

THE GARDEN GATE

A Community Newsletter by the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners

FEBRUARY 2021



INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

- Happenings, p. 2
- February Garden Tips, p. 3
- Houseplants and the Unwelcome Guest, p. 5
- Plant Clinic Zooms ahead, p. 6
- Pest of the Month: Eastern Tent Caterpillar, p. 7
- Seed Starting Hints, p. 8

Welcome, everyone, to the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners brand-new community newsletter.

Each month we will be bringing you relevant seasonal horticultural information for Rockbridge County. If you enjoy this newsletter, please pass it on.

Virginia Master Gardeners are Virginia Cooperative Extension volunteers, extending horticultural and environmental outreach across the commonwealth. Volunteers receive fifty hours of training and are required to do, at the minimum, 20 hours of volunteering per year and 8 hours of Continuing Education to maintain their MG status.

The Rockbridge MG organization is a very active one with a membership that hovers around 100. You will see us working at local plant clinics (now virtually on Zoom), maintaining school yard gardens (Waddell Elementary and Natural Bridge Elementary), historic gardens (Stonewall Jackson House Museum), native plant gardens (Boxerwood and the Buena Vista Visitors Center), answering questions at the Help Desk in the Extension Office, giving programs and workshops, or manning our May plant sale. We are always looking for new volunteers. Our next class will be in 2022. If this is something that interests you, contact Tamara Teaff at tteaffbcps@gmail.com. We are already starting to recruit.

HAPPENINGS...

Wednesday, February 10 – Friday, February 12. “Seek Inspiration Globally, Garden Locally”. Lewis Ginter Botanical Gardens Virtual Winter Symposium and CVNLA Short Course. \$40 per day. Wednesday’s speakers include Rick Darke, Larry Weiner, Carolyn Mullet, Page Dickey and Kelly Norris, all very well-known garden experts and excellent speakers. https://apm.activecommunities.com/lewisginter/Activity_Search/1249

Wednesday, February 10, 5pm. “Seed Starting 101”, Allegheny Mountain Institute at Augusta Health. Free. To register: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/seed-starting-101-tickets-137800704617>

Saturday, February 13, 11am. “Tips for Indoor Plants and Outdoor Plant Needs... Cold Frames? Shrub Coverings? or Hoop Row Coverings?” Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners. Free. Please register by 10am, Friday, February 13. Registration link is on the home page of www.ramga.org

Monday, February 15, 3pm. “U.S. Organic: What Does it Really Mean? Piedmont Master Gardeners. Free live event at <https://thecentercville.org/calendar/event/14643/>

Thursday, February 18, 7pm. “Planning the Garden: Selecting and Starting Seeds”, Shenandoah Valley Master Gardeners. Free webinar. To register: <http://nsvmga.org/events/2021-webinars/>

Saturday, February 20. “Grow the Good Life: The Virginia State Specialty Crop Program (featuring blackberries, raspberries, turmeric and ginger)” and “A Crash Course on Composting”, sponsored by the Bedford Master Gardeners, \$15. To register: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/grow-the-good-life-winter-2021-part-1-tickets-136091036955>

Saturday February 20, 2pm. Virtual Garden Basics Workshop: “Starting from Seed”, Piedmont Master Gardeners. To register: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf2Vt14JOORNNaOTX_tgqt9Qh2c5CnIcw7-c9n2O_GGD2xKw/viewform

Saturday, February 27. “Grow the Good Life: Critter Control in Your Backyard” and “Thinking Outside the Window Box -Gardening for Small Spaces”, \$15. To register:

FEBRUARY GARDEN TIPS

By Donna Campagna

So, you are wanting to start an early garden. If you're like me it's because you're getting the itch to dig in the dirt or you wanted to get started on producing a crop before the bugs arrive. If so, you will need to prepare for possible frost. There are several ways to do that: cold frames, floating row covers, black and clear plastic.

Cold Frames

February is a good time to construct cold frames if you have not already. They are the best place to harden off transplants you have grown inside. You will need to give plants about 10 days to acclimate before planting in the garden. Also, you will probably be using your cold frame during March, April, and May as you continue to prepare your plants for transplanting into your garden. Cold frames have a dual purpose as they can be used in the fall as well, usually late Aug-Sept to grow spinach, lettuce, and kale.



www.Mastergardener.extension.wisc.edu

There are several books available at your local library as well as some YouTube videos that have instructions for building cold frames. Cold frames can be stationary or portable. The advantage of a portable frame is you can move it wherever it's needed around your garden.

