High on the Desert Cochise County Master Gardener Newsletter

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The University of Arizona and U.S. Department of Agriculture Cooperating

The Virtual Gardener—Hang Ups

A few weeks ago I received a catalog in the mail from a yard and garden supply company that contained an ad for a remarkable product. For a mere fifty-seven bucks I could buy a kit to plant tomatoes in a bag and hang them upside down to grow! The ad blathered on about how tomatoes love to grow upside down and growing them that way eliminated diseases and made them easier to harvest. Considering all that stuff I learned in the fifth grade about photo- and gravitropism in plants, those seemed like odd claims to me, but what do I know? I was intrigued enough to investigate further so…off to the Internet and a Google search.

. . . tomatoes love to grow upside down . .

Well, was I surprised. It turns out there are lots of people out there growing tomatoes upside down in bags, buckets, and flower pots. And many of them have explained their techniques online and raved about the results so…guess what? I gotta try it.

Now, I'm not nuts enough to risk fifty bucks on a far out idea so I had to figure out how to improvise using on-hand stuff. At first I thought of drilling holes in the bottom of plastic buckets as one gardener described on the Internet, but even that sounded a little extravagant to me. Why ruin a perfectly good bucket? Then eureka! My wife came up with a brilliant idea. Why not plant the tomatoes in cloth bags?

As it turns out, every year at the High Desert Gardening & Landscaping Conference each attendee gets a collection of seed catalogues, brochures, and other goodies contained in bags made of agricultural fabric. The bag material is not the whimpy weed barrier fabric you find in local hardware stores, but heavy-weight fabric sturdy enough to drive a John Deere tractor over (well…maybe not quite that heavy

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Inside this issue:

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but pretty close). And, even better, they're free and we've got lots of them from fifteen years of attending conferences.

The goodie bags are large enough to contain a two-gallon nursery pot, so a plan was hatched. Here's the sequence:

First I used a 2-inch diameter hole saw (the kind that fits on an electric drill) to cut holes in the middle of the bottoms of two nursery pots. Then I made short slits in the middle bottom of two bags.

Next my wife and I threaded a couple of cherry tomato plants through the holes in bottom of the pots so that the root balls were inside the pot and the tops were sticking out the bottom of the pot. (The 6-inch tall tomato plants were already growing in paper bags as described in last month's article.)

After that, we carefully slipped the bags over the pots and threaded the plants through the slit in the bottom of the bag.

Finally we inverted the bags so that the plant was pointing downward and filled the nursery pot with potting soil through the open top of the bag, making sure that the soil settled nicely around the root ball.

The bags are now hanging on one of those "shepherd's crooks" that are supposed to be used for lanterns and such. We placed the the crook so that the bags receive filtered shade through part of the day and a little full sun. So far, so good. The plants have been hanging there for a couple of weeks now and don't seem to be any the worse for wear. So stay tuned; I'll let you know how my little experiment turns out as the summer passes.

If you're interested in trying to grow upside down tomatoes yourself, here are a few Web sites to check out:

www.oklahomahistory.net/tomatos.html
www.minifarmhomestead.com/gardening/tomato.htm
www.mountvernonnews.com/local/080704/growing.html

Until next time…Happy Surfing.

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Correction: Terrie Gent's name was misspelled on Page 3 of last month's newsletter.

Cuttings 'N' Clippings

❄ The next CCMGA meeting is 5:00 p.m. Thursday, May 1 at the University of Arizona South campus, Public Meeting Room.

❄ The spring Xeriscape (Low Water Landscape) Self Guided Tour will be held Sunday, May 4, 1 - 4 p.m. It is sponsored by Water Wise and Cochise County Master Gardeners and it is free. Low water use landscapes, called Xeriscapes (pronounced Zir- ih - scapes - remember, there is no " zero" in Xeriscape!), can be colorful, evergreen, soft, easy care and wildlife friendly. Come see beautiful and creative Xeriscape landscapes. When you visit these yards, you will be astonished at how much choice you have in creating your very own water wise yard. Docents will be at each yard to answer questions and plant lists will be available. Bring a camera! Maps are available from the Cooperative Extension office—458-8278, Ext. 2141.

