

From The Ground Up

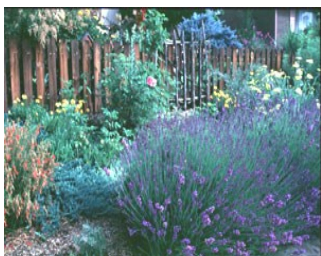
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MINNEHAHAMASTERGARDENERS@HOTMAIL.COM

Xeric Gardening

By Margaret Murphy, Master Gardener

After this summer, some folks may be thinking about adding more water-thrifty plants to their landscape. Water efficient gardens are becoming increasingly more popular among home gardeners. You may already be familiar with the concept of xeriscaping. Xeriscape refers to a landscape that contains plants with low water requirements. Originating out of Colorado, this style of gardening has been commonly done in the west for some time. Xeric, pronounced like zerik, comes from a Greek word meaning dry. In xeriscapes, plants are chosen for their ability to withstand dry conditions as well as for their overall compatibility with the local environment.

Several principles have been developed to guide gardeners in the creation of a xeric garden. To get you started, here are a couple of suggestions from those principles. First take some time to plan and diagram the changes you want to make in your landscape - a good task to undertake during the winter months. Group plants with similar soil, moisture and light requirements together. Place plants with higher watering needs in an area where the retention of soil moisture is good or close to a convenient watering source. Such plants might be placed in a low-lying drainage area, near downspouts, or in the shade of other plants.



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Try to make irrigation as efficient as possible. Hand water when feasible or use soaker hoses or drip irrigation. Avoid sprinklers that

cast water high in the air or produce small drops. Sprinklers that release big drops close to the ground are more efficient. Remember to water deeply and infrequently to encourage better root development and do not water during times when water loss may be high due to evaporation.

In addition, maintain the soil's organic matter by working in compost, organic mulches, or aged-manure every season. Organic matter helps hold soil moisture. Also keep up with the weeding as weeds compete with your plants for water. Mulching is another important part of xeriscaping. Mulching minimizes moisture evaporation and reduces weed growth.

One central theme in xeriscaping is to choose plants that are well-suited for your area. Select plants that are drought tolerant but also appropriate regarding other factors such as seasonal temperatures and soil pH. Native varieties are often used in xeriscaping. Native plants are typically the most compatible with the regional environment and are better able to survive under harsh conditions such as drought. Once established, they generally require less maintenance, little fertilizing and minimal, if any, watering.

There are many beautiful and interesting plants (both native and non-native) that are well-adapted to dry conditions. Several popular perennials fit into this category. If you don't already have them in your yard, a few to consider include: butterfly weed, purple coneflower, goldenrod, bee balm, black-eyed Susan, lamb's ear, speedwell, blanket flower, Russian sage, bearded Iris, blazing star, milkweed and common yarrow. In my yard, both the tall and creeping varieties of sedum did



University of California, Sonoma County: ucanr.edu

very well this summer as did my catmint, periwinkle and Virginia creeper.

If you are looking to add some shrubs to your landscape, a few water-thrifty choices include: juniper, St. Johnswort, barberry, flowering quince, cranberry and hedge cotoneasters, common ninebark, forsythia and potentilla.

There are also many trees that are able to endure very dry conditions such as bur oak, hackberry, Kentucky coffee tree, northern catalpa, Japanese tree lilac, thornless honeylocust, ginkgo, Austrian pine, and Black Hills spruce. Apple and crabapple trees can manage pretty well too through extended times of dryness.

Plus don't forget the ornamental grasses. There is a great assortment of grasses to choose from including: ribbon grass, Indian grass, switch grass, sideoats grama, little bluestem, prairie dropseed, and buffalograss.

To learn more about xeriscaping, Colorado State Cooperative Extension has heaps of information to share.

It's Pumpkin Time!

Pumpkins are the largest fruit and arguably the most popular members of the squash family. Thought to be native to North America, Natives Americans cultivated pumpkins and used them for both food and medicine. Pumpkins became an important food source for early settlers too. They used them in soups, stews and desserts. In our modern times, pumpkins are more commonly associated with fall decorating, Jack-O-Lanterns and pumpkin pie.

According to the University of Illinois Extension, 90% of all pumpkins grown are used for Jack-O-Lanterns. If shopping for a pumpkin, choose one that has at least a one inch stem on it. Those with stems are less likely to rot. It should be unblemished and free of soft spots. The pumpkin should also have a deep color and be heavy. For a different decorative touch this season, scoop out the pumpkin, put in a drainage hole, fill with potting soil and plant pansies, mums or some other delightful crop to craft an autumn pumpkin planter.

From The Ground Up

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2001 E 8th St.

