

THE GARDEN PATH , MAY 2014

A publication of Kerr Lake Extension
Master Gardeners

PLANT OF THE MONTH - MAY

By Marty Finkel



Pictures courtesy of JC Raulston Arboretum
Bears Breeches (*Acanthus* 'Summer Beauty')

The common name "Bear's Breeches" refers to all *Acanthus* even though there are differences in the couple of species (*Acanthus mollis* and *A. spinosus*) and their cultivars. This month's selection, 'Summer Beauty' is noted for having much better tolerance for hot summer weather than *A. mollis*. It grows best in average, fertile, medium moisture, well-drained soils in full sun to part shade. Plants flower best in full sun and make take a couple of years to become well enough established to bloom, and late spring frosts may hinder or even prevent blooming for the year. A mature clump will reach 4-6' wide with giant, glossy, dark green, cut-leaf leaves with flower stalks reaching 6'tall. Stalks are topped with spikes of white flowers surrounded by purple calyces. Remove flowering stalks after blooming. Plants can spread aggressively by creeping root stock in loose soils but can be stopped by root barriers. If the plant is dug up to eradicate or to move to another place in the garden, small sections of root left behind can sprout new plants.

The genus name comes from the Greek word for spine (*akantha*) and refers to the toothed edges on the leaves of some species. According to the Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Search, there "appears to be no scholarly agreement among authorities on the origin and meaning of the term bear's breeches."

CHECKLIST FOR MAY

By Mary Jane Bosworth

May is the time gardens are the most fun. Weather is still comfortable and the beauty of the garden is starting to show. Everything is new and fresh.

- ✓ Start to ease tropicals from the house out to the garden. They have been receiving limited light during the winter months and will thrive out of doors. Repot, if necessary, groom and fertilize.
- ✓ Plan for all the critters that can destroy your hard work in the garden. Work on pest control with fencing and repellents, following the directions on the container.
- ✓ Warm season turf grasses can be safely planted at this time.
- ✓ Fertilize spring flowering shrubs after their flowers have faded.
- ✓ Mow lawns at the correct height for the grass variety. Tall fescue lawns should be mowed no lower than 3".
- ✓ Mulch flower and shrub beds for weed control and moisture retention.
- ✓ Don't be in a hurry to pull out plants damaged by last winter's cold. Wait another month. Even when killed to the ground, plants with an established root system may come back.
- ✓ Azaleas, camellias and rhododendrons can be pruned after they have finished blooming.
- ✓ Fertilize crepe myrtles with 1 cup 8-8-8 per plant to get abundant summer bloom.

GARDEN TO DO – MAY

By Carl Shafer

Check previous TO DO lists as many items continue to be relevant. Note spray and thinning recommendations.*

Prune out fire blight damaged wood on your fruit trees. Sterilize your pruners between cuts.

All the warm and hot weather vegetables can be planted now.

Get *Strawberries in the Home Garden*, HIL 8205, (www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-8205.html) to find the needed steps to renovate your strawberry bed.

When cool season crops (broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, and green, sugar snap, and snow peas) begin to mature, harvest every couple of days for best quality. Hot weather can cause these crops to be over mature very quickly.

Mulch tomatoes and peppers, and keep them evenly moist to reduce blossom end rot.

Extend your sweet corn harvest by successive plantings every two to three weeks or by planting early, mid, and late maturing varieties all at the same time. Make repeated plantings of vegetables based on space availability and your likes.

Control annual weeds by mulching and hand-weeding.

For information on fertilizing, both preplanting and side dressing, get *Home Vegetable Gardening* booklet AG-06 from the internet or the Extension Service center.*

Check your garden every day or two to spot and solve problems early. For publications on pest management, go to Extension – Lawn and Garden Publications (www.ces.ncsu.edu/lawn-and-garden-publications/). Check General Resources, Vegetables and Herbs, and Fruits and Nuts for pest management publications. Note the NC Chemical Manual is listed in the first section.

If you are planning to raise your own transplants for a fall garden, you need to start seeds in June to have plants ready to set out in late July and early August. Plants to try include Brussels Sprouts, Broccoli, Cauliflower, and Cabbage.* See below.

