Plant of the Month, February 2010, Ulmus alata 'Lace Parasol'
By Marty Finkel, Master Gardener

While there are many trees, shrubs, and perennials that bloom in February, most of them have their peak flowering in other months and so are not reliably representative of February. We all know that hellebores bloom anywhere from December to March and April, as does Prunus mume, the Japanese flowering apricot. Since the former is familiar to everyone and the latter was a previous Plant of the Month, I chose a plant that is always spectacular in February, the ‘Lace Parasol’ winged elm.

Since it is a winged elm, ‘Lace Parasol’ has the characteristic corky wings of the species on each side of the branches and twigs. This cultivar, however, reaches about 20’ tall by 30’ wide and is strongly weeping. It was one of J. C. Raulston’s favorite plants, and it was introduced to the nursery trade through the JCRA. Many people think it is more beautiful without leaves because of its weeping habit and corky wings. It was discovered by Dr. Charles Keith of the Keith Arboretum -- the parent plant was transplanted from its Chapel Hill original site to the JCRA (JC Raulston Arboretum). This beauty is one of the signature plants of the JCRA and is fairly easily found in the nursery trade.

As to culture, Michael Dirr writes in his Manual of Woody Landscape Plants about the American elm, a different species, that it is easily transplanted, that it prefers rich, moist soils but grows well under a variety of conditions. This description is good for the genus Ulmus unless otherwise specified in the book, so go with it if planting a ‘Lace Parasol.’

ROSE TIP FOR THE MONTH
By Heidi Moore, Master Gardener

I’m sure anyone who is contemplating planting roses for the first time or adding to your present supply of roses has chosen a variety which will provide great pleasure. I, myself, have ordered five new rose introductions for the 2010 growing season. It is now time to choose the perfect location to plant these new bushes. The most important consideration is the amount of direct sun each plant will receive each day. A minimum requirement for maximum growth and bloom is 6-8 hours of direct sunlight. An area with loose, fertile soil and a pH of 6.5 is ideal. Be sure that there is good drainage as rose roots do not like to be sitting in water. Hydration of your plants is second most important to amount of sunlight, but poor drainage will cause a great deal of plant problems such as root rot and fungal disease. An application of a slow release fertilizer is another important step when planting new roses. I use an 8-12-4 formulation as the phosphorus helps to establish a strong root system to produce strong canes and flowers. Mulching your plants will help to keep the soil moist, roots cool, and weeds under control.

Pruning of established bushes can begin around the end of February but should be completed by the middle of March. Proper early pruning will encourage new strong canes and larger blooms. When beginning the pruning process for your hybrid tea roses, choose 3 to 4 strong outside canes and cut them to a length of about 12”. Remove all inside branches and weaker canes so as to allow for strong new growth and to prevent crowding. Air circulation is important for the prevention of disease and insect infestation. Floribunda and grandiflora bushes can be pruned and thinned less radically. I prefer to cut them back to about 16”, leaving more strong, outside canes and removing the inside clutter to allow for new strong growth. When removing any canes from hybrid tea, floribunda and grandiflora rose bushes, be sure to remove canes at the crown union. This will encourage the growth of new stronger canes shooting from the
crown union instead of weaker branches forming on old canes. Your shrub roses do not require severe pruning. Prune only enough to shape your plant or to control their size. Climbers bloom on old wood and shouldn’t be trimmed or cut back until after the first heavy blooming.

Interesting Tid-Bits
Carl Shafer, Master Gardener

The garden catalogs started coming in December, and the extraordinary cold and snow was a good excuse to hole up and dream of spring and summer. Various horticulture journals add to the wintry pleasure, such as the Dec.’09/Jan.’10 issue of Horticulture magazine with wonderful articles, among which are “51 American Beauties,” “Regional All-Stars,” and “New Year, New Plants.” The Jan/Feb 2010 issue of The American Gardener’s article “2010 Garden Forecast” describes new introductions in all plant categories.

