Upcoming Events

Jr. Master Gardeners - January 17, 2012, 6:00 p.m. Youth ages 10 and up gain hands on experience with gardening while learning leadership and citizenship skills. Meeting will take at Wanda Cohen’s on Bethel Drive.

Beekeeping School - Wednesday, February 1, 2012 ending Wednesday, March 28, 2012, 7:00 - 9:00 p.m. Registration is limited to 15 participants. Cost is $35.00 per person, which includes local membership and mentoring through the first season so beekeepers will have experienced help in the first year. Class consists of 2 components: classroom discussion and in the hive practical hands-on throughout the course. Minnesota hygienic bee packages have been ordered. Beehives of new beekeepers who participate in this program will be setup at the county apiary so experienced mentors can help our new beekeepers. Hive rental is available for the first season for a small fee so there is not a huge expense initially. Ownership is available when the beekeeper is ready.

Master Gardener Course - March 6, 2012 – May 8, 2012 at 9:00 a.m. Classes will be held at the Hoke County Extension Center. Cost is $100.00, which covers the manual, nametag, and state dues. If you or someone you know would like to become a master gardener and enjoys working with the public contact the Extension Center to receive more information. Pre-registration is required by February 15, 2012. All participants must volunteer 40 hours the first year of class. Space is limited to 15 participants.

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Controlling Snails and Slugs in the Landscape

Snails and slugs belong to the mollusk family (the same one as oysters). They crawl along on a single “foot” over a thin layer of slime that they produce to ease their way. Snails carry a shell on their backs, and they can retreat into it when threatened. Slugs do not have shells. In our mild climate, snails and slugs are active and cause damage virtually year-round. They enjoy eating many of the cool-season bedding plants and vegetables in our gardens this time of year. But trees, shrubs and most ground covers and vines rarely are badly damaged by snails and slugs.

The damage snails and slugs cause is obvious but can be misdiagnosed. They eat holes in leaves and flowers and especially favor low-growing, succulent growth. Snails and slugs will be most active at night or on cloudy days during moist or wet mild weather and in beds that are regularly irrigated. Caterpillars also chew holes in leaves. Since the methods and pesticides for controlling them are different than for snails and slugs, it’s important to know which pest is causing the damage. The presence of slime trails — which look like meandering reflective, silver lines — indicate snails and slugs are the culprits. These may occur on concrete, pot sides or plant foliage. Caterpillars may leave behind dark pellet-like droppings, and this would confirm their activity. There also are leaf-eating beetles that chew holes in leaves, so they must be considered when holes in leaves are observed. Holes in the leaves of trees and shrubs are more likely to be caused by caterpillars or beetles than by snails and slugs.

Controlling snails and slugs requires perseverance, and it is best to use several techniques. The goal is to keep the population low enough to prevent an unacceptable amount of damage. The main strategies for snail and slug control involve baits, traps, hand picking and encouraging predators that eat them. Baits generally are available in the form of pellets, meal or liquid slurries. The snails and slugs must eat the bait for the active ingredient to work, so apply these materials in such a way that they are likely to be eaten. Follow label directions carefully. The chemicals in the baits are toxic to snails and slugs and will kill them if they eat the bait. Baits should be used regularly until new damage is reduced to tolerable levels.

Choose baits with iron phosphate as the active ingredient because those baits are safer to use. Beer traps are useful in monitoring and reducing the population of snails and slugs. To make a beer trap, sink a small plastic bowl up to its rim in the ground and fill it half full of beer. Any kind will do, but it should be fresh. Set the traps in areas where snails and slugs have been causing damage in the early evening after watering the yard. Empty and reset the traps daily until you stop catching very many pests in them. Traps also are a great way to monitor population levels. If you see holes in leaves and put out beer traps in the area and don’t catch any snails and/or slugs, the damage is more likely due to caterpillars. Hand picking is done at night with a flashlight and is not for the squeamish. It helps to wear latex gloves or use kitchen tongs to pick up the slimy creatures. Put them in a plastic bag and throw them away.
Several types of barriers will keep snails and slugs out of planting beds. The easiest to maintain are those made with copper flashing and screen. It is believed that copper barriers are effective because the copper reacts with the slime that snails and slugs secrete, causing a disruption in their nervous system similar to an electric shock. Finally, toads are excellent predators of snails and slugs and can consume large quantities of them. You can attract toads and keep them in your garden by providing a water source such as a small pond, pool or water garden, as well as cover for the toads to hide under during the day. Gardens with active populations of hungry toads rarely have major problems with snails and slugs.

