

# **The Gardener's Dirt**

**August 2020**

*Theme: Going Forward and Looking Backward*

## **Feature Article:**

### **A Hollywood Star Remembers Johnston County Farm Life in the Depression Years**



Ava Gardner around 10 years of age  
Photo Courtesy of Johnston County Heritage Center &  
Ava Gardner Trust

**excerpts from Ava: My Story, the autobiography of Ava Gardner  
(Bantam Books, 1990),**

Ours was a neighborly and self-sufficient society. Families lived in white-painted clapboard houses dotted among the fields, with tobacco barns at the back and wicker rocking chairs on every porch. Back then, people raised most of the food they ate. Hogs were kept and the pork was home-cured. You'd go to the local mill and grind your corn for the cornmeal. Every housewife also had her stock of fruit and vegetable preserves. So if you ran short of bottled tomatoes, you could swap your jars of peas and peaches with a neighbor and get a fresh supply. And there were small local stores scattered around, like one Daddy ran for a while. They carried some canned goods, tobacco, sugar, seasonings, a few sweets, kerosene, and hardware for the fields.

Smithfield, the nearest town, was only eight miles away. But because those eight miles were on narrow dirt lanes that frequent rains turned into muddy disasters, Smithfield might as well have been on some other planet. I mean, Smithfield had paved roads and built-up sidewalks and even electricity, things that didn't reach our neck of the woods until 1945 or 1946.

And Smithfield had one further attraction: an honest-to-God movie house. And Mama, bless her, became addicted. Which meant that if I had the pocket money for a ticket, I could always get a ride into town. I sat up in the balcony, where the seats were cheapest, and had as good a time as the law allowed. But if I ever thought even for a minute that somebody like me could ever end up up there, I surely don't recall it.

The best way I knew to earn that pocket money was to work in the tobacco fields, where I surprised myself by becoming fascinated by the intricacies of the growing cycle, a process that had as many challenges, failures, and successes as anything I saw up on that screen in Smithfield.

You'd start the tobacco off as early as the weather would allow, around January if possible. The seeds were real tiny so you mixed them with sand and scattered them in a prepared bedding plot. Then you put a big lightweight canvas over everything to protect the seeds from the frost. Once the sun started to shine regularly, you removed the canvas and watched the seeds sprout. The second half of April, when the sprouts were a few inches high and pretty sturdy, was the moment for replanting, or what we called "puttin'-in-tobacco time."

This was the occasion when our mule really was in his glory, because the replanting was done with the aid of a mule-drawn contraption that, I swear to God, must have been invented by some demented genius way before the Civil War. The driver sat up front on top of a barrel of water. Not that he was really driving-the mule knew as much about the process as any human being, plodding slowly along the furrow until he reached the end. During that walk, the driver would release a gush of water. Not much water, about a cupful. And the two planters, who'd be sitting backward in the back of the contraption with a pile of tobacco plants on their laps, would reach down and plug a plant in the wet spot. At least, that was the theory, though the process never seemed to work quite that way whenever I tried my hand at it.

Every year at this time, regular as clockwork, Shine would arrive. Shine was my black brother and dearest friend. Together with Al Creech [Gardner's nephew], we were a threesome united against the world. Or at least against as much of the world as we could see. The three of us laughed, worked, and played together endlessly. ... He [Shine] stayed in the house with us, ate with us, and was part of the family. And then one morning every fall, I'd wake up and Shine would be gone without a good-bye. I'd always feel sad at his departure. ...

By July, the leaves on the thick stalks would be turning yellow from the bottom up. You'd crop off the yellow one-what's known as "ripe" tobacco-and come back in a week and keep going up the stalk. Just break them off with your hands and stack them up in your arms, that's the way I used to do it. Then I'd carry my stack to the nearest little truck that would be towed between the rows by mules. In case you haven't gathered by now, our Johnston County mules were very educated. You hardly needed to tell them, "Get up" or "Whoa!" If you did, they'd look at you as if you were out of your mind. They knew what it was all about. In fact, I'm surprised they didn't have a mule union to protect their interests.

