A recent visit to Italy last April did not disappoint. It was eleven days of pure joy to be immersed in the antiquity, culture, and food of the regions of Italy that we visited. As the bus rolled through cities, villages and rural areas, the consistent view was of agricultural fields and backyard gardens. Everyone was growing something and it usually was fig, lemon and olive trees and grapes. It was the second week in April and the landscape was already leafed out and green. Many of the trees in Rome were in bloom with small deep purple flowers. The locals called them ‘Judas Trees’ as they bloom around the time of Holy Week. My eye told me they were some type of redbud, or *Cercis*, but I could also recall an old common name for that tree of “Judas Redbud.” In Italy, the Holy Week plant of choice is the olive branch and people on the street were often carrying a bunch home with their groceries. Churches had vases full of olive branches, their dull greenish grey color so much softer than the tall beige palms that are used in the States for this season. It is also the time to prune olive trees so the trimmings are abundant and easy to find.

Eating local is not an issue in Italy as that is the norm and it always has been. Fresh, seasonal food prepared very simply sums up the cuisine. And then there is gelato. Every flavor imaginable and then some. A personal favorite is ‘Lemon Sorrento Delight’ with fresh lemon juice and bits of zest swirled in a vanilla custard base. Many term gelato the Italian ice cream but there are differences. Gelato is slowly churned so there is less air incorporated and it is milk based rather than cream based. Also gelato is stored at a warmer temperature so it is softer and has a lighter mouth feel than ice cream. It did taste like food of the gods!

Growing grapes seems to be an Italian pastime, as every back yard garden had some vines. Passing through the regions of Tuscany and Umbria, field after field of grapes was commonplace. Every restaurant or café sold wine, and even at the food...
stops along the Autostrada one could purchase wine or soda with a meal and the wine was always the less expensive choice. No preservatives are added unless the wine is for export, an added bonus.

The concept of hardiness zones is not in use in Italy as much of the country is semi tropical or warmer. In the northern part of Italy I saw palm trees and magnolias that I know are USDA Hardiness Zone 6 and warmer climate plants. It seemed odd to be looking at them with the snowy Alps as the backdrop! I think the most amazing thing for me as a gardener was to see lemon trees used everywhere as decoration and as part of a landscape. They were gorgeous. Of course I looked for scale or mealy bugs but saw none of the above. They were every bit as amazing to me as the breathtaking works of Michelangelo but then I have always been a big fan of the artwork of Mother Nature.

Italians seem to appreciate the finer things in life and I learned that many of them are the simple things that we busy and driven Americans take for granted like a crusty loaf of bread, a local cheese or wine—the simple fruits of the earth. That lesson was not wasted on this gardener!

Yikes! Who Is This?

Photos of this Flower Longhorn Beetle were sent in by Robin Lemsi. There is a plethora of similar looking species. This particular one with a bold, black and yellow zebra pattern is about ½ inch long and its formal name is *Stranglia luteicornis*. Because of its resemblance to a borer it can set off alarms. Is this trouble? Not to worry, this one is not harmful like the Asian Longhorn Beetle, in spite of the similarity of their names.

Actually, Flower Longhorn Beetles are great pollinators. They live in and along the edges of deciduous forests, venturing into transitional meadows to find favorite nectar sources – sumac and wild rose. They aren’t what we usually tend to think of in considering pollinators, as they aren’t seen much in gardens, so here’s a chance to expand our viewpoints.

Flower Longhorn Beetle larvae feed on decaying hardwoods, so they’re helpful decomposers, too.

Text by Master Gardener Janet Poole
Biting into that home-grown cuke, zuke or melon and finding a bitter surprise, rather than something better than store-bought, is one of summer's bummers. A local case of bitterness led me to the following article from the University of Nebraska, which I'll quote here at length.

“This is the time of year, in many small towns, when you can't leave your car parked with the windows rolled down or you might come back to find your front seat full of zucchini or cucumbers! Both vegetables are members of the Cucurbit family, which also includes pumpkins, melons, squash and gourds. A common problem found in zucchini and cucumber is bitterness, which can be very frustrating to the gardener who finds the vegetables too bitter to eat!

All cucurbits produce a group of chemicals called cucurbitacins, which cause the vegetables to taste bitter, and the higher the concentration of cucurbitacin the more bitter the vegetable will taste. In commercially cultivated cucumbers and zucchini, they are normally in such low concentrations that they cannot be tasted. These chemicals provide other attributes to the cucurbits, such as the musky scent of cantaloupe.