Floating Row Cover

A floating row cover is a lightweight but durable spun bonded polypropylene fabric used to cover plants in the open garden. It literally floats on top of the plants

without harming them. It can also be placed on hoops if desired. The edges are held down with soil or boards. Floating row covers can be used in the spring and fall and folded and stored in between uses. The fabric can be purchased in different widths and lengths to suit any need you may have.

In the spring it can be used to protect cool weather transplants like broccoli, cabbage and cauliflower that are ready to be planted in early April in our area. Row covers help to moderate the plant environment. They should be applied at the time of planting, but do not pull it down too tight, leave some slack. Secure the edges with dirt or boards. If covering transplants, remove the cover when the afternoon temperatures reach 80 degrees and stays that temperature for most of the afternoon.

For plants that have growing tips it is best to use hoops with your row cover to not damage the tips where fruit will appear. They can be purchased, or you can use heavy wire, plastic conduit or PVC pipe, rubber tubing, etc.

Floating row covers can be used to warm the soil in the spring to help speed germination as well. When the seeds have germinated and have about 2 leaves the covers can be removed. They are useful again in the fall to protect established plants from frost and to extend the growing season. Row covers will protect most crops when the temperature is as low as 28 degrees.

Most mail order seed catalogs carry floating row covers so it is a good time to order them when you are making your initial seed order in January or February.

Black and Clear Plastic

Black plastic can be used to suppress weeds and warm the soil in the spring. Clear plastic stretched over hoops can be used to cover crops. However, there are problems with both types. If not anchored, both can be blown away. Also, most black plastic will disintegrate in one season and disposal can be a problem. Clear plastic should be stapled to a wooden frame such as to the lid of a cold frame.

VEGETABLES OF THE MONTH

Outside Planting:

Peas, Onions, Spinach and Parsley can all be planted in the last week of February.

Peas, Onions and Spinach can be planted until the last week in March.

Inside Under Lights:

Cabbage can be started on February 5th.

Broccoli and Sweet Potatoes, rooted in jars of water, can be started around February 10th.

Cauliflower can be started around February 20th

References:

Beckett, Ken, S. Bradley, N. Kingsbury and T. Newbury, 1999, *Gardening Basics*

Johnston, Nancy E., 1995, *Dirty Knees*

Readers Digest, 1978, *Illustrated Guide to Gardening*

Houseplants and the Unwelcomed Houseplant Guest

By Karen Carleton

I am going to tell you about two common houseplant pests that affect three types of plants that would be found in most homes in Rockbridge County. The three plants that I will discuss are the Philodendron, Spider Plant, and the Boston fern. They are easy to grow. Usually requiring moderate light to grow indoors, they will let you know when they need to be watered. These plants are very forgiving even for those indoor gardeners with a supposed “black thumb”.

Philodendron is a forgiving plant for a beginner. It needs the soil to become slightly dry between watering. The best part of the plant is that you can take the young stem of a new growth and put it in the soil of the same pot, and it will give you a new plant.

Spider plant is another easy to grow plant and it too likes its soil to be slightly dry between watering. This is a great hanging plant due to the stems that grow out from the mother plant and at the end of the long stems are baby spider plants.

Boston fern or any fern for that matter, likes humidity, which is the reason one finds them in bathrooms. They, as a species, like to be watered lightly but often, because overwatering will cause root rot. The unwelcomed house guests that would affect all three plants are pests. Their names are Mealybugs and Scale. The Mealybug is a small piercing-sucking insect found where the leaf meets the stalk of the leaf stem. They usually appear as small white cottony masses at the leaf stalk, according to Barbara Pleasant in her book [The Complete Houseplant Survival Manual](#). The best way to deal with them is by hand. You can either use a cotton swab dipped in alcohol or pick them from plant stems and leaves with tweezers. The Iowa State University Extension and Outreach also suggests the above method for any lightly infested plants. This pest can easily spread to other plants within the home. The method by how they come into your home is by a plant that was infected in the store, garden center, etc.



Mealy bug infestation. Colorado State Extension

The next pest is called Scale, also an insect that attacks a lot of house plants. Their method of attack is to suck the plant juices or sap out of the plant stem. They are noticed on plants that have small bumps or a sticky sap on the stem of the plant. They attach themselves to the plant and suck the juice or sap from the plant. Depending on how heavy the infestation is, it will kill the plant. They are usually found on stems and leaf undersides. To get rid of them the Iowa State University Extension and Outreach suggests you dab with an alcohol cotton swab on lightly affected plants. If the plant is heavily affected, throw the plant out because it could affect the other houseplants in your home. Barbara Pleasant suggests using a soft cloth dipped in warm soapy water to remove scale from a plant.

