



## CROW WING COUNTY MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM

# Ask the Master Gardener

MARCH 2016 COLUMN

**Dear Master Gardener:**

**My parents love to garden, but my mother is currently in a wheelchair and my dad has knee problems. Is there a recommended height for raised bed gardens for the elderly or wheel chair bound?**

Raised bed gardening, a centuries-old technique, is a simple way to improve the health and productivity of a garden. Raised beds have better soil structure and drainage, allowing the soil to warm up earlier in the season, and giving you a head start on spring. In addition, perennial weeds can be less of a problem in raised beds than in other gardens. Constructing a raised bed to bring the soil up to a more comfortable working height can be done easily. For most wheelchair users, 27 inches is a comfortable working height, but raised beds can be custom built to any height to meet the needs of the gardener. The width should be determined by the arm's reach of your parent(s).

To make a planter 27" high, place one 2" x 4" and three 2" x 8" boards horizontally, with 2" x 4" boards vertically for reinforcement, especially at the corners. Build the sides first, turning the boards "heartwood in." Make sure to use untreated, rot resistant lumber, such as cedar. Railroad ties are not a good choice for a raised bed garden because they are treated with creosote, which is toxic to plants. Lumber treated with copper, chromium, and arsenic (CCA) is also not recommended for vegetable crops because some of the arsenic may leach out of the wood and be taken up by the plants. Use decking screws to attach the vertical reinforcing boards and to join the corners. You can make a sitting ledge by attaching a 1" x 4" board flat on top of the frame, extending it over the sides.

Fill the planter with a mixture of soil and organic matter, and add two to four inches more each year as the soil settles and ages. If you bring in additional soil, be sure that it does not come from an area where it could have been infested by soil borne plant pathogens or contaminants like lead, pesticides, etc. Remember that containers, even large ones, need extra watering.

**Dear Master Gardener:**

**We lost most of our trees in last summer's blowdown and we have finally finished the cleanup. This coming summer we want to replant and would like to stick to native trees, especially trees that were here before Crow Wing County was settled. What would you suggest?**

The short answer is that the majority of trees at the time of settlement were pines—white, red (Norway) and jack--interspersed with oaks, maples and basswood. That being said, not all would be ideal replacements in your specific yard. Perhaps the most important consideration

is the type of soil you have. A white pine, for example, grows best in sandy loam while a sugar maple prefers moist to wet soil. A soil test will tell you what your soil type is. The Crow Wing Soil and Water Conservation District tree order form lists the soil preferences for about 20 different trees, along with their growth rate and mature size. Diversity of species is another important consideration. While long avenues arched by stately elms graced many American towns in the past century, the arrival of Dutch elm disease swiftly reduced those streets to nakedness. Similarly oak wilt, bronze birch borer and white pine blister rust wiped out stands where their hosts dominated. Whatever trees you choose, faithful watering of new trees is critical for the first two or three years. By then the root systems are usually broad and deep enough to be sustained by natural rainfall.

**Dear Master Gardener:**

**We have some property further north and when I was there the last time, I noticed some of the Norway pines I planted ten years ago have been stripped of bark. I'm quite sure porcupines caused the damage. Will this damage cause the trees to die?**

The porcupine, a common resident of the coniferous forests in northern North America, is an herbivore who feeds during the winter on the bark of conifers and hardwood trees. In the summer their diet mostly consists of plants found on the forest floor. Some of their favorite hardwood trees are maples, basswood and elms. Their preferred conifers are white pine, jack pine and Scotch pine, but they are also known to eat the bark of Norway pine. Porcupine damage is more common in winter and on young trees with thinner bark and sometimes causes the decline or mortality of trees. During the winter, porcupines feed on tree bark and the tender branches in the upper part of the canopy. Squirrels can also cause damage by removing the bark from trees, usually in the upper canopy, but you will be able to tell the difference because the teeth marks made by porcupines are larger than squirrels, the marks go deeper into the wood, and the damage is more extensive. Telltale signs that porcupines are the culprit are clipped twigs on the snow, higher branches snipped off with clean slanted cuts, porcupine tracks, and/or bark chewed or removed on the trunk and branches at any level. Trees are frequently deformed from partial girdling, which exposes the tree sapwood to attack by disease, insects and birds. Bark plays an important role in protecting a tree by holding moisture and nutrients in and keeping disease and insects out.

**Dear Master Gardener:**

**Will the problem with impatiens still be an issue this year? I've always enjoyed having lots of impatiens in my shady areas.**

According to Michelle Grabowski, a plant pathologist at the University of Minnesota Extension, "Impatiens downy mildew is an emerging disease problem that has resulted in severe defoliation and flower drop of impatiens. Impatiens downy mildew was first observed in Minnesota in 2011. Nursery and landscape impatiens are affected by the disease. All varieties of Impatiens walleriana and any hybrid with *I. walleriana* in its background are susceptible to impatiens downy mildew. Touch-me-not (*I. balsamina*) and several wild species of impatiens can also be infected. New Guinea impatiens (*I. hawkerii*) is highly resistant."

To bring color into your shade garden, some alternatives to traditional bedding impatiens include: begonias, New Guinea impatiens, browallia, shade coleus, shade lobelia, or Torenia.

**MARCH GARDEN TIPS**

- Have patience. Spring will come.
- Annuals that can be started from seed indoors in mid-March are Coleus, Dusty Miller, Nicotiana, Pinks, Melampodium, Snapdragons and Verbena. At the end of the month plant Alyssum, Moss Rose and Salvia. Transplant into individual containers when you see the first true leaves.
- Late this month start tender bulbs such as Cannas, Dahlias, Tuberous Begonias, and Caladiums.
- March is a good month for getting your soil tested. Then amend the soil as recommended.
- Prune apple trees and shrubs now, before insects and disease appear and flourish in fresh pruning wounds. Follow the pruning rule DDDC. That is, remove dead, diseased and damaged branches as well as crossovers (branches that rub together and/or impede air circulation).
- Late winter and early spring are the best times to transplant trees. Hire professionals to move large and special trees. They have the equipment and expertise to handle what is often a tricky and dangerous task.
- Visit stores and nursery centers now and buy this year's seed when seed racks are full and selection is at its peak.

University of Minnesota Extension Master Gardeners are trained and certified volunteers for the University of Minnesota Extension Service. All information given in this column is based on university research. To ask a question, call the Master Gardener Help Line at 218-454-GROW (4769) and leave a recorded message. A Master Gardener will return your call.

