neat rows of growing plants. If you don’t have the space for such a garden – let alone the time, energy, expertise and equipment needed to maintain it – you can still grow fresh vegetables. Small gardens can be very productive and rewarding while minimizing labor; that’s a win-win situation! Here are a few ideas to get you started.

Planning and preparation pays – First, select the right site and plan what you’ll plant. Most vegetables require at least six hours of sun each day. If you have a sunny spot to install a small garden, great! If not try creating small container gardens (use big pots) and/or intersperse some vegetables among ornamental plants. Plants that produce vines such as cucumbers or pole beans can be grown along a fence. Raised beds of varying shapes, sizes and materials can be tucked into the landscape. Wherever you find room to plant, you’ll want to ensure your soil is rich in organic matter and drains well. Ideally, your bed will consist of equal parts garden soil, organic matter (compost, peat moss, composted manure) and porous material (vermiculite, perlite, or even sand). A soil test is always a good idea, but in the absence of test results, you can add a complete fertilizer (such as 10-10-10) in the amount appropriate for your space.

A variety of veggies – Vegetables that can be grown in small plots include beets, cabbage, cauliflower, cucumber, eggplant, green beans, lettuce, onion, parsley, peas, peppers, pole beans, radishes, spinach, summer squash, Swiss chard, tomatoes (standard, patio and cherry), and winter squash. ‘Bush’ varieties of cucumbers and squash take up less space than standard varieties. Depending on what you want to grow, you may find it easiest to purchase a few bedding plants of some vegetables (tomatoes, for example) while growing others from seed (radishes, lettuce, beans).

Use these principles to get the most from a small garden:

- **Interplanting:** Plant quickly maturing (short season) vegetables together with those that require more time (long season). For example, you

(Continued on page 4)
Featured Plant

*Cornus florida*

Flowering Dogwood

On March 15, 1941 the State Legislature of North Carolina adopted the dogwood as the official state flower. The dogwood beat out golden rod, oxeyed daisy, and the flame azalea to gain this honor.

Flowering dogwood can be found in the wild up and down the East coast. It is generally considered an understory tree in the wild growing on the edge of the forest where it receives partial or full sun. In the landscape it has been planted in the middle of a lawn where it receives all day sun to areas where it receives very little sun. This may account for the variability in mature size, from 20 to 40 feet tall with a spread of roughly the same.

The little, yellow flowers appear in the center of four white, pink, or red bracts early in the spring before the leaves. The more sun this tree gets the more flowers it produces.

Leaves have their own unique characteristics. Most plants have beautiful dark green color through the summer. Due to the variability of seed propagated plants consistent reds and purples during fall color can be expected year after year.

Once the trees have become established in the landscape, which takes a couple of years, this tree is very drought tolerant. However, trees stressed from drought, heat or other reasons are more likely to attract insect that will feed on the plant or develop disease problems. Keep this tree healthy and it will produce years of beautiful flower bracts.

By Shawn Banks

References:
- [North Carolina State Flower Website](#)

Upcoming Events

**Vegetable Gardening Class** will be held in Clayton at The Clayton Center, Clayton, NC on April 15 at 7:00pm. This class will cover site selection, soil preparation and planting. Future classes will cover other topics. For more information or to preregister for the class call Matt Lorion at 553-1554 or e-mail mlorion@townofclaytonnc.org.

**Southern Ideal Home Show** will be held at the State Fairgrounds April 9 – 11. Extension Gardener Learning Center will be located in Dorton Arena with other gardening information. Cost to get into the show is $9 at the door. Coupons and more information are available at www.southernshows.com/hsr/

**Triangle East Home and Garden Show** will be held April 16 – 17 at the Northside Industrial Park 1801 London Church Road, Wilson, NC 27893. For more information contact Cynthia Lauderdale (252) 237-0113.
Events (Continued)

**Plant Sale-A-Bration** is an annual event held at the Arboretum at JCC. This event has a plant sale with annuals, perennials, vegetables and more. Along with the plant sale there will also be an art exhibit, music, and educational stations to visit and learn more about how we can take care of our earth. This event runs from 9:00am until 3:00pm on Saturday, April 17. For more information visit the arboretum website at www.johnstonnc.edu/arboretum/events.aspx.

