CHECKLIST FOR FEBRUARY
by Mary Jane Bosworth

If you want to be happy for a lifetime, plant a garden. Chinese saying

Late January, early February is the ideal time for the pruning and shaping of most trees and ornamental shrubs. For specifics on pruning, go to:

In general:
✔ Remove diseased and dead wood from any plant.
✔ Spring flowering shrubs bloom on last year’s growth and should not be pruned until after they flower. These include azaleas, rhododendrons, forsythia, spirea, flowering quince, pieris, weigela, abelia, oakleaf and peegee hydrangeas, beautyberry and clethra.
✔ Overgrown plants like Burford holly, cleyera, Japanese holly, pittosporum and ligustrum can be cut back to 15-24” from the ground.
✔ Conifers such as pine, spruce, fir, yew and arborvitae will not withstand heavy pruning. If a branch is cut back past the foliage area, the rest of the branch will not refoliate. The best time to prune conifers is just after new growth is completed.
✔ For bush roses, thin to 3-5 good strong canes and shorten canes to 15”. Prune climbers after they bloom.
✔ Ornamental grasses should be cut back before new growth emerges. Mow Liriope to remove last years foliage.
✔ Fescue lawns should be fertilized around Valentine's Day.
✔ Apply a dormant oil spray to ornamentals for control of over wintering insects and eggs.

INTERESTING TID-BITS
by Marty Finkel

To spice up salads this spring, try perilla (aka shiso), found in many seed catalogs. Its leaves have a hard-to-describe taste that combines spicy, earthy, cinnamony, aromatic, pungent, and they are rich in folic acid and minerals. Besides salads, the leaves are used as wrappers for bits of beef, pork, or fish, as well as for flavor in vodka or gin martinis.

It can be invasive, so pot culture is an option. Otherwise, weed out the unwanted seedlings and add to salads. Look for Perilla frutescens var. crispa for the dark purple or dark bronze leaves with frilly margins, P. frutescens 'Atropurpurea' for dark reddish-purple leaves, ‘Hojiso’ for compact edible flower spikes, and other cultivars such as ‘Green’ with a cinnamony scent and gingery taste, ‘Bronze’ with a warm, spicy scent, and ‘Green Cumin’ with cumin flavor.

(Brooklyn Botanic Garden “Plants and Gardens News”, Vol. 24, Number 1, Spring 2009)

Many seed catalogs are offering grafted vegetable plants, including two varieties of tomatoes on one plant! Other grafted plants include eggplant and peppers – check catalogs for others.

This year zucchini joins the selection of vegetables suitable for container growing with Patio Star, about half the size of standard zucchini plants. Despite its stature, it is said to produce full-size fruits by the bushes. The first late blight-tolerant semi-determinate cherry tomato on the market is ‘Lizzano’, also perfect
for pots or hanging baskets since it has a compact, trailing habit. ‘Lizzano’ is a 2012 All-America Selection.

Perhaps the only fault of Little Bluestem ornamental grass is its tendency to flop. Now there is a variety, *Schizachyrium scoparium* ‘Carousel’ that is under 3 feet tall and wide and less likely to flop. It has the same bluish foliage in summer combining with shades of pink, tan and coral in the fall and looks lovely with Coral Drift roses (aka ‘Meidrifora’) and *Caryopteris xclandonensis* ‘Dark Knight’.

A Missouri Plants of Merit winner this year is a spider flower with lavender-pink flowers called *Cleome Senorita Rosalita* (‘Inncleosr’). It blooms continuously from spring to fall and does not have thorns, sticky foliage, or seedpods. Hummingbirds and butterflies love it. Full sun.

A highly fragrant hydrangea is available this year, *Hydrangea angustipetala* Golden Crane (‘Mon-LongShou’). It has large white and chartreuse lace caps that bloom in late spring and was selected by Daniel Hinkley. (This and the above two bits are from the Nov./Dec. 2011 Horticulture magazine.)