**Feeding Birds in the Winter**

You’ll have good company if you maintain a bird feeder this winter. A government survey found that more than 60 million Americans share your enthusiasm for feeding birds. Anyone who has ever fed wild birds a commercially packaged birdseed mixture soon observes that birds eat some seeds faster than others. But until recently, very little scientific information was available on seed preference to help you in selecting the types of seed most desired by the birds in your neighborhood. Some seeds are prized by many birds, some are ignored by most, and others can be used to selectively attract certain birds or discourage them from using the feeder. Birds also differ in how they feed. Some prefer to feed from elevated feeders while others prefer the ground. Not all birds are attracted to seed in the winter. Mesh bags of suet are choice foods for woodpeckers, nuthatches, and brown creepers. Winter-feeding can be a rewarding experience and offers the best opportunity to observe birds up close. With some understanding of bird food preferences, you can maximize your results.

**CLEANING BIRD FEEDERS AND OTHER GARDENING TIPS**

Cleaning bird feeders, checking houseplants for insects, and propagating African violets are some of the gardening tips for this month. Birds deserve clean food surfaces as much as we do. Every few weeks bring the feeders inside and wash them with soap and water into which a little bleach has been added (one part bleach to nine parts water). Rinse thoroughly. If you have a heated bird bath (a good idea if you don't), make sure to clean it every few days too. I have an old brush just for this purpose. Don't use your kitchen one that is used on eating surfaces. Of course these can just be cleaned outdoors when filling them.
If you’ve noticed disease in the past on plants near your bird feeder, particularly if infected parts are covered with white fluffy growth, the problem could be a fungus that's contained in sunflower seeds. In addition, sunflower seed hulls themselves can impede the growth of certain plants, so to be on the safe side, move your feeder away from your gardens. If that's not possible, periodically clean up any seeds and hulls around the base of the feeder and destroy them. Spring is a good time to do this with a rake, shovel, and wheelbarrow.

Aphids and spider mites may be multiplying like crazy amidst your houseplants, especially if they are grouped close together. Isolate each plant and inspect it closely with a magnifying glass if necessary. Treat these pests by holding the plant and pot upside down and submerging the foliage in a sink full of soapy water (wrap aluminum foil over the soil to keep it from falling out). Use a mild detergent, or weak solution, so not to damage the plant leaf surfaces. In severe cases, spray the plant with insecticidal soap or similar insecticide for indoors.

If that geranium or coleus you're overwintering inside has sent out spindly new shoots, keep trimming it back until the increased sunlight can support sturdier growth. If you have low light, keeping the plant in a cooler location (50 to 60 degrees F) may help.

To get off to a clean start with seed starting this year, disinfect flats and pots in soapy water with bleach added: one part bleach to nine parts water. The longer you can soak them, the better. Then rinse well. Be sure to scrub off any soil before this disinfecting rinse.

Now is a good time to repot any houseplants with roots coming out of the drainage holes. Choose a pot one size larger than the current pot, remove the plant, trim any roots that are too long, and repot using fresh potting soil.

African violets are easy to propagate by leaf cuttings. Snip off a leaf, dip the cut end in a rooting hormone powder (available at garden stores), and stick the cutting in a pot filled with vermiculite or sand. Cover the pot with a perforated clear plastic bag and keep the soil moist. In a few weeks you'll have new plants, which you can pot up separately. Orchid flowers are favorite hiding spots for mealy bugs, and scale insects favor the flower stalks and undersides of leaves. Inspect each flower closely, especially the backside where it attaches to the flower stem. Remove insects with a cotton swab dipped in alcohol.