Sioux Falls, SD 57104

Phone 605-782-3290

minnehahamastergardeners@hotmail.com



October 2012



Calendar

By Kathy Osterloh, Master Gardener

Lawns

- Apply broadleaf herbicide to lawns, just before first hard frost, if possible.
- Apply quick release lawn fertilizer if missed last month.
- Mow to pick up leaves off the lawn. After the last mowing of the season, run the mower until the gas tank is empty for winter storage. Sharpened blades so they're ready for next year.

Trees and Shrubs

- Water all trees until ground freezes.
- Put up mesh or tree guards on young trees once dormant to protect from wildlife.

Flowers

- Take cuttings of coleus and geraniums to grow indoors for the winter.
- Dig glads and other tender bulbs to store for winter.
- Plant spring bulbs for color next year.
- To force Christmas cactus to bloom in late December, in early October reduce water, place in cool area (50-55 degrees F) and increase time in darkness (12-14 hours).

Fruits

- Cut Autumn-fruiting raspberries back to fruiting stem.
- Mulch grapes once ground freezes to protect from harsh winter winds.
- Clean up orchard by throwing out fallen/rotten fruit.

Vegetables/Herbs

- Before killed by frost, pot up tender herbs (such as sage and rosemary) to grow indoors through the winter.
- Dig potatoes and let dry before storing for winter.
- Harvest pumpkins, squashes still in the garden.
- Keep rhubarb and asparagus foliage until a hard frost.

General

- Isolate houseplants that have been outside before intermixing with indoor houseplants to allow for "debugging".
- Check for bargains on garden tools, gloves, and other supplies.
- Clean garden implements and put away for season.

Herb Garden

Featuring herbs that can be grown in the South Dakota region.

By Priscilla Jurkovich, Master Gardener

Sage, *Salvia officinalis*, is from the genus *Salvia* (in Latin means to be saved). *Salvia* is one of the largest group of plants in the mint (Lamiaceae) family. The perennial sage plant is dense, upright and bushy with woody square stems and leaves arranged oppositely on the stem as is common in the mint family. Sage can be started from seed, root cuttings and transplants. It prefers a warm, sunny location, but is not particular about soil except that the soil be well-drained. In the 2012 drought, it was one of the heartiest herbs in my garden!

The leaves are used in poultry and meat seasoning. They also make an excellent tea and are used for their medicinal qualities. This herb has curative, antibacterial and astringent properties stemming from its components of pinene, salvene, borneol and cineol. One old saying is that "sage is good for the head and brain." Many have used sage tea as a gargle for sore throats, colds, bleeding gums and mouth ulcers. It's been known to help with Alzheimers, brain and nervous diseases, delirium fevers and headaches. As with most plants in the mint family, sage also assists with digestion.

Further uses of sage include being used as an ingredient in deodorants since it helps with odor control.

Harvest sage lightly the first year until the plant is well established. After the plant has flowered, you can harvest the leaves for drying or freezing.



Photo from Priscilla Jurkovich's garden

Weed of the Month: Spiny sowthistle

By Paulette Keller, Master Gardener



Growth: Spiny sowthistle grows in most of North America except in northern Canada. In the springtime a single stem grows up from a basal rosette of leaves. The leaves have jagged edges and are alternately arranged on the stem. Each leaf has prickly hairs that can cause an allergic reaction in some people. The stem is hollow and releases a milky sap when broken. This weed blooms from late June until frost. Pale yellow flowers grow in clusters at the top of the stem which can grow up to 6 feet tall. Spiny sowthistle resembles a dandelion in that the seeds are fluffy, fuzzy and white and float away in the wind when fully ripe. This weed prefers full sun and can be found in garden areas and in undisturbed areas.

Duration: Spiny sowthistle is a perennial weed.

Control: Spiny sow thistle seedlings can be hoed but may re-sprout from roots left in the soil. The plant has a deep taproot and weak stem and these make it hard to pull a mature plant from the soil. Mowing can also be done to prevent flowering and seed formation. If control is needed in the lawn, a selective herbicide such as Trimec can be used.

For the Birds

By Margaret Murphy, Master Gardener

With less daylight and cooler temperatures, we know winter is just around the corner. Migrating birds take their cue from the shorter day length and recognize it is time to head south. As the winter landscape can sometimes be a bit bleak, I am grateful to the little, feathered souls that remain behind to brave our cold winters. They add color, interest and animation to an otherwise static and usually white backdrop.

