



## CROW WING COUNTY MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM

# Ask the Master Gardener

APRIL 2015 COLUMN

Dear Master Gardener,

**Several years ago a large white pine in my yard was struck by lightning, leaving a shallow crack about three inches wide and 80 feet tall. Since then birds and insects have enlarged the crack greatly, making us wonder if the tree will fall on our house — or on the neighbors'. My brother-in-law just bought a chain saw and said he will cut it down, but I worry that he might injure himself or our property. What should I do?**

Hire a certified arborist. An arborist is one who is knowledgeable about trees, and a certified arborist is not only knowledgeable about trees but has also been certified as such by training and testing by a recognized professional organization such as the American Society of Certified Arborists. Such persons can assess tree damage, prune, and diagnose tree diseases and insects. They will be able to tell you how healthy or hazardous your tree is and, if necessary, take your tree down in a safe and insured manner.

Certified arborists will treat you professionally, showing you credentials, offering proof of liability insurance, and giving references and estimates of cost. They will not ask for full payment in advance (half before starting and half when the job is completed is usual).

Trees are valuable assets, providing shade, beauty and increased property value. Pruning and removing them is dangerous—and expensive--when incorrectly done.

Dear Master Gardener,

**I live near the Paul Bunyan Trail and often walk or bike on it. I am intrigued by the wildflowers I see along the wayside and would like to learn the names of some of them. What flowers am I likely to see in April?**

After long months without green and growing plants, we Minnesotans are eager to see them again. Although only a small number of wildflowers bloom as early as April, we appreciate them happily because of their long absence. The Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden staff in Minneapolis has put out a list of only five flowers that reliably bloom in April. Because snow cover, temperature and other circumstances vary, even these flowers may appear earlier or later than expected.

The five are: skunk cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetida*), snow trillium (*Trillium nobilis*), hepatica (*Hepatica nobilis*), bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*), and false rue anemone (*Enemion bileratum*). For some reason they did not include the one we usually see first at the Northland Arboretum in Brainerd, the pasque flower, *Anemone patens*, also called *Pulsatilla patens*.

Next month we will print a list of what wildflowers flowers to look for in May.

**Dear Master Gardener:**

**I have a tendency to go to the garden center when the new annuals arrive and want to buy every new plant that catches my eye and I end up with a hodgepodge of flowers in my containers. This year I'd like to go with a plan and was wondering how to design beautiful containers?**

First, you want to make sure you are growing your plants in the best possible growing medium. For most containers, a soilless potting mix is a good choice. It is lightweight with room for moisture and air and will be void of soil-borne diseases because it doesn't have topsoil in it.

Good potting mix crumbles when you squeeze it. Some mixes have fertilizer and perlite added and some are specially formulated for outdoor containers; these are excellent options too. If you have a container that has all succulents and/or cacti you will want to purchase a medium specifically for succulents or make your own mix with equal parts compost, turkey grit and sand.

Second, you will want to choose plants that have similar growing requirements (sun vs. shade, dry vs. moist). The classic design formula for containers is "Thriller, Fillers, and Spillers". Choose one plant to be your thriller or focal point plant and place it in the center or back of your container, depending on how your container will be viewed. Plants that make great "thrillers" are Persian Shield, New Zealand flax, *Dracaena* spikes, purple fountain grass, tall snapdragons, angelonia, and 'Golden Sword' yucca. *Sansevieria* (snake plant), which is a houseplant, makes a beautiful thriller for a summer container, then can be brought back in as a houseplant. Another fun way to add drama and height to a container is to add curly willow branches to a container.

When you choose your fillers look for plants with colors, forms or textures that contrast or call attention to your thriller. Lantana, wax begonias, geraniums, coleus, calibrachoa, Pentas, petunias, and coleus are just a few of many options.

The "spillers" are your trailing plants, which soften the edges of your pot and wind among the bases of your other plants. Some plants that make good spillers are verbena, sweet potato vine, bacopa, lobelia, sweet alyssum, vinca vine, creeping Jenny and ivy.