Mild bitterness is fairly common in cucumbers resulting from higher levels of cucurbitacin triggered by environmental stress, like high temperatures, wide temperature swings or too little water. Uneven watering practices (too wet followed by too dry), low soil fertility and low soil pH are also possible stress factors. Over-mature or improperly stored cucurbits may also develop a mild bitterness, which is often not severe enough to prevent gardeners from eating them.

However, occasionally a gardener will find a zucchini growing in their garden that is extremely bitter, as was the case recently for one Dodge country gardener. Eating these vegetables caused severe stomach cramps and diarrhea that lasted for several days. These symptoms are similar to twenty-two cases of human poisoning by bitter zucchini reported in Australia from 1981-1982, and in Alabama and California in 1984. The variety of zucchini grown in Dodge County was 'Black Beauty' and the variety implicated in Australia was 'Blackjack.' Very small amounts (3 grams) of the bitter zucchini were ingested.

Of 12 zucchini grown in the Dodge County garden only 1 plant produced very bitter fruit. Since all plants in the garden originated from one seed packet, were planted in the same location and received the same amount of water, simple environmental stresses could not be the culprit. Unlike cucumbers, extreme bitterness in zucchini and summer squash is not influenced by the environment, but is completely controlled genetically by one dominant gene.

How do these plants with extremely bitter fruits happen? Large amounts of cucurbitacins are still present in wild cucurbits, such as buffalo gourd, making them inedible to humans and most animals. Since cucurbits are pollinated by insects, especially bees, cross-pollination of cultivated plants by wild cucurbits (in the form of weeds growing near a seed production field) can cause problems if seeds from those plants are saved and planted in the garden the following year. Fruits from the parent plant would not be affected at all, and would not exhibit bitterness. Only the seeds resulting from the cross-pollination with a wild cucurbit or gourd would carry the gene for extreme bitterness. Plants grown from these seeds could express the dominant gene for fruit bitterness. Rarely, mutations in seed-production fields could also result in seeds that carry the dominant bitterness gene.

What should you do if you find extremely bitter zucchini in your garden? Well, you're unlucky since these plants are rare, but don't be discouraged. Don't eat the zucchini and don't give them to your neighbors! Discard them. Finally, don't save seed from plants that produced extremely bitter fruits. If you like to save your own seed, be sure to save fruit only from flowers that have been isolated to ensure that pollen came only from other domesticated, non-bitter squash and not from gourds or wild cucurbits.”

To visit the original article see https://byf.unl.edu/zucchini1
It’s Not Easy Being Green:

Myths and “Miracles” Do Grow On Trees

Text by Rensselaer County Master Gardener Don Maurer

Forget Johnny Appleseed. Sam’s the man!

What did Sam Van Aken do? Over nine years he has produced 14 trees each capable of bearing 40 different fruits. That’s one stop picking for peaches, apricots, cherries, nectarines and European plums. And this fruit basket calls the public places in 14 cities home.

But what motivated a Syracuse University art professor to create these living masterpieces? He learned that the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station, which had been saving historic seeds and trees, was discontinuing some of their stone fruit orchards. Van Aken told CBS News “what he did is essentially collapsing an entire orchard down to one tree.”

And the secret to this wizardry? According to the CBS report, growing multiple fruits on one tree is possible because what Van Aken does, perhaps better than anyone else, is graft. In essence he tricks the tree into adopting new limbs, or in this case, dozens of them.

Preserving historic seeds and trees. I think Sam Van Aken can be forgiven for “fooling Mother Nature.”

For more on this project visit: http://blog.syracuse.com/cny/2011/09/tree_of_40_fruit_su_sculptors_creation_commemorates_911.html

Green Shots: The Gardening World in Pictures

The Garden Party was still going strong during a mid-September visit to Stonecrop, the late Frank Cabot’s fantastic paradise near Cold Spring, New York. Dahlias, coleus, castor beans and amaranths are determined to shine until the first hard frost takes them down.
Vegetable Variety Trial Garden Project

What do you get when you bring youth, retirees and master gardeners together? A fabulous partnership for the Cornell Garden-Based Learning project, Vegetable Variety Trial Garden (VVT), a Citizen Science program involving Cooperative Extension offices from around NYS and Cornell Garden-Based Learning.