What to Do in February and March

~Pecan Trees:

If you enjoy gathering pecans from your pecan trees for your seasonal pies then its time to fertilize them for next season. Fertilize home-landscaped pecan trees at least once a year, preferably in February. Pecan trees are heavy feeders and require 4 pounds of 10-10-10 fertilizer per inch of trunk diameter. If the tree’s trunk is 5 inches then you would multiply 5 inches times 4 pounds of fertilizer, in which you would apply 20 pounds of fertilizer. When applying fertilizer you can broadcast it by hand, however, to evenly distribute the fertilizer it would be best to use a handheld or push spreader.
Besides adequate fertilization, pecan trees need proper sanitation. Keep the floor area around the tree clean of limbs, old nuts and leaves. This debris provides a home for pests, and you definitely don’t want pests. Backyard pecan pests include the pecan weevil, pecan scab and pecan phylloxera. Pecan weevils are the tiny carpenters that bore the pin-sized hole often seen on nuts from homegrown trees. Picking up and destroying the infested nuts as they fall can control pecan weevils. Nuts should be picked up at least two times per week. If foliar sprays are not possible, spray tree trunks, crotches, bases of scaffold limbs and the soil underneath tree, from trunk to just beyond drip line, with Sevin. Use $\frac{1}{4}$ lb active carbaryl (Sevin) per 10 gallons of water per tree. Begin sprays when weevils start to emerge, normally the first week in August and continue weekly sprays until harvest season is over. Pecan phylloxera is a small wasp-like insect that stings the leaves of pecan trees. Inside the leaf, the female lays an egg that forms a gall on the leaf. It looks like a bump on the leaf and cuts down on production. Pecan scab is a disease that is best prevented by planting scab resistant varieties. The best control of all pests and diseases is prevention, with the proper care and maintenance your pecan tree will be around for generations to come.

~Roses:
After February 14 (Valentines Day) but before mid March, you need to prune your roses. Remove all dead and old canes. Small twiggy growth should be removed from the center of the shrub. If there are many canes, they should be reduced to 5 or 6 of the strongest and newest canes. If you have only 3 or 4 health canes, that is sufficient to get a bush off to a new start for the new season. Canes should be shortened to 15 to 24 inches. The larger the diameter of the cane the longer you can leave the cane. Make sure the pith (interior) of the cane is white or a greenish white. If on the first cut, you find the pith of the cane to be dark or tan continue to cut back to the next node. Cut just above a node and at a 30 to 45 degree angle pointing outward. Don’t let the bush intimidate you and don’t be afraid you will harm it if you cut it back aggressively. Rose bushes thrive on being pruned and this process stimulates new growth. Around mid March, you will need to start applying a high nitrogen fertilizer (36-6-6) water-soluble solution. Spring blooming climbers should not be pruned until they have finished blooming.

~Crepe Myrtle: Ideal to trim January - March. Although some people like to top these hearty shrubs, commonly referred to as “Crepe Murder”, this is not a recommended pruning technique. When you top these plants you cause the plant to generate weak branches leading to stubby knots on the end of the branches. They can split and severely damage the plant.
Just trim and shape Crepe Myrtles. Remove old seedpods and crossing branches. Remove many of the interior branches to allow new growth and flowers a place to grow. Remove new growth at base of shrub often. This will promote better flowering later. Flowers grow on NEW growth. Water, fertilize, and remove dead blossoms until mid-August for almost continuous summer bloom.
and Rose Of Sharon: The time to trim is now.
You can hard prune these bushes anytime now through March, but the best time to trim them is after mid February. Only disbud or lightly trim to shape after March. Cut bushes 18 inches to waist high above the ground. Flowers grow on NEW growth. After blooms fade, prune off old flowers and new blooms will emerge. You can do this until August. The butterflies will love you for this.