**GARDEN TO DO – February & March**

by Carl Shafer

During warm spells, dormant sprays can be applied to fruit trees and vines this month. For specific recommendations, check the NC Chemical Manual, and always follow label directions. For additional information see: Fruit Disease Information Note No. 2, Disease and Insect Management in the Home Orchard, (www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/pp/notes/Fruit/fdin002/ fdin002.htm). For the dormant spray only, dormant oil and lime-sulfur may be combined. When leaves are present this combination will burn the leaves.

Finish pruning fruits if needed before spraying. Peach trees and grape vines normally need the most pruning. Check at the Extension office for pruning bulletins, and watch for scheduled Extension pruning demonstrations. 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*, (www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/consumer/agpubs/ grapesberries.pdf).

Get a copy *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 starting 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 mid to 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, (www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/pdf/hil-8104.pdf). Buying a bag or two of seed starting mix is preferable to trying to make your own mix. Buying a “Seed starting heat mat” to provide bottom heat will result in quicker and more complete germination.

To provide the bright light that is needed to grow stocky transplants a 4 ft 2-tube shop fluorescent fixture works well. Use one “cool” and one “warm” bulb. A simple timer allows you to set the time for the light you want – 16 hours is usually recommended. I found the following extension plans for adjustable light stands: (www.gardening.cornell.edu/factsheets/growlite/index.html) and (http://umaine.edu/publications/2751e/). I find that I need to start eggplants and peppers about two weeks before the tomatoes.
HERB OF THE MONTH
by Edna Gaston

Besides cooking with herbs or accenting the landscape there are many fun and beneficial ways to use herbs. Here are a couple for the kitchen:

HERBAL or CITRUS VINEGAR
For great recipes, visit the website of the National Center for Home Food Preservation (http://http://nchfp.uga.edu/)

DRAIN CLEANER
½ cup baking soda
½ cup herbal vinegar

Pour soda into the drain. Add the vinegar and cover for five minutes. Flush with hot water. Now the drain is clean and refreshing. Do NOT use this method if you have used a commercial drain opener and it may still be present in the drain.

KITCHEN CLEANER
1 cup baking soda
10 - 20 drops of one or more herb essential oil

Blend, scrub with a sponge, rinse. Can be abrasive, so take care with kitchen counters, etc.

There are many, many more uses but these will be topics for future articles. Some of the herbs I have used include Rosemary, Lavender, Lemon Balm and various Mints Experiment - that’s half the fun. The wonderful scents help to make less than pleasant chores more tolerable.

Happy Gardening from Ladybug

PLANT OF THE MONTH:
*Disporopsis pernyi*
by Marty Finkel

The common name, Perennial Evergreen Solomon’s Seal (*Disporopsis pernyi*), is an apt description for this attractive plant, even though it is not in the genus for the plant that comes to mind for Solomon’s Seal, which is *Polygonatum*. *Disporopsis pernyi* is similar, with arching stems that arise from a pencil size underground slowly spreading rhizome. It even has small, white flowers that appear at each leaf axil in the spring. However, it has thicker, darker green, glossy leaves that stay beautiful all winter, unlike the deciduous Solomon’s Seal. It will make a slowly spreading clump and grows best in part sun to shade. It is a tough plant that comes from the rocky mountains of Southern China. Evergreen Solomon’s Seal joins other mainstays for winter green along with Arum, Butcher’s Broom (*Ruscus aculeatus*), Cast Iron Plant (*Aspidistra*), etc.

THE DWARF TOMATO PROJECT
by Marty Finkel

How did the heirloom tomato, Cherokee Purple, get its name? Craig LeHoullier (aka nctomatoman) of Raleigh, NC was recognized by Slow Food, USA for rediscovering and preserving this heirloom variety which it named...
to its US Ark of Taste. LeHoullier received unnamed tomato seeds in the mail from a Tennessee man who said he wanted to share them because he believed they were from tomatoes that the Cherokee Indians grew in the area a century earlier. When LeHoullier grew the plants and found the taste and color of the tomatoes to be exceptional, he named it Cherokee Purple.

