



Trowel Talk!

February, 2012

Nature has its own solutions

A survey published in the Ottawa SUN highlighted five of the main concerns listed by gardeners. They were weeding, mowing, controlling insects, watering and fertilizing. These activities concern not only those with lawns but ornamental and vegetable gardeners also.



Photo by Gillian Boyd

The author's garden flourishes without fuss

There are some simple ways to reduce possible problems. One of them is to keep mulching garden beds with leaves saved in the fall. If you haven't enough of your own to last the whole year, it is certainly worth going out and collecting discarded leaves from your neighbours. A leaf mulch prevents weeds growing and, as it breaks down, it improves the soil and provides plants with all the nutrients they need. There is no need for extra fertilizer. Leaf mulches also help the soil stay cooler and retain moisture.

Choosing tough plants and only watering directly round their roots

when necessary also makes sense. Plant roots are forced to go deeper into the soil in search of natural moisture and no water is wasted. Your plants may not grow as big and showy, but they will be strong, sturdy and resilient, and far better able to withstand dry conditions and insect attacks.



The two photos above illustrate that it is not necessary to remove all the leaves that fall in our gardens. Leave them to act as mulch, decompose and improve the soil. The first photo was taken in early April, the second photo in early June – What leaves?

Most insects are useful. They pollinate flowers to produce our fruits and vegetables. They attract and provide food for other insects as well as birds, bats and toads. Beneficial insects either feed directly on harmful insects or lay eggs in them. When the larvae hatch, they destroy their hosts by eating them. Beneficial insects are more likely to stay if we grow plants they like such as veronicas, daisies, asters and yarrows. In a well-balanced garden, pest insects may cause some minor damage but are usually well-controlled by their natural predators.

Sometimes the easiest way to solve our garden problems is to

change our attitude towards them. A proper garden does not have to be like those we see illustrated in books and magazines. Even if we wish we had such gardens, time and circumstances often make this impossible. Creating gardens that suit our conditions makes life a lot easier.

As a long-time organic gardener, I have found the methods described above very effective. When I go into the garden, I do not worry about weeds or insect pests. I removed my lawn long ago and now only have grassy paths round the flower beds. Cutting them when necessary with a light hand-mower is quick and easy. Continually spreading a layer of leaves over the bare soil in my flower beds lessens the need for watering and weeding while also feeding the soil and the plants.



A moth larva that has been parasitized by another insect – a natural control found in well-balanced gardens.

I now have more time to watch all the visiting and resident birds and insects who control most of the problems. In return they can find food, do some sunbathing or use the various birdbaths. Sometimes the birds just like to hang out in the garden and we enjoy each other's company. Best of all, by focusing on natural solutions, I know I am not harming the environment.

Gillian Boyd
Master Gardener

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- Newsletter of the Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton
- Volume 3, Number 2
- <http://mgottawa.mgoi.ca>
- Editor: Mary Ann Van Berlo
- trowel_talk_editor@rogers.com



Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton

Where to find us this month for free gardening advice!

ONGOING:

Telephone Help Line: 613-236-0034

- Wednesday and Thursday 1-3 pm (all year)

E-mail Help Line: mgoc_helpline@yahoo.ca

- monitored daily
- send photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for ID

CLINICS:

March 22-25, 2012 – Ottawa Home & Garden Show – CE Centre, 4899 Uplands Drive
 – Visit us at our booth. We'll be there all weekend at this annual Spring show, to answer your gardening questions.

SPEAKING EVENTS & WORKSHOPS:

Tips, Tricks and Techniques – February 20, 2012 – 7:00 p.m.

Mary Ann Van Berlo, Master Gardener
 Russell Legion/Lion's Den, Russell, Ontario
 Hosted by the Russell Horticultural Society (guests welcome)

Seed Propagation – February 21, 2012 – 7:15 p.m.

Fran Dennett, Master Gardener
 Royal Canadian Legion, Smiths Falls, Ontario
 Hosted by the Smiths Falls Horticultural Society (guests welcome)

Attracting Birds to your Garden – February 28, 2012 – 7:30 p.m.

David Hinks, Master Gardener
 Tom Brown Arena, 141 Bayview Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario
 Hosted by the Ottawa Horticultural Society (guests welcome)

Daylilies – March 14, 2012 – 7:30 p.m.

Kelly Noel, Master Gardener
 Larkin House, 76 Larkin Drive, Barrhaven, Ontario (Info: 613-825-4257)
 Hosted by the Barrhaven Garden Club (non-members \$3)

Propagation/Seed Germination – March 20, 2012 – 7:30 p.m.

Mary Ann Van Berlo, Master Gardener
 Pretty Street Community Centre, Stittsville, Ontario
 Hosted by the Stittsville-Goulbourn Horticultural Society (guests welcome)

Gardening for the Busy Gardener – April 10, 2012 – 7:00 p.m.

Mary Shearman-Reid, Master Gardener
 Old Fire Hall, 260 Sunnyside Avenue, Ontario
 Hosted by the Old Ottawa South Garden Club (non-members \$7)

LECTURE SERIES: Presented jointly by Friends of the Farm & Master Gardeners

Tuesdays in April Non FoF Members – \$15 for one talk, \$50 for four talks

FoF Members – \$12 for one talk, \$40 for four talks

7:00 p.m. – Building 72, Arboretum, Central Experimental Farm, Ottawa
 Reservations: info@friendsofthefarm.ca OR (613-230-3276)

All from a Little Seed – April 3, 2012 – Rebecca Last

Low Down, Delightful Dirty Earth – April 10, 2012 – Edythe Falconer

The Beauty of Annuals – April 17, 2012 – Diane McClymont Peace

Creating a Winter Scene in your Yard – April 24, 2012 – Julianne Labreche



For information on arranging a lecture for your group: speakers@mgottawa.mgoi.ca

For more information on Master Gardeners, visit us at: <http://mgottawa.mgoi.ca>

February TO DO List

- Winter pruning of shrubs and trees can be done on a mild day. Summer flowering shrubs and trees can be pruned in late winter or early spring. Avoid pruning the spring bloomers at that time as you will be pruning out this year's blossoms -- wait until after they bloom to prune. Also, avoid heavy pruning of trees that bleed such as maple, birch or walnut at this time of year – a light pruning should not cause problems.
- Get a head-start on the growing season by starting some plants under lights. Check how many days are required for germination and calculate when to sow the seeds to ensure transplant-sized seedlings in May.
- Check houseplants for bugs every time you water. Put any infested plants in quarantine and start a spraying regime with insecticidal soap every 7-10 days.
- If you have a gardening or plant identification question, ask a Master Gardener (contact information to the right).

Tip of the Month:

Ask two gardeners “when is the best time to clean-up of the yard” and you will likely get two different answers.

Fall

- fewer places for garden pests and diseases to overwinter
- gardens look tidy all winter
- ready to go in the spring, and you won't be compacting the wet soil by walking on it too early
- less self-seeding

Spring

- the plant stems left in the garden help to collect snow which acts as insulation for your plants
- birds will eat seeds through winter
- seedheads look attractive poking through the snow and add winter interest
- beneficial bugs and micro-organisms need the organic matter

Compromise

- clean up diseased plants or aggressive self-seeders in the fall
- leave the rest for spring but wait until the soil is dry enough that you

aren't leaving footprints and compacting the soil

In the end, it boils down to: “when do you have time?” Either season is fine.