Other Gardening Chores:
- Don’t remove mulch from perennials too early. A warm day may make you think spring is almost here, but there may be more cold weather yet to come. Watch for signs of growth in early spring bulbs. When foliage is 1 inch high, gradually start removing mulch. Cloudy days are best for the initial exposure of the leaves to strong sunlight, which can burn tender foliage.
- If you do get early growth and see bulbs that break the surface (which is very common this year) just re-mulch to protect the foliage.
- Ageratum, begonia, marigold, and petunia seeds can be started indoors now. Sprinkle the small seeds sparingly onto moist soil and gently press them in. Start slow-developing flowers such as alyssum, coleus, dusty miller, geranium, impatiens, marigold, petunia, phlox, salvia, vinca, and verbena.
- Order perennial plants and bulbs now for cut flowers this summer. Particularly good choices are phlox, daisy, dahlia, cosmos, aster, gladiolus, and lily.
- Check stored bulbs, tubers, and corms. Discard any that are soft or diseased.
If you are planning to add shade trees to your landscape, here are a few things you should know. Some types of trees have roots that may invade drain fields, crack walks, and damage foundation walls, so plan the placement and species of the trees to avoid problems. For instance, poplar and ash are known for cracking walls, and should never be planted near a house or walls. Keep these species at the perimeter of the yard. Maple roots can raise heavy concrete sidewalks, and willow and crabapple trees can invade drainage fields with their fibrous roots.
- Late winter is the time to prune many deciduous trees. Look over your plants now and remove dead, dying, unsightly parts of the tree, sprouts growing at or near the base of the tree trunk, crossed branches, and V-shaped crotches.
- Remember that plants require water during the winter to replace water lost due to wind desiccation and lack of rain or snow.
- If bird feeding has been a favorite activity this winter, plant trees and shrubs that provides cover.
Interior Gardening tips for This Month:

- An interesting indoor fern to try is the brake fern, *Pteris cretica*. It grows better in a sunny window than most ferns.
- Resume a fertilizer schedule for indoor plants. Never fertilize a plant in dry soil. Remember that fertilizer is a salt could burn roots, so water your plants thoroughly. It's better to water plants a couple of hours before fertilizing.
- Once a month, water your acid-loving house plants, such as gardenia using a solution of 1 teaspoon of vinegar to 1 quart of water. Be careful, as too much vinegar can kill the plant so make sure you use the proper vinegar to water ratio.
- When placing plants around the home, remember as a general rule, plants with thick leaves can take lower light levels better than those with thin leaves.
- Check all five growing factors if your houseplants are not growing well. Light, temperature, nutrients, moisture, and humidity must be favorable to provide good growth.
- Amaryllis bulbs may not bloom if they are in too large a pot. There should be no more than one inch of space on each side of the bulb. At least one third of the bulb should be above the soil line.

Herb Tips for This Month:

- Thyme, a low-growing, woody perennial herb, should be started from seed every two to three years because older plants produce coarser, lower grade stems and leaves. Thyme seeds often germinate poorly when planted directly in the soil, so it is advisable to start plants indoors and transplant later.
- Start herb seeds now in your own mini-greenhouse made from a plastic soda bottle or milk carton. When using a plastic soda bottle, cut off the top two-thirds and fill the bottom third with rooting medium. Make several short cuts around the perimeter, and plant the herb seeds. Put the top back on, using the cuts to lock it into place. When using a milk carton, you also need a plastic bag and a wire coat hanger or other stout wire. Staple the carton shut and cut away one side. Lay the carton on its side, fill with potting media, plant seeds, and add water. Cut the wire into 8-inch lengths, and bend into arches. Place three or four wire arches in the carton so that as the seedlings grow they will not touch the plastic. Place the carton in the plastic bag and seal. Keep your mini-greenhouse in a warm, bright location out of direct sunlight. Open the bag or bottle top daily to check on seedlings. Add water when necessary.
- After a long winter inside (usually with less-than-sufficient sunlight) scented geraniums (yes, this is an herb) often get leggy. Now is the time to cut them back to encourage shorter, fuller growth.
Fruits and Vegetable Gardening Tips for This Month:
A frequently overlooked factor in vegetable garden planning is the date of the family vacation. Choose planting dates and varieties carefully, so your garden won't be ready for a full harvest when you are out of town.