Next, the bundles of leaves were strung up on tobacco sticks. This was skilled, swift work, and the ladies of the household would usually help out. At the end of the day, you'd take the sticks to the tobacco barns, where the leaves would be hung up to dry in the warm air that came off a wood-burning brick furnace.

Getting the proper temperature for the inside of the barn was the crux of the operation. At ninety to ninety-five degrees, you'd begin to see the yellow color you wanted. Then you'd build the temperature to about a hundred and twenty-five, at which point the little veins in the leaves would begin to dry. But the thick stems, the largest part of the leaf, would still have a lot of moisture in them. So you would let the heat run up to about a hundred and sixty to one hundred and eighty degrees to dry that part out, too.

To get all this right, you had to literally live with the tobacco. Night and day, you had to be there. I used to go and sleep nights in the barn with Daddy, and he'd point his finger at the thermometer and explain to me that if the temperature wasn't exactly right, the crop would be ruined. I thought it was all terribly exciting, and, what with the lamplight, the hot air and the sense of being there when everything important was going on, I guess it was.

Once the stem was dried and the tobacco cured-a process that took about six days-the leaf would be almost stiff; we called it "killed out." The next step was letting it come "into order," which meant opening the barn doors and letting the night air in to soften the leaf. That also needed a lot of experience, because if the leaf got too brittle, it would crumble.

At this point, everything would be graded into different classes, from the best to the worst. I can still see Aunt Ava, the only aunt I knew from Daddy's side of the family, sitting at the long grading bench, which was divided into little pens. She would inspect each leaf as carefully as you'd examine material for a fancy dress. The very finest leaf was first class, then came second and third and down to what they called the trash.

Finally, in the latter part of August, the warehouse would open up in Smithfield, and you'd start laying your tobacco out on the floor for examination by the auctioneers representing the various tobacco companies. It was a scary time, because the crop you had worked so hard on for all those months was out there taking its chances with everyone else's.

When it came to prices, I think the best we ever did was about twenty-five cents a pound, and that didn't last. I can remember how Daddy's hand gripped harder and harder in mine as the prices were called, and how the faces of some of the farmers were gray with anxiety as they left the auction hall. ...

I was seven years old when the stock market crashed in 1929. I didn't even know what a stock market was, let alone a Depression. ...I had not even an inkling that during the next few months my world was going to collapse around me.

## Ask an Expert:

### 26 Years of Tobacco in Eastern NC

By Bryant Spivey, Director/Agriculture Agent for NC Cooperative Extension, Johnston County Center



Photo Courtesy of Tobacco Farm Life Museum in Kenly, NC

I have been privileged to serve as an Extension Agent for tobacco growers in Eastern NC for the past 26 years. While some folks question the use of tobacco and the production of the crop, it is not disputed that the crop, its production, sale, and processing to an end product has certainly shaped and benefited many people.

Now before you ask how the crop has benefited you and your family, consider this: a man name Washington Duke returned to Durham from fighting in the Civil War in 1865. Having sold his farm equipment before going to fight, he began processing tobacco leaf on his farm to sell for pipe tobacco. This enterprise later grew into the American Tobacco Company, one of the largest cigarette manufacturers in the world. In the quest to mechanize processing and production, Duke's descendants needed reliable electricity and established the power generation which we know today as Duke Energy. So, every time we turn the lights on in our region, in a way we are benefiting from tobacco. This is just a small part, but the commodity has supported many aspects of life in North Carolina.

The tobacco that we grow most in North Carolina is a type called flue-cured. This name relates to the curing process which controls both heat and humidity for a 7-day period. This tobacco is used in blends to make cigarettes, and it is generally accepted that NC growers produce the highest quality flue-cured tobacco in the world. This crop is well suited to our soils and environment, is drought tolerant, can withstand our well-drained soil conditions, and thrive. Furthermore, an acre of high-yielding, quality tobacco can surpass \$6,000 in value while grain produced on the same area this year will be worth around \$400+/- . In addition, growing grain crops has often been riskier than growing tobacco.