**Tour Airlie Gardens** is provided by The Arboretum at JCC on Tuesday, April 27. The bus leaves at 8:00am and will be back at 5:30pm. For more information on this event contact Lin Frye at 209-2052 or visit their events website. The cost for this event is $25.

**Insect Investigator**

**Syrphid Flies**

*Family:* Syrphidae  
*Order:* DIPTERA  
By Troy Messano

**Is the Syrphid Fly a Good Bug or a Bad Bug?**  
This is one of the most beneficial groups of insects in the yard and garden.

Syrphid fly larval are 6 to 19 mm long (about 1/4 to 3/4 inch long), elongated, legless, and slug-like. Their bodies are pointed at the head, blunt or broad at the tail end, and somewhat depressed. Many are yellow, pink, green, or brown marked with black or white. Larvae move along plant surfaces, lifting their heads to grope for prey, seizing them, sucking them dry and discarding the skins. A single syrphid fly larva can consume hundreds of aphids in a month. Not all syrphid fly larvae are predaceous some species feed on fungi.

Adults of this large stingless group of flies (1000 in North America) feed on nectar and pollen of flowers. Because they spend so much time around flowers they also help as pollinators. Adult stages of these insects are usually colored bright orange or yellow and black most resemble bees and wasps. As they hover around flowers some even carry this act mimicry to convincing extremes by buzzing.

**What’s in Season?**  
By Shawn Banks

**Sweetpotatoes**  
*Ipomoea batatas*

North Carolina grows 40% of the nations sweetpotatoes, making it the top producing state. Sweetpotatoes are a great source of potassium and antioxidants. They are high in fiber and have a low glycemic index. Sweetpotatoes are also cholesterol and fat free.

Unlike other potatoes, which are actually tubers or underground stems, sweetpotatoes are actual roots. They can be easily grown at home, grow best in a sandy loam or loose soil. Start your favorite sweetpotato by suspending it in a bowl and cover it half way with water. In a few weeks there should be 6 to 8 inch long vines. Remove these vines (slips) as close to the sweetpotato as possible. Slips are used to produce new sweetpotatoes. Slips are planted directly into the ground and kept moist for a couple of weeks until they have rooted and started to grow. Harvesting should be done before the first frost. For more information on growing sweetpotatoes in the home
garden visit the North Carolina Sweetpotato Commission webpage.

Here is one of many recipes that can be found on how to prepare sweetpotatoes.

Snappy Sweetpotato Crackers
Ingredients:
1 - ½ cups flour
2 - ½ tablespoons baking powder
½ teaspoon salt
3 tablespoons butter
1 medium NC Sweetpotato (1 cup)
¼ cup milk
Coarse salt
Sesame seeds
Cayenne pepper

Preparation:
Sift flour, baking powder and salt together into a large bowl. Add butter and by hand work it into the flower mixture until it becomes a coarse meal texture. Cook sweetpotato in boiling water until softened. Cool, remove skin and purée with mild to make a smooth mixture. You will need 1 cup of sweetpotato purée. Beat sweetpotato purée into flour and then turn out onto a lightly floured surface. Knead well (about 80 turns). Divide dough into 4 pieces and roll each very thin. Cut into rounds or squares. Sprinkle with salt, sesame seeds and a little cayenne, if desired. Bake in a preheated 350°F oven on an ungreased cookie sheet for 10 minutes until bottoms are slightly browned. Turn over and bake 3 – 4 minutes more. Cool on rack before storing in an airtight container.

Vegetables (Cont. from pg 1)

Here in North Carolina, it’s possible to have a 3-season garden. When cool-season vegetables such as lettuce, spinach, peas and radishes are harvested, plants that prefer warmer weather, such as tomatoes, squash, and beans, can follow them.