LeHoullier is a Ph.D. chemist, retired from Glaxo. He has an intense interest in genetic diversity resulting from majoring in biology at Dartmouth, and this interest morphed into an obsession with the taste of heirloom tomatoes. In 2009, his collection contained about 700 heirloom tomato varieties and is growing, along with peppers and eggplants. One of his main goals is for people to give heirloom varieties a chance in home gardens. One drawback is that most of these tomatoes grow 8 to 10 feet tall and sprawl unless staked.

Getting heirloom tomato flavor in a dwarf (3 to 4’ tall) plant was the challenge LeHoullier faced. In 2005, on the garden site Garden Web, he discussed the idea with Patrina Nuske-Small of Australia, another avid heirloom tomato grower who was skilled at carrying out crosses. Although some dwarf tomatoes are listed in seed catalogs, they generally are determinate and have smaller tomatoes than the large-fruited heirlooms. There are a few “dwarf” indeterminates offered, but Craig and Patrina wanted to create a new class of dwarf indeterminate non-hybrid tomatoes with the taste of heirlooms.

In his collection of old seed catalogs, Craig noticed that the 1915 Isbell Seed Company listed a New Big Dwarf tomato and described its creation: A cross was made between a medium sized pink fruited dwarf, Dwarf Champion (known from the late 1800s), and the largest tomato known at that time, Ponderosa. After a few generations of selections, a new variety was produced with the compact growth of Dwarf Champion and the large fruit size of Ponderosa – New Big Dwarf. If Isbell Seed Company could do it, why couldn’t he? Craig and Patrina designed a breeding project, and through the tomato chat website, Tomatoville, attracted extreme tomato enthusiasts in the US, Canada, Australia, Tasmania, and New Zealand who volunteered to take the project forward. By working the project across two hemispheres, two growing seasons were possible in one year so that new tomato variety development time was reduced by half.

The first crosses resulting from this global all-volunteer project were grown out in 2006. In 2011, the progeny from these crosses exceeded expectations of quality, and they are stable. LeHoullier revealed the Project in a keynote address and workshop at the Seed Savers Exchange (he’s a long-time member) campout in July 2011 to a large audience. Some seeds are available from Tomato Growers Supply Co. (Dwarf Wild Fred was sold out as of 1-12-12 but Summertime Green was available), Victory Seed Company (5 of their own introductions from the Tomato Project), and Sandhill Preservation Center.

For more detailed information on The Dwarf Tomato Project, go to nctomatoman on a search engine.

**IT’S BLUEBIRD TIME**
by Beverly Allen

Yes, February is the time that our bluebirds begin looking for mates and checking out locations for their nesting sites. It’s time to clean out the old nests and make any needed repairs to current boxes. If you have new boxes to put up it’s best to have them in place by mid-February. The location of your bluebird nest boxes is important. Good locations are mowed lawns, fields, meadows, orchards and road sides. Place the nest box on a pole (not a tree) about 5 feet high (or eye level), with a squirrel and raccoon baffle below the next box. It’s best to face the nest box east or south, preferably toward a shrub or tree with low branches for fledglings to land on.

Approximately two-thirds of their diet consists of insects and other invertebrates such as:
grasshoppers, crickets, beetles, earthworms, spiders and snails. Favorite plants and fruits are: dogwood, hawthorn, wild grape, sumac seeds, hackberry seeds, honeysuckle and Virginia creeper. Consider planting some of these plant species to enhance your garden. Remember, the three basic needs we can provide for our bluebirds are: food, water and shelter. The N. C. Bluebird Society, Inc. is a great source for basic bluebird facts. They have great information on feeding and even some recipes for “Winter Pudding” and “Miracle Meal”. If you have a problems with squirrels eating your suet just add some ground cayenne pepper to the mixture. Please take a moment to check out their website at: www.ncbluebird.com. You will be glad you did! Don’t forget the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) February 17-20.

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Pictures courtesy of JC Raulston Arboretum