❄ The City of Sierra Vista Parks and Leisure will be sponsoring a class on *Summerizing your Garden* taught by the Cochise County Master Gardeners on May 17. It will be held at the Oscar Yrun Community Center from 9:00—11:00 a.m. For information contact 458-7922. There is a fee for the class.

Robert E. Call

Robert E. Call
Extension Agent, Horticulture

Carolyn Gruenhagen
Editor

A Garden For All Seasons

A couple of years ago I listened to a landscape designer give an illustrated presentation at the High Desert Gardening & Landscaping Conference. The photographs of the gardens she was talking about were stunning, each taken when the garden was at its absolute peak of perfection. After the talk I began to wonder what the gardens pictured in the talk looked like the other 364 days of the year. What would the gardens look like in December or February instead of April or June? I e-mailed the presenter and challenged her to come up with a talk that showed gardens that were beautiful year-round. She replied that would be difficult. I haven't heard from her since.

So how would we design such a garden? Let's see, but first we need to establish some guidelines.

If you go to a theme park or a botanical garden, it will look good all year round—perhaps not as spectacular in the middle of winter as in the middle of summer, but acceptably attractive. We too could keep our gardens looking like a theme park all year round if we had the same resources to work with, tons of money to spend on plant materials and battalions of gardeners to install and maintain them. But we don't. So let's agree that our perfect year-round garden first of all must be sustainable on a reasonable budget and without the help of a staff of professional landscape gardeners.

Next, let's agree that a spectacular garden does not always have to be filled with pretty flowers. Flowers, like jewels on a beautiful woman, add interesting highlights but are not the essence of the beauty. Color can also be found in foliage, fruits, bark, and even hardscape elements. A stunning landscape combines many elements in addition to color—texture, pattern, form, balance, scale, and others. Each of these elements is an essential part of the total package. A good discussion of how to put these principles to work in your design can be found on the University of Florida Extension Web site at **http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/MG086**.

Now, let's consider the impact of the environment on our designs.

The weather in our High Desert is highly variable and ranges to extremes. Winter temperatures can drop to single digits while summer highs are sometimes above a hundred degrees. Diurnal temperature swings of 50 degrees or more are not unknown. Precipitation often comes in bunches or not at all and rainy days are usually separated by long dry spells. Multiple days of gentle soaking rains are the exception rather than the rule. This imposes some strict constraints on our choices of plant materials. Year-round blooming, lush-leaved, moisture-loving tropicals are out. We need plants that are whang-leather tough and thrifty in their use of water. Plants to match our mountains. That means priority should go to natives first and after that to desert adapted plants from other regions of the globe with climates similar to our own, plants that can take a punch and come back swinging.

With these constraints in mind, let's take a look at a few of the kinds of plants we might use to create our all-season garden. The plants I will describe are limited to some of the trees and shrubs growing in my own garden.

Many commonly used landscape trees, including natives such as mesquites, acacias, and desert willows as well as exotics from other parts of the United States are winter deciduous. These trees and shrubs present a stark landscape in late winter and early spring. Although their forms can be interesting silhouetted against the winter sky, too much of a good thing is depressing to me, so I like lots of non-deciduous plants to fill in the spaces and provide color and mass during the winter.

Junipers (*Juniperus* sp.) grow well here and are very drought tolerant. Their foliage ranges in color from green to gold to blue, they bear reddish to bluish cones, and they come in a variety of interesting forms, ranging from low and carpet-like to small multi-trunked trees with striking twisted shapes. They can be used to provide mass or as focal points. In addition to native junipers, there are a large variety of hybrids available in the nursery trade. I have many different varieties that thrive with no supplementary irrigation.

