



# High on the Desert Cochise County Master Gardener Newsletter

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**Penelope Hinkley Artio  
October 29, 1956—April 17, 2007**

## Memories of Penny Artio

This month, you will have to forgive me; I will stray from my usual plant profile and remember a person that was a good buddy and friend, Penny Artio. She was the Grounds Supervisor at the University of Arizona South and she didn't mind putting her hands in good old dirt.

The first time I met Penny, a few years ago, she was the speaker at one of our Sierra Vista Area Gardeners Club meetings. At the time she was working at one of the biggest local landscaping businesses. I was impressed with her knowledge and her presentation. Over the years we got to know each other better through our interest in the Master Gardeners Organization. She was the President of the organization one year.

Even as I never had the chance to get to meet her in her own surroundings, we both had such busy lives, we

shared many interests. Just like me, she was a Master Gardener, she loved plants and could make them grow. Just like me, she loved animals and enjoyed taking care of them. Just like me, she liked nature and preserving it for generations to enjoy, and just like me she liked the outdoors and the desert. Also, just like me, she was a work-a-holic, burning the candle at both ends.

I got to know Penny better when I started taking my water plants to the Bisbee Farmers Market. Her space at the Market was across from mine. At times, when business was slow, I used to wander over to her display to admire the wonderful drought tolerant plants she displayed. She always had time for a chat, and I loved her sharp humor. She was always good for a healthy laugh.

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I also had the privilege to work with Penny for the High on the Desert Conference. Our job was to get door prizes, vendors and advertisers.

I used to kid her about her fancy name. Penelope, a beautiful name taken from the Greek Mythology and fitting for her. Penelope, the Queen of the Island of Ithaca and the wife of the lost hero, Odysseus, lost for seven years after the war of Troy. Penelope, strong, upright, honest, faithful, and enduring. What a good choice of name for a wonderful person.

Of course, I always found something I just couldn't live without and slowly my little garden filled up with her wonderful plants. Soon she started to call me her best customer, and we both had a good laugh. Many times we threatened to visit each others gardens, but unfortunately it never happened—so much to do, so little time. This is life, so many things we want to do and never take the time to do, and then comes the day it is too late.

When I wander through my little desert garden, I look at my plants and most of them have a

story to tell or remind me of some wonderful people I met in my life. I sometimes cannot remember something I need to do if I don't write it down, but I never forget where my plants come from and the stories attached to them. I am able to point out every single plant I bought from Penny and the words we exchanged over them. Now, every time I look at them they will remind me of Penny, the wonderful person I once met—a free spirit and nature lover.

Penny Artio left a deep impact on this community and I know she will not be forgotten.

*Angel Rutherford, Master Gardener*



## May Reminders

- ◆ Deep water
- ◆ Plant warm season crops
- ◆ Check tree ties
- ◆ Control pests
- ◆ Control weeds  
(*Controlling Weeds*—a bulletin available from the Cooperative Extension)

## Cuttings 'N' Clippings

✧ The next CCMGA meeting is 5:00 p.m. Thursday, May 3, 2007 at the University of Arizona South campus, Room 508. Jan Groth will speak on getting spring color in the landscape.

✧ On Sunday, May 6 from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. *Water Wise* and the Cochise County Master Gardeners will once again sponsor a Xeriscape (Low Water Landscape) garden tour. Docents will be at each yard to answer questions and plant lists will be available. Be sure to bring a camera! Remember, this is a FREE tour! Maps of the beautiful and creative landscapes are available from the Sierra Vista Cooperative Extension Office. Call 458-8278, Ext. 2141 for information or to request a map.

✧ The Sierra Vista Farmers Market begins its summer schedule on Thursday, April 26, from 2:00—6:00 p.m. at the corner of Wilcox and Carmichael. For more information e-mail [vallimac@cox.net](mailto:vallimac@cox.net) or call 266-1976.

✧ The Sierra Vista Gardeners Club will be holding its annual Spring Plant Sale on Saturday, May 12 from 8 a.m. to noon at the Bisbee Farmers Market in Vista Park. The club will have available annual flowers, perennials, herbs, vegetables, houseplants, and cacti. A selection of Mother's Day gift plants will be available for purchase as well as baskets and vases. Many seeds will be available for a donation.

## The Virtual Gardener—Heirloom Tomatoes

A discussion developed at our last Cochise County Master Gardeners Association meeting about a variety of heirloom tomato called *Mortgage Lifter*. Call my horticultural education deficient, but I had never heard of such a variety before and became curious about it. I also thought heirloom tomatoes might be an interesting topic for this month's column. So here we go...

First, what is an *heirloom* tomato variety anyway?