For more information on planning a fall garden, see *Growing a Fall Vegetable Garden*, HIL 8001, (www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-8001.html). For information on fall-winter gardening with variety suggestions, visit the websites of seed companies. Check for growing guides and library listings as well as individual recommendations. Note that some of the recommended varieties are not commonly available at

local seed sources so you will need to seek internet or mail order sources for these. Note the Central NC Planting Calendar has fall garden planting dates and the Planting and Harvesting Guide for Piedmont Vegetables and Herbs has both planting and expected harvesting dates.

If you are interested in extended gardening, check out the book “The Year-Round Vegetable Garden” by Niki Jabbour.

A new regional vegetable gardening book you may find useful is: THE TIMBER PRESS GUIDE TO VEGETABLE GARDENING in the SOUTHEAST.

*See the Feb. 14 and Mar. 14 issues of, *The Garden Path*, Garden To Do for more web links.

HERB OF THE MONTH- MAY

By Edna Lovelace Gaston

Thymus

Height: varies by plant but most are in the 5 to 12” range

Flowers: again varies by cultivar

Propagation: cuttings, very easy or layering

Growing conditions: slightly acid soil, sun to part shade

HISTORY

Such variety and so many uses – well deserved honor for such a mighty little plant. Its name possibly comes from the Greek word for courage. This is a very useful plant – great in containers, wonderful fragrance as there are so many new cultivars whose names give a hint of what you will find, easy to propagate, not invasive, no pest problems. What more can you ask of a plant!

Through the centuries thyme is one of the herbs used frequently in cooking. In many bouquet garni recipes it is one of the traditional ingredients. It is also included in the herbes de Provence of French cooking. The Greeks had many medicinal uses for the herb.

For cooking it is easy to preserve thyme – just cut a few sprigs, tie together and hang in a cool, dark location. As with other herbs, store away from heat and humidity in a dark container after stripping the leaves from the stems.

Let’s not forget landscaping with thymes. This plant is the perfect “spiller” for a container. Imagine walking down a path and the wonderful scent of nutmeg drifts upward. Or a patio with every brick replaced with thymus minus. Don’t forget our fairy gardens. A rock garden would not be complete without

thymes softening the edges of the rocks. Hanging baskets in sunny locations are just begging for thymes as are window boxes. Thyme will grow indoors, south facing window is best, so it is readily available in the winter.

I rarely fertilize my thymes but a little during the growing season won't hurt. As with all herbs, harvesting on a regular basis is advantageous and actually encourages growth. But never cut more than a third of the plant at one time and give it a chance to recover but cutting again.

Some of the favorites in my collection:

Lemon Thyme – refreshing scent, delicious addition to cooking

Corsican Thyme – great groundcover in a container

Mother of Thyme – tends to get woody with age but great in an informal setting

Woolly Thyme – leaves slightly different in appearance from most thymes

Creeping Thyme – one of the best ground covers for a large area

Variiegated Lemon Thyme – nice change of pace

Doone Valley Thyme – just an all-around good herb

Silvery Thyme – nice foliage variation

So many more!!!!!!

If there is a special scent you want to capture, there is probably thyme for you – lime, orange, cinnamon, caraway. So get started! Just remember there is always “thyme” to garden!

Enjoy,
Ladybug



THE TYROS' CORNER

By Eileen Novak

There is a saying in the computing world “garbage in, garbage out”. I have found out that this applies to gardens as well.

I began this gardening season on the 19th of March when, in an excess of enthusiasm, I planted a flat of 72 cells with nothing but tomato seeds. And having recently learned about vermiculture at the Master Gardener Symposium in Henderson, I decided to enrich the seed starting mix with my own, self-made (well, with the help of a few thousand worms) worm compost.

I do not have a do-it-yourself worm housing made of plastic storage bins, no siree! I showed the plans I found in a gardening magazine to my husband

last year and he rejected the notion of making it out of hand. Much better to purchase one from a catalog. Well, sure, I guess so. Therefore, I have a nifty, expandable, guaranteed to produce worm bin.

I got this worm bin last year, in May, and set it up with the recommended ingredients in the users manual. Imagine that, if you will – a real, paper users manual that came WITH the article (not available only online). This alone was worth the price! The thing came with 4 black trays; the one that has the food is called the “working” tray and the ones beneath it are the “processing” trays. I have been adding a tray at a time when the previous (working) tray seemed overly filled with black stuff.