Cornell Cooperative Extension in Schenectady County (CCE,SC) submitted a grant application to create a demonstration garden and grow heirloom vegetables and other plantings as part of the VVT garden. CCE,SC took advantage of another program offered through Cornell University called RISE (Retirees in Service to the Environment) in which retired adults are offered a structured training on various environmental issues, then upon completion, participate in a community service project. This year’s service project involved creating a demonstration garden at the Sustainable Living Center greenhouse facilities in Schenectady’s Central Park. In order to make the project intergenerational, we coordinated with our Roots and Wisdom youth program and Master Gardeners. Together we created a garden space that demonstrates square foot gardening to show-case the vegetable variety planting plan provided by the Cornell Garden-Based Learning project and use for future educational programming.

The demonstration garden project included the construction of nine, 3’ x 3’ raised garden beds, test and amend the soil then plant according to a pre-determined planting plan. Heirloom seeds and established plants were provided by the Cornell-Based Learning Center as part of the VVT garden project. In April we began seeding, then in May we planted the established plants provided from Cornell. The individuals raised beds had signage that described the planting plan. Some of the beds included perennials and others had seasonal plantings for Spring, Summer and Fall. At the end of the growing season, each bed will be cleaned out and finished with cover crops or other methods. The entire process was a significant learning experience for both the RISE and Roots & Wisdom youth volunteers.

The RISE volunteers, Roots & Wisdom youth and Master Gardeners met periodically this summer to harvest and taste the varieties plantings. The RISE volunteers took produce home and prepared their own recipes to sample beyond the garden. Each member of our group who taste tested the produce gave a rating which were averaged out and entered into the Vegetable Variety review database, along with yield and reliability for gardeners across the country to reference. To learn more, visit: www.gardening.cce.cornell.edu
You know as well as I do that the key to a good joke is in the delivery. Timing. Willie Nelson is quoted as saying “the early bird gets the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese.” Again, timing is critical. Horticulture is replete with issues of timing. Frost, drought, and pruning come quickly to mind. It is the issue of pruning I want to address at this time.

This summer has been a good one to grow things. For the most part we have had mild temperatures, and moisture; well feast or famine has become the new norm with rain. Home landscapes have thrived, some more than normal. Several homeowners I have spoken to recently were overwhelmed by some of the shrubbery growth in their yard and were looking to me for advice on pruning it. After all, they were getting ready to clean up the yard for winter. They want advice on pruning! Not now, I said, it’s fall, the worst time of the year to prune anything you value.

I often tell the story of the time I did some rejuvenation pruning of my two five-foot tall rhododendrons that were broken and crushed by the winter’s snow and ice. I cut them back hard; one was not even left with a single leaf. I did this in May which allowed the plants the growing season to send out new growth and harden off prior to winter. My neighbor later told me that he watched this apparent plant massacre, assuming I was going to take these damaged plants out. Since I did not and they grew back, he decided to do the same thing in his yard.

So the story goes, one October day I arrived home to see that he had severely cut back all the shrubs in front of his house! I ask him what was going on. He had seen my plants grow back and decided he would do the same thing. He must have moved here from Missouri, the “show me” state. You guessed it, his plants did not survive the winter. Today I have two five-foot rhododendrons in front of my house and my neighbor’s foundation is barren. Timing is critical!

Fortunately for us gardeners, there are some chores, such as pruning, that are best done in the “off” season. There is enough work cleaning up the garden in fall without adding pruning to the list. And, after a long winter, most folks are itching to get back out in the yard and garden. Late winter (March) and early spring (April) is an excellent time to shape or reduce the overall size of your plant material through pruning. With deciduous plants, it is easy to see the overall branch structure and easier to properly select the specific portion you want to reduce or remove. Just prior to the onset of leaf expansion is also when the rate of “healing” or callusing over of the wound will be most rapid. We are also not wasting valuable resources by removing any newly formed leaves. So this is the ideal time to prune most plant material.

The second best time to prune your trees and shrubs is in the middle of summer. July pruning is a good time to reduce the size of plants that have grown beyond their bounds. Mid-summer pruning wounds will respond with new growth that has time to slow and harden off in the fall prior to the onset of winter.