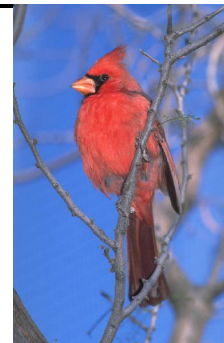


extension.colostate.edu

I hold birds in very high esteem. I am in awe of how they manage to survive unpredictable and often times rather harsh environments. According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, birds have several ways of dealing with very cold temperatures. They will fluff their plumage to trap an insulating layer of air. Some will tuck their feet and legs into their breast feathers or shiver as a way to create more body heat. To help conserve energy on a brisk, below zero night, birds may also roost tightly together in the same shrub or tree cavity. However, to really be able to survive the cold, birds must get plenty to eat. This is vital in order for them to keep up with their metabolic needs, especially during the winter. And the smaller the bird, generally, the more often it must eat to stay warm.

Having bird feeders and suet cakes available in the winter can certainly help supplement a bird's diet. However, to compliment a bird's natural diet, which for many includes fruit, more and more gardeners are choosing to landscape using ornamental vines, trees and shrubs that are especially attractive to birds. What follows are a just few native choices that provide both food and shelter to birds, particularly those that overwinter in our area.

The first plant is the wild grape. The fruit ripens in September and October giving birds plenty to fatten up on before winter sets in. According to the Iowa Association of Naturalists' publication *Iowa's Shrubs and Vines*, more than 100 different species of songbirds will eat wild grapes. The redosier dogwood also provides valuable late season food to wildlife. Like the wild grape, this dogwood has a long list of birds that enjoy its white drupes, which ripen in mid-summer and persist into fall. Its dark, red twigs also bring lovely color to a winter scene making the redosier an attractive addition to any yard.



Hawthorns are another wildlife friendly choice. Growing either as dense shrubs or small trees, they produce an apple-like fruit that is a key winter food for a variety of birds. These thorny plants provide much needed shelter during the winter as well. Evergreen trees and shrubs also furnish excellent winter cover for birds. The fruit of junipers, which is not a true berry but a modified cone, is eaten by an assortment of wildlife.

Other important sources that provide cold weather food include hackberry and crabapple trees; viburnums such as the American cranberrybush and blackhawk; and the vining plants American bittersweet and Virginia creeper.



clemson.edu

So, if you are thinking of ways to change up your landscape, consider planting some native ornamentals that will provide food and shelter for wildlife, especially those feathered friends who bring such cheer to stark winter days.

Indoor Blooms with Amaryllis

By Margaret Murphy, Master Gardener

The amaryllis is native to tropical and subtropical areas of the Americas. It normally flowers February to April but can be forced to bloom anytime. A bulb potted in early November should be in bloom by Christmas.

You can buy a kit or you can purchase just the bulb. If you have only the bulb, plant in a pot that is one to two inches wider than the base of the bulb. Amaryllis bulbs prefer to be a bit cramped when growing. Make sure the container has drainage holes. For bulbs, good drainage is essential.

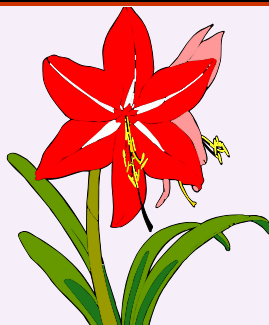
The best potting mix for forcing bulbs is made from equal parts of soil, sphagnum moss, and perlite. Soil-less potting mixes can also be used. Plant the amaryllis with about 1/2 of the bulb showing above the surface of the potting medium. According to Clemson Cooperative Extension, keeping the "nose" dry reduces the chance of the fungal infection red blotch. Water thoroughly then place the potted bulb in a warm, sunny location (keep between 70-75

degrees F). Wait until the soil surface is dry to the touch before watering again. The soil should remain slightly moist but don't overwater. Also, avoid fertilizing the bulb until after it begins to grow.

Use a water soluble fertilizer once or twice a month. To keep the flower stalk growing straight, rotate the pot regularly.

Flowering usually occurs six to eight weeks after the bulb is potted. To prolong the life of the bloom, move the plant out of direct sunlight until the flower fades. Then remove the flower stalk to prevent seed formation. Cut the flower stalk back to about an inch or two above the bulb and place the plant back in a sunny location with the foliage intact. The plant uses its leaves to produce food that is stored in the bulb for next year's flower.

For reflowering, the amaryllis bulb needs exposure to cool temperatures (between 50-55 degrees F). Amaryllis will naturally rebloom if

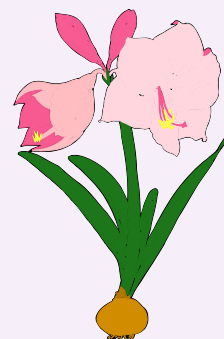


kept in a well-lit, cool spot and tended as a green houseplant. However there are steps you can take to control the bloom time. The bulb can be forced to rebloom after going dormant or resting for eight to ten weeks.

Store the plant in a semi-dark place such as a basement or closet. The temperature should be cool but stay above freezing. This will induce dormancy. Do not water and remove the foliage once it has turned yellow and shriveled. After the resting period, bring the plant into bright light and water thoroughly. Then wait for a beautiful bloom in about six weeks.