So after seeing the glorious results that Dr. Rhonda Sherman displayed onscreen during her talk at the Symposium, I decided “why not get better tomato seedlings by adding worm compost to the cells?” I planted tomato seeds in a 72-cell tray, I planted lemon grass, vinca, parsley (both flat and curly), cilantro and even artichoke seeds in peat pots. And then, because I had them leftover, I planted some “love lies bleeding” amaranth in reconstituted peat pellets.

Imagine my joy when I saw the first sprouts a week later!

Imagine my confusion when I saw more sprouts per cell than I had inserted seeds!!

Imagine my bewilderment when I saw tomato seedlings show up in the peat pots containing the herbs, flowers and even the artichoke!?! But not in the amaranth peat pellets.....

Faced with a mystery, I thought back on the steps I had taken. I closed all the packages of tomato seeds and put them away before I cleaned off the counter to start the next type of plant. I never even showed a tomato seed to any of the other plant pots. The only thing all these seeds had in common was..... the vermicompost. You notice I didn't say castings. I just took handfuls of goop from the bottom tray, picked out the occasional worm and stirred the mess into the pot of seed starter. Well, I do remember Rhonda saying something about freezing the food scraps that go into the worm bin, but she was talking controlling odor, right? So I got out the users manual for the worm bin and they had a note about “what if I get seeds sprouting in the worm bin”? I had ignored this because, after all, it was covered and the plants weren't going to get much bigger, right?

Upon further reflection, I believe that Rhonda's freezing advice might help but might not. It was plenty cold this winter outside and during this morning's visit

to the garden I believe I saw several volunteer tomatoes waving their little leafy hands at me. Hmmmm, the book that came with my bin says to microwave the stuff you are going to feed to the worms to kill any fly eggs that might be there. So I believe that from now on, I will utilize the one/two knockout punch for my worm food: zap it first in the microwave and then freeze it till the worms are ready for their next course. Of course, now I have the dilemma of what to do with the tomato seedlings. I can't very well just pull the excess because I only have a 50% or 30 % chance of pulling out the weed tomatoes.

And also, what do I do with the 4 trays of vermicompost that I was hoping would make my vegetative year????? <sigh>.

Note from the Ag Extension Agent: I suspect the Eileen's problems arose because of incomplete separation of unprocessed food scraps from the finished vermicompost. Freezing the food scraps is helpful as a way to store them until your bin is ready for more, but will not kill all the seeds in your vegetable scraps. Microwaving might help if the temperature gets high enough, but is probably not necessary. For all the details on vermicompost, visit <http://worms.ncsu.edu>.

INTERESTING TID-BITS FOR MAY

By Marty Finkel

If your cat(s) is annoying your houseplants, here are some tips to keep kitty out:

- The scent of a dilute solution of vinegar and water sprayed on the leaves will deter chewing and will not harm the plant.
- Use pots of lavender, rosemary, and/or mint around houseplants or else scatter their leaves in the pots
- Scatter orange or lemon peels on the surface of the potting soil as a scent repellent.
- Mulch with pine cones or gum balls to keep cats from scratching in the soil
- Give kitty his/her own pot of catnip or cat grass
- Keep a spray bottle handy and squirt water at kitty when caught in the act.

(These tips are adapted from information sent by Pinetree Garden Seeds)

From Cornell University comes **The Lost Ladybug Project!** They will identify your ladybugs (beetles) from photos you send them in their efforts to find out why some species seem to be declining while

others are increasing in numbers and in geographical range. Because the investigating team at Cornell is so small, they have solicited help from citizens, and so far more than 23,000 people have sent pictures for ID. With the identification, you will learn more about your particular ladybug (and others). The researchers don't mind if you send in 20 pictures and they all turn out to be the same ladybug – also, they would like to know if you can't find any, since the more information they get the better they are able to understand what ladybugs are where, and maybe even why. To learn how to find, collect, photograph your ladybugs, and upload the photos to Cornell's website, visit it at <http://www.lostladybug.org/> (This tidbit was condensed from an Al Cooke E-letter of April 8, 2014)

'Tis the chigger season – always is when the temperature is 60 F and above. This tidbit will dispel all the myths you have heard about chiggers: that they burrow under the skin, that they drink blood, and that they can be killed by putting nail polish on the bite. E. F. Rivinus contacted Dr. Frank J. Radovsky of the Bernice P. Bishop Museum in Honolulu (whom entomologists at the Smithsonian had recommended as a leading acarologist) for the skinny on chiggers and wrote an article “Chigger Season: Mythical Mite Behind the Itch” for Smithsonian magazine. An acarologist was the appropriate source since chiggers are a type of mite (Acari). Dr. Radovsky engaged another acarologist who focused particularly on chiggers, Dr. M. Lee Goff, and they provided these facts.