Many of the tomatoes and other vegetables that you buy in the nursery these days are hybrids, produced by crossing specific varieties to create a "custom" plant that has the characteristics desired by the plant breeder. The parentage of the hybrid plants is carefully controlled to achieve uniformly predictable results. Hybrid plants will usually not breed true to type, that is the seeds from hybrid plants will usually not produce plants with the same characteristics as the parents.

Heirloom varieties, on the other hand, are open-pollinated by insects, the wind, or other natural mechanisms, which means that the exact parentage of each plant is not precisely known and their characteristics cannot be precisely predicted. Although there will be more variation between individuals of open-pollinated plants, their seeds will produce plants that have the same basic characteristics as the parents.

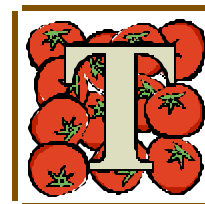
To be considered an *heirloom*, a tomato or other vegetable must not only be open-pollinated, but must also have been developed at some time in the past. The exact meaning

of "some time" is a subject of debate. Some people accept 1951 as the latest date for the development of an heirloom plant; others accept 1945; and yet others insist that an heirloom plant must have been developed at least 100 years ago. Some heirlooms were developed so long ago in the past that their origins have disappeared into the mists of time.

Gardeners like to grow heirloom tomatoes and other plants—there are heirloom varieties of ornamentals too—simply because there is a wider choice of plant characteristics to choose from. In the case of tomatoes, the fruits from heirloom varieties vary in size, shape, sweetness, color, and so on. A sure way to generate a lively discussion among heirloom growers is to discuss which variety is the "best." Gardeners who are seed-savers also like heirlooms because they can grow the same varieties year after year without seasonal trips to the nursery or plant store to buy hybrids.

But, I digress. What's the story behind the heirloom tomato with the fanciful name, *Mortgage Lifter*?

According to the Wikipedia ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)), the Mortgage Lifter heirloom was developed by M. C. Byles (AKA "Radiator Charlie") who developed it in the 1940s. During the Great Depression, Charlie's radiator repair business in Logan, West Virginia was not doing very well and he was in danger of defaulting on his mortgage payments. In order to save his home and



business, Charlie began cross-breeding tomato plants until he came up with a stable variety that was a prolific producer of great fruit ("A single plant can feed a family of six.") and began selling them for a dollar a plant. So the story goes, he was able to pay off his mortgage in four years from the proceeds of his tomato plant sales.

If you would like to try your hand at growing Mortgage Lifters or any other variety of heirloom tomato do a Google search on "heirloom tomato seeds" and you will find more sources than you ever thought existed. If you would like to know more about heirloom tomatoes, other vegetables, or other even heirloom ornamentals, take a look at the articles in the Wikipedia. It's a great place to start your search for information

Until next time...Happy Surfing.

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*Robert E. Call*

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## The Agent's Observations

If you want to grow a great vegetable garden or some beautiful annual flowers, you would do well to get some soil “black gold.” Compost is that “black gold” and it increases soil organic matter that acts like little sponges holding water and nutrients. Natural composting, or biological decomposition, began with the first plants on earth and has been going on ever since. As vegetation falls to the ground, it slowly decays, providing minerals and nutrients needed for plants, animals, and microorganism growth. Composting is a way to produce organic matter. Compost contains humus that is dark brown or black and has a soil-like, earthy smell. It is created by combining nitrogen containing “green” organic wastes (e.g., grass and plant trimmings, kitchen scraps, manure) in proper ratios with carbon containing “brown” materials (e.g., dry leaves, straw, sawdust, dried manure) into piles, rows, or vessels. Both are essential to create compost. Mature compost has experienced high temperatures, above 140° F., that eliminates most pathogens and weed seeds that natural decomposition does not destroy. Avoid using animal based materials and oils when composting. These will attract pests (skunks, cats, dogs and other scavengers) and cause bad smells.

### Advantages of composting

- Reducing the dependency on commercial fertilizers and improves soil structure, while adding nutrients needed for healthy plants. It is also inexpensive because you make it.
- Soil pH may be altered by compost addition. Ideal pH for most

edible plants and flowers is between 6.0—7.0. If the soil is alkaline (over pH 7.5), as much of the arid Southwest is, compost may help lower soil pH over time.

- Recycling organic waste materials reduces landfill use.

### How to get started

- **Cost**—Composting does not take a lot of time or require much equipment.
- **Location**—The compost pile should be placed in a warm area with adequate sunshine, but out of the wind so it will not dry out too quickly.
- **Size**—An ideal size is one cubic yard (3 feet by 3 feet by 3 feet). If the pile is too small it will decompose slowly. Also, it will not generate and hold enough heat to kill weed seeds and other pests. If the pile is too tall, aeration may not be adequate.
- **Water**—Consistent moisture is important. The pile should contain enough water to feel like a well wrung-out sponge. If the pile is too wet, it may produce unpleasant odors. If it is too dry, decomposition will not occur. Drying out is a major problem for successful composting in the Southwest.
- **Microorganisms** — Periodically add a little native soil to the compost pile. This will inoculate the compost with beneficial microorganisms. These include bacteria, fungi, worms and insects. (Purchase of special composting microbes is not necessary.) Aerobic (air-loving) microbes do the actual decomposing. Creating an environment in which they thrive is the goal.