In 1994, when I started work as an Extension Agent, US tobacco was grown under a tightly controlled government quota system. The system was created in the 1930's era to manage and limit production and thereby manage price. By keeping the supply low enough, the sales price was maintained at a higher level. Each year, the quota was adjusted according to purchase demands submitted by major cigarette manufacturers and export averages. In order to grow and sell tobacco, farmers were required to either purchase or lease quota. Quota was purchased as an interest in land and leased by landowners to farmers. I knew growers that paid up to \$6.00 per pound to purchase quota and up to \$0.70 per pound to lease it for one year.

From 1994 to 2004, the quota gradually declined because there was less and less demand for the tobacco that we produced at the support price. In addition, tobacco manufacturers and leaf dealers cultivated relationships with growers in other countries like Brazil that increased their production and quality to take US market share at a lower price. Over these years, some growers felt that reducing production costs by eliminating quota would allow US growers to compete on the world market. In 2004, the federal government approved a tobacco buyout that eliminated the tobacco quota system. Growers and landowners did not have an option on the buyout, they could not opt out.

Following the buyout, tobacco production has continued in North Carolina. From 2004 through 2011, production in Johnston County actually increased as US production moved from areas of less profitable production to counties along the I-



95 corridor. Since 2011, production has been declining. Exchange rates and the strength of the US dollar make exports from our country expensive when compared to exports from Brazil and Zimbabwe. Additionally, declining consumption of cigarettes worldwide is also affecting demand.

You might ask, "Are tobacco farmers interested in alternative crops to tobacco?" The answer is yes, absolutely. Tobacco growers are innovative and are used to dealing with speciality crops and equipment. Just last year, 12 farms in Johnston County tried industrial hemp production. In general, they were successful. They were so successful, in fact, that they and other NC growers quickly fulfilled the demand for the crop. This year contracts for hemp were few and far between and growers did not even sell all that was produced last year. Industrial hemp is just one of many examples that have not lived up to the hype.

During the past 26 years, tobacco production has seen many changes. These changes include fewer larger farms, increased mechanization, changes to curing equipment, producing transplants in greenhouses, production under contract, increased regulation, and the list goes on. However, we still grow flue-cured tobacco and NC growers will continue to do so as long as the crop is legal and profitable.

## Ask an Expert:

### History of Sweet Potatoes in Johnston County

By Brandon Parker, Extension Agent, Commercial Horticulture



Little thought is sometimes given to sweet potatoes and their importance to NC and Johnston County, in fact many people likely do not know that sweet potatoes are the state vegetable for North Carolina and have been since 1995 when it was approved by the General Assembly.

Johnston County has historically played a large role in sweet potato production in NC and can even be traced back to the early stages of marketing the crop in NC with the first market/auction known for the crop located in Benson, NC. This auction was started in 1950 and was held five half-days a week during the harvest season where what is now known as the Grove is located, right in the heart of town. NCDA inspectors would grade and inspect the crop prior to being auctioned to produce buyers and shippers. This was the beginning of what would become a

staple crop for the county and region along I-95 in NC.

With the large tobacco acreage in the area during the mid and late 1900's and even into the early 2000's, sweet potatoes were considered an important crop but not nearly as important as tobacco for most farms. It was a great addition for farms due to labor and equipment needs as tobacco and sweet potatoes can utilize the same labor and much of the same equipment, just at slightly different



times of the year which allowed growers to keep workers busy from spring until late fall. With the decline of tobacco acreage in recent years, sweet potatoes have been called upon to help fill some of the void left by tobacco in our county. A prime example of this is seen in the drastic increase in sweet potato acres in Johnston County in the last 10 years with the annual acres planted and harvested going from roughly 6000 acres to nearly 12,000 in 2019. This large increase has also been seen in other counties across NC with Johnston County ranking in the top 3 sweet potato producing counties in NC annually. North Carolina is also by far the leading State in the US with 2.5X the acreage of the next closest state. In 2019, NC produced around 93,000 acres of sweet potatoes, showing that from their early beginning in our area during the mid 1900's to the ever-growing acreage of the past 25 years, sweet potatoes have been, and continue to be the backbone of many farms in Johnston County.