Amaryllis performs best when slightly root bound so does not require repotting more than every few years. If needed, repot the bulb after the dormant period right as the growing cycle is beginning again.

Growing amaryllis is relatively easy. Give it a try and add a burst of living color indoors this winter season.



Upcoming Events

November's Minnehaha County Master Gardeners monthly meeting will be on Saturday the 10th at 10 a.m. at the Regional County Extension office, 2001 E 8th St. Sioux Falls

International Master Gardener Conference
Sept 7-14, 2013— on a Holland Cruise off Alaska.

This is the last *From the Ground Up* newsletter for the 2012 season. Thank you and see you next spring!

For more details about these events call 605-782-3290 or email minnehahamastergardeners@hotmail.com

Perennials: to prune or not to prune

By Margaret Murphy, Master Gardener

I sometimes get asked whether it's better to cut back certain perennials now or in the spring. Well, that depends. Traditionally, the practice has been to cut back most perennials every fall. However, more gardeners are deciding to leave their pruning until spring. Left standing, perennials can add color and form to a winter garden. Ornamental grasses, for example, are plants that gardeners frequently leave untrimmed as they provide much appreciated color as well as movement to a static winter scene.



urbanext.illinois.edu

Plus there are other advantages to keeping old growth on perennials for the winter. Remaining stems and leaves can capture snow, which provides extra insulation for plants. This is especially important for those that are only marginally hardy. Wildlife such as birds benefit from the additional coverage that they can use for resting or hiding places. Seed heads left on dried flowers and ornamental grasses also supply birds with much needed fuel this time of year.

On the other hand, there are a few good reasons to cut back perennials in the fall. Plants that are harboring diseases or insect pests should be pruned back. Removing diseased plant material in the fall will help prevent problems from reoccurring in the spring. You may also want to cut back perennials that you don't want spreading by seed. Gardeners may trim unattractive foliage that doesn't add interest to the winter landscape. Ultimately, one's own sense of garden tidiness will help make the final decision about how much garden pruning you do this fall.

As a rule of thumb, perennials not pruned in autumn will need to be cut back in the spring before new growth emerges. Cut back old vegetation to approximately 2-3 inches off the ground. Avoid cutting back too near the crown. Whether you prune your perennials in the fall or spring cut them back when they are dormant. In the fall, if plants are pruned too early it can encourage new growth. This uses up valuable resources the plant needs for next year. If surprised by earlier-than-expected growth in the spring, then just clean-up the plant by pulling out dead stems rather than risk cutting back new growth.

Local Foods Corner

By: Chris Zdorovtsov, Community Development Field Specialist, SDSU Extension

Utilizing the school garden in autumn

Often we think of the garden season slowing down in the fall, but for a school garden, this is a peak usage time for the classroom. What can be done to get kids involved before the killer frost? Harvesting, planting and utilizing season extension techniques to teach science, math, health and more!

Growing food gives students an opportunity to learn about topics such as plant life cycles, plant parts, weather and soil. Many cool-season crops can be planted early in the semester. Look for varieties of lettuce and salad greens, radishes and other short-season root crops to plant in your garden. Varieties with a shorter "days to harvest" period will provide food within about a 2-month period. Planting in mid-late August, and even later for some fast growing radishes or spinach, will provide a harvest before extreme cold weather would typically damage the vegetables. Visit the SDSU Climate page for a map of frost date probabilities for your location.

Allow the students to complete calculations to predict harvest dates. By looking at the seed packet they can mark a planting date and then count weeks to determine when the crop will be ready. Remind the youth that the optimal harvest period will be listed on the seed packets and that lower light levels in the fall and colder temperatures will likely



Row covers in a field. Photo from Michigan State University Extension.

cause grow slower. While planting students can also practice measuring skills as they ensure proper plant spacing.

A favorite activity is eating from the garden! Students can harvest the crops that remain from the summer season and those planted in the fall. Allow students to pick, wash, prepare and taste the produce. This provides opportunities to teach about food safety, health and nutrition and to encourage

increasing fruit and vegetable consumption.

Frost protection and season extension techniques can be utilized to allow for more gardening time. Covering plants with fabric row covers allows air, water and sunlight to pass through, but helps trap heat within the covering, providing 2-8 degrees of frost protection. Larger low tunnel structures could be constructed over a ground or raised bed to add a longer period of protection. In this situation a hoop support covered with plastic will creating a mini-greenhouse over the plants. Plants should not be allowed to touch the plastic or they will freeze.

Last, consider the garden clean-up in itself a lesson. Establishing a compost bin for depositing plant debris will allow youth to observe decomposition and discuss this piece of the food web. Additionally, other concepts such as soil fertility, ecosystems and recycling can be taught.

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