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Eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus* sp.) are exotics native to Australia but they thrive here on rainfall alone and without any TLC. The Coolibahs (*E. microtheca*) in our garden have leaves that vary in color from a distinctive grayish-green to almost blue. In addition to their color, they have interesting forms and unusual bark patterns that add visual interest, but they also have some downsides. They are spring and early summer deciduous but they never become bare. As the old leaves drop, they are replaced by new ones. And they are subject to branch fall.

Moving on to smaller plants, another "native" plant that is evergreen and provides winter foliage color is the Texas Ranger (*Leucophyllum* sp.) These hardy plants are native to Texas and Mexico and do well under our arid conditions. All they demand is well-drained soil. A bonus feature are the lavender to purple (sometimes white) blossoms that appear after rains from May to October. If you

add these plants to your garden, please don't humiliate them by pruning them into little round beachball shapes.

Arizona Rosewood (*Vauquelinia californica*) is a fast-growing native evergreen that is a good substitute for oleander. Although it doesn't have the showy blossoms of oleander, it is well adapted to our area and survives on little or no supplementary irrigation. The leaves are long and slender like the oleander and bright green in color. They also have clusters of small white flowers in the spring and summer. Arizona Rosewoods can be massed to create tall hedges.

Fraser's Photinia (*Photinia xfraseri*) is a large non-native shrub that does well here with only a little supplementary irrigation. It can be massed to form a hedge or trained into a small tree and used as an accent. Most of the year it is covered with dense, shiny, dark green leaves but new leaves in the spring are a striking bronzy red. This plant also has small white flowers in the spring and early summer.

Two plants with brightly colored foliage that do well here are Heavenly Bamboo (*Nandina domestica*) and Variegated Japanese Euonymus (*Euonymus japonicus* var. *aureomarginata).* In my experience both plants are reasonably drought tolerant, although the *Nandina* will perform better with regular irrigation. New leaves on the *Nandina* emerge in the spring with a bronzish-red color which later turns to green and then back to red again in the fall. The nandina also has small, bright red berries for much of the year. New leaves on the euonymus are a brilliant yellow that glow in the sunlight. For my taste, euonymus shrubs are better used as accents rather than *en mass*.

Finally, here are a couple more non-native evergreens I find well adapted to conditions here—rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) and pyracantha (*Pyracanthus* sp.).

Rosemary is native to Mediterranean coastal areas and, surprisingly, does exceptionally well here. It is highly drought tolerant and grows well in our alkaline soils. It is covered with small, white to lavender flowers in the late winter and early spring and ours bloom a second time in the fall. In addition to looking pretty, rosemary is a cooking herb.

Pyracantha is not only evergreen but bears bright red berries in the fall and winter which attract many birds. Our pyracanthas are used as a hedge but they are also very well suited to espaliering on a wall.

In this article I've described a few of the plants that add interest to my winter garden and provide year-round color. I could have discussed many more, including cacti and succulents, ornamental grasses, and vines but enough for now. If you would like to learn more about these plants and see pictures of them, check them out on the World Wide Web. For best results, search on the scientific names rather than the common names.

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May Reminders

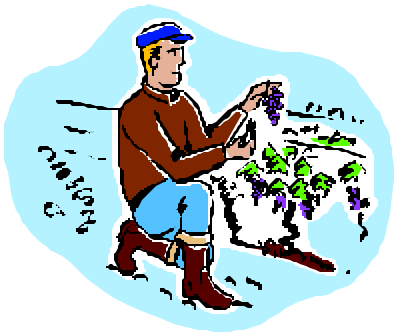
- Deep water
- Plant warm season crops
- Check tree ties
- Control pests
- Control weeds (*Controlling Weeds*—a bulletin available from the Cooperative Extension)

The Agent's Observations

Q I have two peach trees and one apricot tree that do not bear any good fruit. I planted them eighteen years ago. They produce a few flowers, but they mature into small, bitter tasting fruit. I have followed all of the Master Gardener's recommendation on watering, fertilization, and pruning. Still the fruit is small and poor quality. What else do I need to do?