- Chiggers feed on humans in the larval stage. They are usually red and virtually invisible to the naked eye. They have piercing jaws called chelicerae, lurk on grass stems, leaves, shrubbery, etc usually in dry, sunny spots on woods' edges.
- Upon landing on us, the chigger penetrates through the outer layer of skin with its chelicerae and injects a salivary secretion into the opening. Powerful enzymes are in the saliva, and these break down the skin cells which become mostly chigger food. It continues alternately injecting saliva into the hole and sucking up tissue fluid and the contents of damaged skin cells – NOT blood – until it's fully fed. This can take four days.
- The skin reacts defensively during this feeding process, and makes a tube, or stylostome, from a combination of your tissue reaction and chigger secretions. Ultimately, the stylostome may become longer than the chigger itself. The engorged chigger falls off but the stylostome remains and is finally

absorbed within a week to 10 days – this is what causes the itching.

- Mr. Rivinus assures us that out of the thousands of species of Acari, only a few have larvae which are parasitic, and of those, Man is an unsatisfactory host. Acarologists estimate that half a million species of mites have yet to be discovered, but that about 35,000 species have been classified and described.
- Mites do have a good side. Many species “perform herculean labors of tremendous service, as in breaking down field and forest litter and converting it into soil.”

GARDENING FOR THE BIRDS AND THE BEES...PLUS BUTTERFLIES AND ME

By Edna Lovelace Gaston

Through a subscription to a listserv of very informed and dedicated birdwatchers (and great sightings of butterflies which I will share at another time) I learned about a very rare bird in North Carolina in early 2013. It was the Northern Lapwing whose range is usually Europe then migrating to northern Africa for the winter. It has been sighted in North America, usually after a strong storm. One was sighted in Person County, not far from where I live. Speculation was this one blew in with Hurricane Sandy. One cold and cloudy January morning I saw a posting on the listserv that some birders had the bird in their scopes. I loaded my gardening buddies, Ned and Jules, and off we went with our most powerful pair of binoculars. My supplies were useless as the bird was way back in the field and the only way to view was through one of the powerful – and expensive – scopes. These birders were so kind to share with me and I had the pleasure of seeing the bird. It was strolling through its preferred habitat, the brush beside a pond, its sassy topknot blowing in the wind. So exciting.

This year the discussion is the Snowy Owl. Several have been spotted along the coast and an injured bird was rescued in our mountains. There have been several articles in national publications about sightings in other parts of the country. This many migrating from its normal Arctic range is quite unusual. From posted pictures this is a magnificent bird – large and in charge. It is about 2 feet tall with a wing span approaching 5 feet. So far I have not made the trek to the coast for a viewing.

Now back to our regular viewings, much smaller except for an occasional eagle, hawk and of

course buzzards [Editor’s note: a.k.a. turkey vultures and black vultures].

Tweet, tweet until another month

NEW PLANTS FOR 2014

by Edna Gaston

According to the January / February issue of The American Gardener there are some exciting new additions for our wish lists. In case you don’t get this magazine, here they are: Echinacea ‘Cantaloupe’, Dark Blue Moody Blues Veronica, “Beyond Blue” fescue (*Festuca glauca*), Shooting Star hellebore, ‘Desert Diamond’ agave, ‘Rose Bells’ pasqueflower, *Hemerocallis* ‘Midnight Raider’ and *Coreopsis* ‘Bengal Tiger’.

The International Herb association has named Artemisia as its herb of the year. The North Carolina Botanical Garden’s 2014 Wildflower of the Year is Hoary Skullcap *Scutellaria incana* var. *punctata* while the National Garden Bureau, Inc has designated Echinacea. 2014 Perennial Plant of the Year *Panicum virgatum* ‘Northwind’ according to the Perennial Plant Association. There have also been some great shrubs and vines introduced for this growing season. Have fun searching!

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