- **Oxygen**—Air is essential for the organic matter to decompose. Turn the pile frequently, poke deep holes in it, or position the pile a foot or so off the ground to allow for air circulation.

### The process

The first point to remember is smaller pieces of waste material decompose faster. “Green” and “brown” materials are alternatively layered no more than a foot or two deep. The best material ratio of carbon (brown) to nitrogen (green) is about 25 to 30 parts to 1, respectively. If there is too much brown material in the pile decomposition will be slow. This can be corrected by adding more green material or some nitrogen fertilizer. If too much green material is present nitrogen may be lost and the pile may smell like ammonia. While layering the two types of material add some native soil to inoculate the pile with microbes. After the pile is started, wet it thoroughly with water. Monitor moisture over time. Placing a water sprinkler on the pile may aid in keeping the pile moist, but not wet (see photo on next page). Turning the pile will aerate it. This will accelerate the decomposition process.

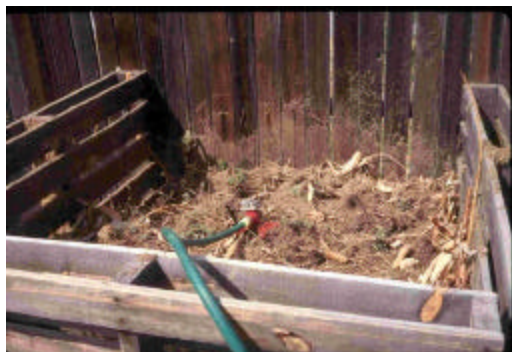
### Using compost

Screen the compost using ¼ - ½” mesh hardware cloth tacked or stapled to the bottom of a box frame made of 1" or 2" X 4" lumber. Placing the box on top of a wheelbarrow allows the compost to fall through produc-

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Some examples of compost containers. Drum composters aid in aeration. Plastic containers may sun-rot.



Keeping the compost pile moist, but not wet is a key to success in the southwest.

*(Continued from page 4)*

ing finished black gold! Return unscreened materials to the compost pile. Add two to four inches of finished compost to garden or flower planting areas. Till or turn the soil over with a shovel for soil incorporation. Adding too much compost may tie up plant nutrients and stunt plant growth. “Black gold” will increase plant health and growth.

#### **Mulch—A Cozy Soil Blanket**

Mulches that blanket the soil can warm or cool it, conserve moisture, block weed growth, and if from an organic source add to the organic matter content of the soil.

There are many types of mulch that will aid in plant growth. The list includes, but is not limited to, bark chips, shredded paper and wood, compost, newspaper, leaves, grass clippings, straw, hay, pine needles, saw dust and wood shavings, colored plastic sheeting, old carpet, and gravel or decomposed granite. Place these materials three to four inches deep on the soil surrounding plants. Adding more mulch may injure young plants.

In the case of black plastic, lay pieces down and cover the

edges with soil, boards, soil pins, bricks or rocks. Plant through the plastic by cutting holes in it to accommodate plant roots and/or seeds. Agriculture plastic will last longer because during manufacturing UV light inhibitors are added to delay the breakdown of the plastic polymers.

Plastic is used to inhibit weed growth and warm the soil. White plastic is used to cool the soil. When using plastic mulches it is best to place a drip tape or soaker hose on top of the soil before mulch installation.

Do not lay plastic directly on the ground and then mulch on top of it with gravel or decomposed granite. Plastic will prevent soil penetration of natural precipitation and cause runoff. Plastic will also break down over time. If this is the case on your property, use a pitch fork to poke holes through the rock mulch and plastic at the drip-edge (canopy edge) of plants so they will benefit from the water. Manufactured landscaping plastics and fabrics are made with small holes that allow water to penetrate the soil and prevent weed growth. These work well under rock or gravel mulches.

*Robert E. Call, Extension Agent  
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## Tabletop Greenhouse Follow up



In the November 2006 issue of the Cochise County Master Gardener newsletter we had an article about Tabletop Greenhouses by Master Gardener Diane Liggett. She is now the “proud rose-mother.” In the photo to the left you can see the results of her three varieties of miniature climbing rose plantings of last March. The plants are now in ten-inch pots and doing very well.

Congratulations, also, to Diane. She submitted the winning logo and slogan for the International Master Gardeners Conference being held in Little Rock, Arkansas the first week of May.