My hope is that your houseplants always stay healthy and give enjoyment in your home.

References:

Pleasant, Barbara. The Complete Houseplant Survival Manual, Storey Publishing, 2012.

<https://www.extension.iastate.edu/>

Plant Clinic Zooms Ahead!

By Vera Winkler

You discover an intruder in your garden. You are sure it was not there a few days ago. To pull it? Not to pull it? That is the question. You think, is it a native or nonnative plant? Worse, you think, is it an invasive plant? Gardeners everywhere have found themselves debating what to do with unwanted specimens in their gardens.

All gardeners, whether novice or experienced, have questions about their gardens that perplex them and demand answers. But sometimes the answers are hard to come by. Who do you ask? Is it your neighbor, a friend, or the local nursery?

Maybe all of them. But one of most reliable and informative sources for answers is Rockbridge Area Master Gardener Association (RAMGA) Plant Clinic.

In the past, you could find Master Gardeners stationed at Plant Clinic tents at local farmer markets and area events. Currently, like so many organizations, the pandemic has forced the Rockbridge Master Gardeners' Plant Clinic team to rethink how to it can continue to best serve the community. After many

Zoom(™) virtual meetings, the Plant Clinic team came up with three initiatives.

The first initiative called for abandoning, at least temporarily, the marketplace setting. Instead, the Plant Clinic will host monthly virtual meetings where local gardeners can engage with Master Gardeners to ask questions and get information. The Plant Clinic team feels certain that the community will quickly discover how convenient and easy it is to log onto the www.RAMGA.org

website and register for the monthly virtual Plant Clinic meeting. The dates and times for these Plant Clinics will be published in the Lexington News-Gazette and in this newsletter.

The second project led by Dr.

Karen Lyons is to deliver pertinent information about gardening as well as local environmental concerns via newsletters and social media. Master Gardeners seek to help educate and promote responsible behavior through their RAMGA website, RAMGA Facebook page and the new RAMGA Community Newsletter.

The Plant Clinic team also concluded to engage new residents, too. What better way to promote the work of the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners than by providing contact

“We’ve successfully hosted two meetings already” says Master Gardener, Peggy Agnor

information and services in a Welcome Bag. Master Gardener, Anne Riffey-Buckner, led this effort and quickly found that Lexington Chamber of Commerce would include RAMGA information in their 150 Welcome Bags distributed each year. A possible outgrowth of this project is an offer for a Master Gardener to visit the new resident's home. The objective would be to provide the new owner with information about local fauna, frost dates, and soil testing. The visits would provide a unique opportunity to demonstrate the importance of plants native to Virginia and particular to Rockbridge County.

The three projects, Virtual Plant Clinics, RAMGA newsletters, and Master Gardener Welcome Bags have the endorsement of Tom Stanley, VA Tech Extension Agent in Rockbridge County. He has been helpful and encouraging, for which we are grateful.

Each initiative strives to influence as well as to educate community members; most important to demonstrate that your own backyard can serve as a venue for preserving, enhancing, and sustaining the natural biodiversity AND BEAUTY OF ROCKBRIDGE COUNTY. We must work together to protect this beautiful community we all care so deeply for.

From the Help Desk: Bug of the Month

By Karen Lyons

It is difficult to think about Spring as the leaves fall and the temperatures drop. But it will be here before you know it, with all its splendors and also challenges. One of those challenges is the infamous tent caterpillar, *Malacosoma americanum*, recognized for those unsightly webs of squirming insects spoiling the beauty of our fruit and landscape trees.

As MG Katherine Smith points out there are two good times when gardeners can intercept this pest's life cycle, and one of them would be now. During winter, the egg clusters that were laid in late summer become visible and are easy to remove. (See photo for close-up of egg mass.)

The next opportunity comes as the unfound egg clusters hatch in spring and begin to weave their unsightly tents, usually in a tree crotch. These can be manually removed by inserting a stick and

twisting to loosen the web. If left undisturbed, the caterpillars will begin to wander off after they have either defoliated their birth-tree or the leaves become too tough for them to ingest.



Eastern tent caterpillar egg mass. Credit: Alan T. Eaton

Mother nature may assist in control of the tent caterpillar through viruses, fungus or predation by small mammals, spiders, or birds, especially Blue Jays and Cuckoos.