## Quick Tip:

### The Raleigh Farmers Market

By Joanne King, Johnston County Extension Master Gardener Volunteer



The State Farmers Market in Raleigh is located at 1201 Agricultural Street, off of Centennial Boulevard, near the Lake Wheeler Road exit off I-40. It is operated by the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, which also operates three regional farmers markets located in Charlotte, Asheville, and Greensboro.

The State Farmers Market is a great place to buy fresh, local produce and plants from farms and nurseries operating in the surrounding counties. It is open daily, including Sunday. You will always find what's in season in our area at the Farmers Market. Plus you will find a couple of restaurants, Nahunta Pork, and specialty shops in the enclosed building.

I enjoy browsing for plants so I can easily see in one place a large variety of what's available. The displays of flowers are always so inviting, you want one of each! It is great for produce, great for shrubs and flowers, great NC gifts, and great for pumpkins, mums, and Christmas trees.

Check out their website for hours and any special events. Or follow them on Facebook at State Farmers Market

<https://www.ncagr.gov/markets/facilities/markets/raleigh/>

## **Garden Visit:**

### **Virtual Garden Visits**

**By Margy Pearl, Johnston County Extension Master Gardener Volunteer**





Wilson Rose Garden NC Weekend UNC-TV

Normally, I would be recommending a great garden visit that hasn't already been highlighted in a previous issue. The key word is "normally"! Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 restrictions, there are only a few open public gardens.

So, when virtually nothing is open and the heat index is at the face melting point, how do you get your garden visit fix? The key word is "virtually" and there are a staggering amount of videos online to choose from!

YouTube will be one of your best resources. Enter "NC Public Gardens", then add "North Carolina Weekend", "UNC-TV", or a particular county such as "Guilford" to weed out the unrelated videos and ones by individuals. From those searches, featured NC public gardens include the NC Arboretum near Asheville, Duke, several in Greensboro, Tryon Palace, Daniel Stowe and the NC Botanical Gardens, Wilson Rose Garden, Elizabethan Gardens in Manteo, Biltmore, and more! There may be multiple videos of a single garden featuring different sections or seasons. There were also videos about various nurseries and even gardens I didn't know existed! This link will get you started:

[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=nc+public+gardens+UNC-TV](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=nc+public+gardens+UNC-TV)

If you're looking for guided virtual garden visits and/or gardening information, you can't beat the online talks by Tony Avent, international plant celebrity and owner of Plant Delights Nursery and Juniper Level Botanic Garden. His talks are varied, informative, entertaining and free! They range from tours through JLBG, to feature plants, how-tos on plant propagation and more. Accessing them through his website seems to yield the most videos:

<https://www.plantdelights.com/pages/videos>

Another amazing garden visit video source is JC Raulston Arboretum. You can access videos from the website <https://jcra.ncsu.edu/resources/videos/index.php> or do an online search, but the best source is still through YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/jcraulstonarb/featured>

There are weekly garden walks with Director Mark Weathington, guest lectures by Tony Avent and others and much more!

So, stay cool and enjoy a garden visit virtually anywhere in NC today!

**Got Gardening Questions?**



**Our Johnston County Extension Master Gardener Volunteers (EMGV) can help with various horticulture questions.**

**Email the EMGV at [jcemastergardener@gmail.com](mailto:jcemastergardener@gmail.com)**

**or call (919) 989-5380**

**to speak with one of our *Master Gardener Volunteers*.**

## August Gardening Tasks

### GENERAL IDEAS

- Collect soil samples for testing so you'll know how much fertilizer and lime to add this fall. Test your lawn, flowerbeds, and vegetable garden using the free kits from Cooperative Extension. Testing should be done once every 3 years.
- Watering deeply but frequently encourages a deep and extensive root system for better drought tolerance.
- Control fungal diseases by watering early in the morning, allowing the sun to dry water droplets from the foliage.
- Mulch trees and shrubs with a 2-3 inch layer of mulch to keep roots cool, conserve moisture, and control competing weeds and grasses. Avoid mulching more than 4 inches deep, and leave 3-4 inches between mulch and the trunk of the tree/shrub.
- Avoid pruning shrubs and trees during late summer. Pruning stimulates new growth which will not have sufficient time to harden off before cold weather.
- Avoid nitrogen fertilizers during late summer. New growth at this time of year is vulnerable to frost damage in the fall. If your soil test shows you need to add phosphorus or potassium to your soil, add them now. These nutrients will help your plants better withstand the winter.
- Cut back leggy summer flowers, then fertilize them. They'll regrow within a few weeks and look great till frost.
- Plan for Fall Bulbs. Autumn-blooming crocus and colchicum add color to your fall garden. Since these bulbs are not always available locally, order them now from a mail-order source. They need to be planted in September.
- Prepare garden spaces for fall garden veggies. Greens, cabbage, carrots, parsnips, beets, radishes, and lettuces can be started by mid-August.
- New tomato plants and fall cucumbers need to be planted quickly.