• **Grow up!** That is, garden vertically. Use a fence, trellis or bamboo teepee to grow pole beans, cucumbers and squash. Tomatoes cages or ladders provide support while saving space. If located on the north side of your garden area, these tall structures won't shade shorter plants.

Do not crowd the plants; proper spacing allows room for growth and ensures air circulation, which helps prevents disease.

Caring for your garden – To minimize the weeding chore, apply organic mulch around plants after the soil has warmed up. Mulch also helps retain soil moisture. Most vegetables require about 1 inch of water per week, so water during hot, dry weather. Early morning watering is recommended; soaker hoses that direct water to the roots of the plants save water and help prevent foliar diseases.

(Source: University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, College of Agriculture)

April Garden Tasks

**LAWN CARE**

• **Grass clippings are a great source of nitrogen.** Practice [grasscycling](#), a recycling practice where you leave the grass clippings on the lawn to return nutrients to the soil. This may reduce the amount of nitrogen fertilizer needed for the year by 25%. Clippings may also be composted (they're a great nitrogen source), or sprinkled onto flowerbeds as long as they're not allowed to mat together.

Vegetables (Cont. from pg 1)

• **Succession planting:** Plant one crop as soon as the previous crop is finished.
• **Warm season lawn** seed may be planted toward the end of the month. 'Carolina Lawns' is a great publication if you want to know when to plant and how to get it done right.

**TREES, SHRUBS & ORNAMENTALS**

- **Renew mulch** around trees, shrubs, and garden beds. Make sure mulch does not touch the bark of trees or shrubs and extends to the drip line of young trees.
- If rambunctious perennials have reproduced too freely, remove and pot the excess plants. Pass them along to friends and family. New gardeners will be thrilled to receive free plants.
- **Don’t overfeed** azaleas and camellias. These shallow-rooted plants are not heavy feeders, and may be damaged by over-fertilizing. Submit a soil sample to be tested (it’s free) to determine if fertilizer is needed. Use a slow-release, balanced fertilizer immediately after blooming. Apply it around the drip line of the shrub, according to label directions.
- **Special fertilizers for 'acid-loving plants' are not necessary**; our soils are sufficiently acidic naturally.
- **Watch for black spot and powdery mildew** on roses - common problems in our humid climate. Although these diseases make the foliage look bad, the plants generally do well anyway.
- **Watch for lace bugs**, the most common pest on azaleas. Look for whitish, stippled leaves with shiny dark flecks on the undersides of the leaves. If found, treat with horticultural oil (an insecticide). Be sure the spray reaches all parts of the leaves and stems, including the undersides.
- **Annual flowers such as zinnias, moonflowers, cleome, gloriosa daisies and sunflowers can be seeded in mid April.**

**VEGETABLES & FRUITS**

- **Check tender shoots** of vegetables and emerging perennials for aphids. If found, spray off with water.
- **Plant turnips before April 15.** Plant pole beans, carrots, and winter squash after April 15.
- Cucumbers, corn, pumpkins, snap beans, watermelon, and cantaloupe may be safely planted at the end of the month.
- **Thin cool weather crops** that were seeded last month.
- **Watch out for and control fireblight** on apple, blackberries and pear trees (including ornamental varieties). Affected branches look like they've been burned with a blowtorch. Control this bacterial disease by pruning diseased limbs back 1 foot beyond the diseased area. Be careful not to let infected foliage touch healthy foliage (yes, it's that contagious), and disinfect tools between cuts to avoid spreading the disease. Discard rather than compost the infected limbs.
- **Pick off blossoms of strawberries planted this season.** Let plants mature a year before they bear fruit.
- **Keep tomatoes** well watered to avoid blossom end rot.

**HOUSEPLANTS**

- **Divide overgrown houseplants.**
- **Gradually introduce houseplants to the out-of-doors** for their summer "vacation." Give them partial shade at first; experiment to see which of them can handle sun. Even sun-lovers will need a few days in the shade, to get used to the intensity of sunlight, before going out onto a sunny patio.