So if you notice that your landscape is a little “out of bounds” or overgrown, be patient. Wait until the leaves drop and winter sets in to do any pruning so you will not lose a valuable landscape plant.
If you like television featuring car crashes, murders, shark attacks and the like, plants in distress might also be up your alley. Late summer is the prime time for viewing insect destruction, fungal devastation and bacterial disruption in 3-D, living color each time you open your door. But which plant problems do we need to fret over, and which can we just gawk at as we go by?

Any time an entire tree turns brown even i-Phone addicts might glance up and notice, and such is the case with the black locusts along Schodack’s Brookview Road. Currently trees seventy feet and taller are the color of well-done toast, appearing as if hit with a flame thrower. If this happened during a dry summer or in October, it could be easily if erroneously explained away, but when most other trees are a healthy green the locusts look alarming. Those other trees, lucky devils, have not been hit with the locust leafminer.

The show begins when the black and orange adult leafminer beetles lay eggs in black locust foliage in the spring. The resulting larvae tunnel between the upper and lower epidermal leaf layers, causing necrotic blotches. Once these larvae become adults, they also feed on the foliage. Black locusts are tough trees, so most remain viable, but if defoliated repeatedly and in conjunction with drought, they may reach their limits and die. We don’t see that too often locally, so if your locusts look scorched, don’t panic, they’ll most likely live to see 2015.

It wasn’t such an easy diagnosis for a newly-planted dawn redwood, whose worried owner brought in some foliage last week. This tree, a conifer which actually loses its needles when autumn arrives, is a fascinating species, having lived during dinosaur times 100 million years ago. Curiously, remnant populations only existed in China, and it wasn’t known to western botanists until 1941. Since then, it has become a collector’s tree, so when you own one, you take care of it. Books and websites glibly state it has “few diseases or pests,” but the tree in question clearly had a fungal leaf spot of sorts. Microscopic identification revealed the offending spores in all their glory, and I was able to pinpoint their identity to the genus *Pestalotiopsis*, a fungus with a name as difficult to pronounce as it is to spell. Often dismissed as a weak pathogen only capable of inflicting chaos on plants already declining for other reasons, it might in fact be problematic to the young dawn redwood as it strives to establish in its new location. No action is called for now, but a timely, organic fungicide next spring might help the tree and belittle the fungus.

My lovely pink coleus, grown gargantuan since May, is now sporting brown leaf blotches. Once again I pulled out my trusty microscope, and this time *Botrytis* came into view. Not good news as *Botrytis* can quickly kill the healthiest herbaceous plant. Closing credits for this coleus will roll well before the first frost.
Summer flowering bulbs such as dahlias and gladiolus should be lifted after the first light frost but before the ground freezes. Allow frost to kill top growth back, then let the bulbs dry out before putting them into storage. Remember to keep them in a cool dry place where they won’t freeze.

Houseplants will need a cleanup before their return indoors. Inspect carefully for insects and disease, and begin their journey gradually inside from the sunny outdoors.

Peonies and hardy mums can be planted any time this month.

Don’t do any more pruning of trees and shrubs beyond essentials, such as removing dead limbs.

Do not pick Brussels sprouts until after a hard frost, when they’ll taste even better.

Dig potatoes when their tops die back.

Harvest green tomatoes before first frost. Wrap in newspaper and store in a single layer in a cool location for gradual ripening indoors.

Plant garlic now for next year.

Gather and discard diseased leaf and twig materials.

Think about planting a cover crop in the vegetable garden as areas go out of use. The top growth will protect the soil from erosion and compaction. The roots of the cover crop will aid in improving aeration and drainage of the soil. Both top growth and root matter will add organic matter when the ground is tilled in the spring. Treat your vegetable garden to a cover crop and it will reward you for years to come.
“My good man, have you never looked into the heart of a flower?”
Clark Gable (1901-1960)

Gardening Questions?
Call The Master Gardeners!

In Albany County: Call 765-3514 weekdays from 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM and ask to speak to a Master Gardener. You can also email your questions by visiting their website at www.ccealbany.com

In Schenectady County: Call 372-1622 weekdays from 9:00 AM to Noon, follow the prompt to speak to a Master Gardener and press #1. You can also email your questions by visiting their website at http://counties.cce.cornell.edu/schenectady/

In Rensselaer County: Call 272-4210 weekdays from 9:00 AM to Noon and ask to speak to a Master Gardener. You can also email your questions to Dhc3@cornell.edu

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