### LAWN CARE

- August is the best time to prepare for planting cool season grasses. The optimal planting time is the second half of September.
- Prepare to treat for winter weed control using pre-emergents.

- Grasses vary in their needs. Check out the Lawn Maintenance Calendar for your grass and learn how best to care for it, month by month...

*Click on each type of grass for individual maintenance calendar:*

- [Bermuda](#)
  - [Centipede](#)
  - [Zoysiagrass](#)
  - [St. Augustine Grass](#)
  - [Tall Fescue](#)
- 
- *Keep fescue mowed at a height of 3 - 3 1/2 inches to help it survive hot, dry periods. The growth of the cool season grass slows down in the summer. If it is cut too short, the tender roots will be exposed to extreme heat which will certainly damage, if not kill them. It is also difficult for fescue to recover from cutting too short as it is not actively growing at this time.*
  - *Repair Warm-Season Lawns: Bermuda, Zoysia, and centipede are growing strong by now, making it easy to see spots that are weak or weedy. Pull weeds and patch bare spots if you haven't already.*
  - *Established fescue lawns naturally go semi-dormant in the heat of August. Established fescue can survive up to three weeks without water, but will need a drink if it doesn't rain by then! Water only when grass shows sign of wilt (footprints show when grass is walked on). Fescue planted last fall will need watering every week. See the Fescue Lawn Maintenance Calendar (link above).*

## ***Cool Connections:***



Photo taken at Airlie Gardens, Wilmington NC by Marshall Warren

## Helpful Links from Johnston County Cooperative Extension

***\*NEW\* Cool Connections - Gardening Resources for ALL!***

***Basic Steps for Home Landscaping***

***Carolina Lawns***

***NC Extension Gardener Handbook***

***Vegetable Gardening: A Beginners Guide***

## **Announcements:**

**Updated Soil Testing Info.**

**NCDA&CS Soil Sampling Facility labs are**



## ***now accepting routine soil samples!***

The NCDA&CS Soil Sampling Facility labs will be operating under reduced staffing. Although longer than normal sample turnaround times may be expected, **we are accepting all routine client samples** (soil, nematode, plant, waste, solution and soilless media) except waste samples covered by the NCDEQ waiver on liquid animal waste .

See website link for more information.

<http://www.ncagr.gov/agronomi/>

## **The Master Gardener Annual Plant Sale Will be held on October 10th, 2020**

***For more information visit:***

***N.C. Cooperative Extension of Johnston County Website***



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NC State and N.C. A&T State universities are collectively committed to positive action to secure equal opportunity and prohibit discrimination and harassment regardless of age, color, disability, family and marital status, gender identity, genetic information, national origin, political beliefs, race, religion, sex (including pregnancy), sexual orientation and veteran status. NC State, N.C. A&T, USDA and local governments cooperating.

Declaración Completa (Español) "La Extensión Cooperativa de Carolina del Norte prohíbe la discriminación y el acoso independientemente de la edad, el color de la piel, la discapacidad de la persona, el estado civil y situación familiar, la identidad de género, el país de origen, la ideología política, la raza, la religión, el sexo (incluido el embarazo), la orientación sexual y la condición de veterano de guerra. Colaboración entre las Universidades NC State y N.C. A&T State, el Departamento de Agricultura de los Estados Unidos, y los gobiernos locales.

Contact [bmspivey@ncsu.edu](mailto:bmspivey@ncsu.edu) or 919-989-5380 for accommodations related to a disability.

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