A gaillardia (blanket flower) was both a 2010 All America Selection and a 2010 Fleuroselect Gold Medal winner – it’s Gaillardia x grandiflora ‘Mesa Yellow’, with 3” yellow single petals. It grows 18” tall and 22” wide in full sun, and butterflies love it. The Fleuroselect Gold Medal is given by an international organization that tests, protects, and promotes new flower varieties for the ornamental plants industry. Other All America Selection winners were Viola cornuta ‘Endurio Sky Blue Martien’ with sky blue flowers tinged with purple growing 6” tall. It has a mounding habit that spreads up to 12”, and it did well in southern trials. A bi-colored zinnia with a double row of white and rose petals, Zinnia marylandica, was another winner. Heat and drought-resistant, it reaches 14” tall with a recommended spacing of 12”. Grown in full sun, it is leaf spot and mildew resistant. The fourth winner is a snapdragon, Antirrhinum majus ‘Twinnny Peach’, with peach, yellow, and light orange butterfly-shaped flowers. It is a compact 12” tall plant covered with flowers. All these, except the viola, have been listed in most of the seed catalogs received so far for 2010.

Included in a trio of new flowers for full sun featured in at least one of the catalogs is the red ‘Cherry Brandy’ Rudbeckia, growing to 24” -- can’t wait to see this red black-eyed Susan. Imagine it planted with the new double-flowered white Cosmos bipinnatus ‘Double Click Snow Puff’, at 2 to 3 feet tall! The third new flower is another Cosmos, ‘Rubenza’, 3 feet tall, with ruby red blooms changing to rose red as they mature. Both these cosmos were Fleuroselect winners in the Fleuroselect Novelties class. I like to start cosmos seed around the second week in March so they are ready to plant out after the first frost. Cosmos can be direct-seeded, too.

If you like the tropical look, the Japanese fiber banana, Musa basjoo, grows as tall as 15’ and is said to survive in Zone 6 when grown in full sun and rich soil mulched deeply through winter.

The following garden blogs were listed in the Spring ’09 Vol. 24, No. 1 issue of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden’s “Plants and Gardens News” as “Gardening Blogs We Like”. They cover everything from the latest in gardening tools and tips to recipes.

Garden Rant: www.gardenrant.com
Horticultural: perrone.blogs.com/horticultural
The Inadvertent Gardener: www.theinadvertentgardener.com
Janet Marinelli’s blog: janetmarinelli.com
A Way to Garden: awaytogarden.com
You Grow Girl: yougrowgirl.com

FEBRUARY TO DO –FRUITS & VEGGIES
Carl Shafer, Master Gardener

During warm spells, dormant sprays can be applied to fruit trees and vines this month. For specific recommendations, check the NC Chemical Manual, (http://ipm.ncsu.edu/agchem/agchem.html), and always follow label directions. For the dormant spray only, dormant oil and lime-sulfur may be combined. When leaves are present this combination will burn the leaves.

Prune fruits as needed. Peach trees and grape vines normally need the most pruning. See Training & Pruning Fruit Trees, AG-29 (www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/ag29.html).
Also see *Producing Tree Fruit for Home Use*, AG-028
(www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/ag28.html) and
*Grapes & Berries for the Garden*,
Get a copy of the Extension Services *Home Vegetable Gardening* AG-06,
(www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/pdf/ag-06.pdf) to use to plan your garden this year. Notice that many cool season, direct seeded, vegetables can be planted in February. These include: garden and edible-pod peas, beets, carrots, lettuce, onions (seeds, sets, and plants), radishes, Irish potatoes, and spinach. Be careful to not work the soil when it is too wet. For planning purposes, note that the average last frost date for the Henderson area is about April 21.

Start seeds early this month of broccoli, cabbage, and cauliflower for transplanting in late March. Start seeds of eggplant, pepper, and tomato later this month for transplanting in late April and early May. See *Growing Vegetable Transplants for the Home Garden*, HIL 8104,

If you are interested in trying some new varieties this year, look through several seed catalogs for ideas. If you have not received catalogs in the mail, you can order a copy from company web sites. See the JAN 09 issue of *The Garden Path* for a sample of interesting seed catalogs.