You don't have to do a "Thriller, Filler, Spiller" design to have a beautiful container. A container with one large, bold plant such as a small tree, flowering shrub, large houseplant, or perennial (such as a hosta) can make a statement. You can add Scotch moss to soften the container's edges and act as a living mulch. Another option is to choose any plant that has at least one

bold and interesting feature on its own, which can be used as a single specimen designed container; for example, a container filled with plumbago, petunias, geraniums or tuberous begonias. For single specimen containers choose plants that are in scale with the container.

Last, you may want to add a layer of mulch to the top of your containers to help your plants maintain the amount of moisture needed, as pots tend to dry out easily, especially in very hot weather.

**Dear Master Gardener:**

**I am confused about the different types of begonias. Please explain.**

It's no wonder you are confused as there are over 1500 known species of begonia, ranging from rhizomatous perennials a few inches high to 10 foot shrubs. Many are grown indoors and prized for their beautifully colored and textured foliage or showy flowers. They are native to moist tropical and subtropical regions of all continents, except Australia, and are most diverse in South America.

Although begonias are actually perennial in areas that don't freeze, in Minnesota they are grown as annuals. Cane-like begonia have been popular for many years and are known as Angel Wing begonias. They have high branching stems that produce pendulous panicles of light salmon-pink flowers. Dragon Wings begonia grows two to three feet tall, with tall arching canes, glossy deep green leaves and most commonly pink or red flowers. They are great in hanging baskets, window boxes, containers, or garden beds.

Semperflorens is probably the most widely grown begonia and is known as the wax begonia due to its waxy looking leaves. These begonias can't be beat for continuous flowering throughout the summer. They can be grown in partial shade or full sun and withstand drought better than other begonias; however, they definitely prefer moist, well-drained soil. The varieties with bronze foliage do better in the sun than the green varieties.

Tuberous begonias are also popular annuals. They grow best in partial shade and need frequent watering. They produce two to four inch wide flowers in white, yellow, pink, orange and red. There is a trailing type that looks nice in a hanging basket. You can dig up the tubers in the fall and replant them the following spring. If you decide to do this, cut the tops back to within a few inches of the tubers, dry them, then pack them in cardboard boxes between layers of vermiculite, peat moss, or wood shavings and store them at 45-55° F.

The real beauty of the begonia world is the Rex Begonia, a type of rhizomatous begonia that is grown for its lovely, multicolored leaves. Although Rex Begonia do bloom, they are not grown for their flowers but for their spectacular leaves, which can be green, gray, silver, pink, red, lavender, or a very deep maroon. They are often grown as houseplants, but if you decide to put them outside during the summer they need to be kept in part shade.

## APRIL GARDEN TIPS

- If you used rose cones and tree wrap over the winter, remove them now.
- Gradually remove mulch from bulbs, perennials and roses. However, recover them if evening temperatures fall below freezing.
- Pansies, violas and snapdragons can safely be planted now.
- Cold-hardy vegetables that can now be planted are spinach, kale, chard, onions, lettuce and radishes.
- Check your watering system to insure that it is in working order.
- If you are starting new beds or have ones that aren't doing well, have your soil tested. Download <http://soiltest.cfans.umn.edu> for instructions.
- To get the most out of lawn fertilizer wait until after one or two mowings. Water in well.
- Crabgrass pre-emergent herbicides applied this month in our area are likely to be ineffective. Wait until mid-May.
- Plant tomato seeds indoors early this month. They need only 6-8 weeks under lights to reach planting size. Putting out large plants or getting them early sets them back and reduces their potential yield.
- Corn gluten meal helps prevent weed germination in lawns and is best applied late in April. Like all pre-emergent herbicides, it needs to be watered in well and won't become fully active for about two weeks
- Don't be fooled by ads for "miracle plants" such as Zoysia grass plugs, tree tomatoes and MN-hardy peaches.

## QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?

Crow Wing County Master Gardeners are trained and certified volunteers for the University of Minnesota Extension. All information given in this column is based on research and information provided by the University. To ask a question, call the Master Gardener Help Line at 218-824-1000, extension 4040 and leave a message. A Master Gardener will return your call.

UMN Extension Crow Wing County Master Gardeners' Website

<http://crowwingmastergardeners.org/>