- Even under ideal storage conditions, some vegetable seeds have a fairly short life and probably will not be good one or two years after purchase. These include sweet corn, onion, okra and beans.
- Don't start your vegetable plants indoors too early. Six weeks ahead of the expected planting date is early enough for the fast-growth species such as cabbage. Eight weeks allows enough time for the slower-growing types such as peppers.
- Early varieties of onions are most productive when grown from transplants (small plants) or from sets (small, onion bulbs grown from seed the previous season). Direct seeding is satisfactory for growing green onions or for late varieties.
- Before working an area in the garden for early spring planting, check the soil. It should be dry enough to crumble in your hand before you work it. The temperature of the soil should be at least 50 to 60 degrees before adding new seeds or plants.
- Gardening in a raised bed improves drainage and gives an earlier start in areas with cold, wet soil.
- This year plan to grow at least one new vegetable that you've never grown before; it may be better than what you are already growing. The new dwarf varieties on the market use less space while producing more food per square foot.
- When planning your vegetable gardens add a few extra plants just in case a few of them succumb to some disease or other problem later in the growing season.

Even the most experienced vegetable gardener will lose some plants every season. Also, plant a few extra for your neighbors, your local soup kitchen or food bank.

- Pruning aging apple trees is largely a job of renovation followed by renewal of fruiting wood. The pruning must be moderate and spread out over two or three years to avoid stimulating excessive growth and/or causing injury to large limbs from sudden over exposure to sunlight. Such pruning consists of gradually lowering tree height to 18 feet or less, removing surplus scaffold limbs, and eliminating weak, damaged, and dead wood.
- If you want to raise fruit in your garden, try grapes, blueberries, blackberries, or strawberries. It is much less difficult to succeed with them than with tree fruits, and you'll get much faster results.
- Producing insect- and disease-free fruit trees requires a thorough spray program, proper pruning, and good cultural practices. Give thought to this before planting a backyard orchard.
- Peaches grow best when maintained with an open center (no central leader). Keep
three or four strong, scaffold branches evenly distributed around the trunk. Limbs that branch out at a 60-degree angle are preferred, but spreaders can be used to widen narrow crotch angles.

Grapevine pruning’s can be made into attractive wreaths. Decorate them with cutout hearts, dried flowers, or bird nests, or shape them into a heart over a wire frame for use as Valentine gifts.

Blueberries are somewhat self-sterile. Be sure to plan for more than one variety to enhance the pollination necessary for fruiting. Highbush blueberries make attractive ornamental hedges with bright-red, fall color.

Prune fruit trees and grapes in late January through the end of February after the worst of the winter cold has passed, but before spring growth begins. For disease and insect control, cut out dead wood and dispose of the pruning.

Fertilize fruit trees as soon as possible after the ground thaws, but before blossoming begins.

Nut and fruit trees should be planted three to four weeks before the last killing frost in spring.

Fruit trees, such as peaches, pears, apples, and plums, can be sprayed now with dormant oils to reduce insect problems.

Apple and pear trees are best trained with a modified central leader. Prune to maintain a pyramidal shape -- wide at the bottom and gradually tapering toward the top. Contact the Hoke County Extension Center for complete instructions.

**Centipede Lawn Maintenance Calendar**

**Mowing:** Remove lawn debris (rocks, sticks and leaves). Never burn off centipede grass to remove excessive debris.

**Fertilization:** Do NOT fertilize centipede grass at this time. Submit a soil sample for analysis every 3 years to determine nutrient requirements. Contact me at the Hoke County Extension Center for details. Apply lime or sulfur ONLY if the soil test recommends it.

**Watering:** Water occasionally during dry spells.

**Weed control:** Apply broadleaf herbicides as necessary to control chickweed and henbit. Centipede grass is sensitive to certain herbicides (like 2,4-D), so be careful and follow label directions exactly. Selected herbicides (like atrazine or simazine) can be applied in November or December to control annual bluegrass and several winter annual broadleaf weeds.

(Source: “Extension’s Successful Gardener North Carolina State University)
A Different Kind of Busy

Every time I write a newsletter, I reflect on what has happened in the past years and the questions I receive regarding that particular season. This year I will be going into my fourth year as a Horticulture Extension Agent in Hoke County. This program would not be possible without your support and I just wanted to say Thank You! I am certainly charmed and challenged by the work here. There is no typical day’ here at the office.

Although the clients (you) haven’t been calling and dropping by with plant problems and questions, we continue to work on programs and activities for the year, it’s a different kind of busy. Things are quiet on the surface, but things are hopping underneath. If there are workshops you would like to see offered in 2012 please call or email me with your ideas.

Looking forward to spring,

Mary Hollingsworth

County Extension Agent for Horticulture