For more information, refer to Fact Sheet by the New Hampshire Extension "Fall webworm & Eastern Tent Caterpillar," <https://extension.unh.edu/resource/fall>

So, You Want to Start Seeds This Year? Some Helpful Hints...

By Faith Vosburgh

Read your seed packets. There is valuable cultural information on the packets that will help you become more successful in starting seeds.

Use wide, flat containers to prevent overcrowding. For smaller seeds, I like to use aluminum cake pans. I punch holes in the bottom of the pans, fill the pans with a soilless mix (my preference is ProMix with some perlite mixed in). I wet the mix before filling the containers. The soil should be moist, not sopping wet. For large seeds I use plastic seed trays called plug flats. They come in a variety of sizes. I can usually find them at the Farmers Coop in Staunton, but they are also readily available online (and cheaper) through a number of sources. You can reuse these containers every year, but they must be clean and free of pathogens. Wash them in a 10% bleach solution and let them air dry.

Fill the containers to about $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ " below the top of the container. Firm and level the medium.

For the tiny seeds, sprinkle them lightly over the surface of the container and tamp down gently, making sure the seeds are in direct contact with the soil. Use an old kitchen sieve to sift the soil 2x the seed diameter. You could also sprinkle vermiculite on top instead. For large seeds, after you have filled the plug flats or your containers with the soilless mix, poke a hole in each cell with a pencil or a bamboo skewer and drop in two or three seeds and cover with extra soilless mx.

Mist the newly planted seeds with water.

Label your containers. You can use Popsicle sticks, plant tags, or anything waterproof. Sometimes I cut red plastic solo cups into strips and mark them with sharpie pens.

Place the cake pans or pots in empty flats. Cover the entire flat with clear plastic to preserve moisture. I like to reuse extra-large Ziplock bags that I save from year to year, but any plastic will do. I have often used old dry cleaner bags. Do not let your seeds dry out. The advantage

of using plastic flats to hold the containers is that you can just add water to the flats and the pots will wick up the moisture.



Seeds need heat and light to germinate. This can be somewhat tricky if you are starting your seeds in March when the weather fluctuates. I have several heat mats that I use to start those seeds that have a long germination time. I usually start seeds in the beginning of April in an unheated greenhouse. Our last frost date is around May 15 or so, so that gives me about 6 or 7 weeks lead time.

Monitor your seeds often, every day being preferable.

When seedlings emerge, remove the plastic covering.

If your seedlings suddenly droop and die, they are probably suffering from a fungus which leads to “dampening off”. Too much moisture and not enough air circulation will create this condition. If this happens, you will have to start over. A small fan will help with air circulation.

After the first true set of leaves appear, start fertilization every two weeks. I use diluted fish emulsion, but Miracle Gro or something similar will also work.

For plants grown in cell packs, I let the seedlings grow a bit until the true leaves are a good size before transplanting. That way it is easier to pop them out the container and the root mass is bigger. For the smaller seeds that I have scattered over the surface of the cake pan containers, once they have their true leaves, I prick them out with an old teaspoon or a knife and plant them individually in containers filled with the soilless mix. Handle the seedlings by their leaves, not the long stringy roots. Again, fertilize every couple of weeks.

When it is time to move the plants outside, they will need to go through a period of hardening off. The temperature and light change are too great for tender seedlings to go directly into the ground. Plants need to be moved to a shaded location with temperatures around 50 degrees. If the night temperatures are going to be below 45 degrees, bring the flats inside. Gradually acclimate the plants to more light and reduce watering. Hardening slows plant growth and makes the plants sturdier.

Some good sources for starting seeds:

Relf, Diane. “Seed for the Garden”.

https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/426/426-316/426-316_pdf.pdf

Relf, Diane. “Plant Propagation from Seed”.

https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/426/426-001/426-001.pdf

A great chart from Virginia Tech on when to start your vegetables according to your first and last frost dates: <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-331/426-331.html>

The Garden Gate, a monthly newsletter by the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners, www.ramga.org

Editor: Faith Vosburgh, fvosburgh@gmail.com

Contributors: Donna Campagna, Karen Carleton, Vera Winkler, Karen Lyons

To subscribe to this newsletter, click on

<https://www.ramga.org/what-s-happening>



Virginia Cooperative Extension programs and employment are open to all, regardless of age, color, disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, veteran status, or any other basis protected by law. An equal opportunity/affirmative action employer. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Virginia State University, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperating. Edwin J. Jones, Director, Virginia Cooperative Extension, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg; M. Ray McKinnie, Administrator, 1890 Extension Program, Virginia State University, Petersburg.