A After speaking with owner of the trees it was learned that the trees had grown from peach and apricot seeds (pits) he had planted. Seeds are produced by the pollination of an egg by pollen. The genetic material from the pollen and the egg produces a mixture of traits, much like animals. Therefore, they have characteristics of both parents. Our children have features of my wife and me, but are not exactly like either one of us, thank goodness! It is the same with plants grown from seeds. This is why nearly all fruit and many ornamental trees, roses, and other plant materials are cloned. These plants are propagated by budding, grafting, layer, division, or micro-propagation among others. The resulting plants have the same genetic make up as the "mother" plants. The odds of a peach or apricot grown from seed producing fruit identical to the fruit it came from are something like one in 10,000. The answer to the question then is to produce good fruit, grow trees that have been cloned through budding or grafting.

Q I have just pruned my grape vines. They are "bleeding" quite a bit. Should I put some pruning paint on then so the bleeding will stop?



A No, do not put pruning paint on the pruned ends of the grapes. In fact, do not put pruning paint on any pruning cuts except roses, if the rose chaffer, a beetle, has caused problems in the past. They get into the center of the rose stems. Grapes will bleed, but this will not be damaging to the plant. They will heal and grow normally. To prevent this next year prune earlier, when the vines are dormant, in February or early March.

Q I have an ornamental plum tree that produces fruit. When the fruit matures it is not edible, drops on our patio, and makes a big mess. Is there something I can do to stop this problem?

A There are products that contain ethephon and will cause abortion of the flowers or young fruit. It is marketed under a variety of names, but the active ingredient listed on the label in fine print is ethephon. When applied to the tree it will generate ethylene gas, which is a plant growth regulator or hormone. It aids in maturation and causes the ripening of fruit. As temperatures increase more ethylene gas is generated and causes the fruit to abort. If temperatures are too high gas generation may be too much and cause the leaves to fall off as well. They will usually grow back later on in the season. Follow the label instructions carefully. Add only as much product to the spray mix as indicated and be careful about the temperatures over the next several days.

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Farmer's Markets

Sierra Vista's Farmer's Market is held each Thursday on the NW corner of Wilcox and Carmichael. The summer hours are Noon to 5:00 p.m.

The Bisbee Farmer's Market opens April 26 celebrating Earth Day. It is held in Vista Park in Warren on Saturdays from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. The Farmers Market has been canceled for May 10th. The Garden Club will hold their plant sale May 17 under the big tree.

Petey Mesquitey to Debut at Bisbee Farmer's Market

Peter Gierlach, AKA Petey Mesquitey, native plant grower extraordinaire, will debut at the Bisbee Farmers Market on May 3 with plants from his Spadefoot Nursery near the Chiricahua Mountains. Peter has been growing native plants for over thirty years.

Besides his nursery background Peter is a poet and a musician, well known for his Growing Native radio show at KXCI Community Radio in Tucson where the moniker Petey Mesquitey was coined. He and his wife Marian reside in Cochise County.

Peter will bring Emory oak and Toumey oak seedlings in 9" cones, the same as the USFS and others use for revegetation projects. "The feedback I get from folks who have plugged these seedlings in their yards is that they really take off and naturalize quickly," he said.

He'll also have these native oaks in larger sizes, including 5 gallon. Other native trees and shrubs in 1 and 5 gallon sizes will include Elderberry, Little Leaf sumac, Apache pine, Pinon pine, Arizona cypress, Juniper spp., Bigtooth maple, Silverleaf oak, Gambel oak, and Scrub oak.

In the past Peter has concentrated mostly on raising seedlings for other nurseries. The farmer's market will offer him a venue where he can sell his plants at home and directly to the public from seeds he has gathered and planted himself that are uniquely adapted to conditions here.

Wildflower Walk

On Saturday May 17 there will be a wildflower walk led by Cochise County Herbarium botanists. Meet at the Plant Sciences Center, U of A South, at 8:00 a.m. and bring water and a snack. A small donation is requested and will be used to support the herbarium. For more information contact Cecile at cecilelumer@gmail.com or Cindy at rickorcindy@hotmail.com—Telephone #803-1160.