**“Way Down Yonder in the Pawpaw Patch”**
by Carl Cantaluppi, Area Agricultural Extension Agent, Granville and Person Counties

Many of you know the lyrics to the above song but do you know anything about the pawpaw tree. The pawpaw is the largest edible tree fruit native to the United States. It is the only temperate member of a new- and old-world tropical plant family (Annonaceae, Custard Apple family) that includes cherimoya and sweetsop. There are nine species of Asimina. The common pawpaw, Asimina triloba, has the greatest potential for commercialization. It is widely adapted with a native range from Florida to Michigan and as far west as Nebraska.

It is a common species in Virginia, found near waterways and low moist draws in the mountain drainage areas. Though technically a tree fruit, it can stretch the accepted definition for “small fruit” by plant size due to its natural bush-like and suckering habit. In most situations it is easily trained into a single-trunk small tree, pyramidal in form, which can reach 15 to 20 feet in height.

Historically, pawpaw was a well-known and much utilized fruit in the eastern U.S. It was an important food crop for both Native Americans and early settlers. Today it is a local specialty, gathered in the wild by enthusiasts and grown by hobbyists in backyard orchards. Over the years, wild selections have been collected and named, and many of these cultivars (cultivated varieties) are now available through commercial nurseries as asexually propagated (grafted) stock.

In its ideal native habitat, pawpaw is characteristically found in the deeper, rich soils of river-bottom woodlands, growing in the shade as an understory tree. Because of root suckering, it usually forms clumps or thickets. Its leaves are long, drooping, dark green, and turn a brilliant yellow in the fall. The fruit (a true berry) may weigh up to a pound, is oblong to cylindrical in shape, one to six inches long, and one to three inches in diameter. Fruit is borne alone, or in multi-fruit clusters, which can resemble a “hand” of bananas, hence its common names: poor-man’s banana and Indiana banana.

It has a strong floral and fruity aroma and its flesh is creamy textured, usually bright yellow to orange in color. Typical of its tropical family, the flavor of pawpaw is best described as richly complex, a mixture of papaya, banana, mango, and pineapple. Flavor can vary greatly among selections, with sweetness and minimal aftertaste characteristics defining a high-quality cultivar.

The crop is well adapted to the Eastern U.S. climate and soil conditions. Pawpaw is adapted
to humid temperate zone growing conditions. It is hardy to the USDA growing zone 5 (-20°F or -29°C), and needs at least 400 hours in annual chilling requirements (time exposed to 35° to 45°F during winter months, depending on the cultivar). This is a low chill requirement compared to other tree fruit species (apples 800 to 1,700 hours), and once met, the trees will begin to flower early in the spring. A long, warm season is required to mature fruit (2,600 degree days; ~160 frost-free days). From 30 to 35 inches of rainfall is needed annually, with the majority falling in the spring and summer. Contrary to popular belief, pawpaw performs best in full-sun exposure. The pawpaw is a unique/unusual fruit crop with high nutritional value and potential for both fresh and processed market uses. As a food source, pawpaw exceeds apple, peach, and grapes in vitamin, mineral, amino acid, and food energy values. The current and primary market for fruit is as a fresh product in farmers markets and other direct sales outlets.

Though large-scale commercial processing markets do not yet exist, the fruit’s intense flavor and aroma have significant potential in blended fruit drinks, baby food, ice cream, and as a substitute for banana in various baking recipes. In Kentucky, various entrepreneurs are utilizing pawpaw as a local cuisine item for restaurants and in frozen custard and ice cream products.

Mr. Neal Peterson, a pawpaw enthusiast and plant breeder, has bred pawpaws for over 25 years. His efforts have yielded six new hybrid varieties, with fruits that weigh over one lb. each.

To explore the possibility of looking into growing pawpaws as a commercial crop in the Piedmont, I am conducting a replicated pawpaw variety trial north of Oxford on a grower’s farm. I am looking at four of Neal’s varieties, replicated six times, for a total of 24 trees. The trees were planted in 2007, with the first harvest occurring in 2011. Stay tuned for updates as the research progresses.