



Trowel Talk!

February, 2013

Seeds help cultivate history

With heritage plants, "putting down roots" is more than just an expression. One definition of heritage or heirloom plants is older varieties known to have been cultivated for at least 50 years, seeds carefully passed from one generation to the next like heirloom jewellery. Another definition equates heritage varieties with varieties at risk: plants that, regardless of how long they have been around, are at risk of disappearing.

Some long-lived perennials, like roses and peonies, are treasured family heirlooms, nurtured by successive generations as a living link with the past. Specific plants have their own fascinating histories. Native beebalm (*Monarda didyma*), for example, is sometimes called Oswego Tea because pioneers used its fragrant leaves as a tea substitute after the Boston Tea Party made it impossible to get the real thing.

Today's gardeners can enjoy growing a link to history by cultivating heritage plants. Heritage tomato (*Solanum lycopersicum*) varieties range from small, pale yellow globes to big lumpy blackish-maroon coloured fruit of exquisite flavour. One of my favourites last year was the 'Livingstone Golden Queen', a lovely big yellow variety with a deep pink blush on

the blossom end. It was first introduced in 1882.

Beans (*Phaseolus spp*) have been cultivated for thousands of years. They are easier to grow than tomatoes and a great way to introduce kids to gardening. Among my favourites are Painted Lady runner beans and Dragon's Tongue wax bush beans.



Photo by Monique Paré

A variety of heirloom potatoes – the purple varieties are sure to be a hit with children

Hummingbirds love the showy red and white flowers of Painted Lady, a climbing vine that dates to 1827. Dragon's Tongue is a Dutch variety that does not need staking. Its tasty creamy-yellow pods are dramatically streaked with purple – a show-stopper in salads!

Several local suppliers offer open-pollinated, organically grown, heritage seeds. Open pollination means that, just by letting nature take its course, seeds will grow true every generation. You may initially pay a bit more for heritage seeds, but you only need to buy them once and then collect their seeds each fall.

Saving seeds reinforces our connection to the past and saves money, too. Seeds of Diversity (www.seeds.ca) is a Canadian non-profit organization dedicated to encouraging seed saving and

preserving heritage varieties. Between February and April, they host "Seedy Saturday" seed exchanges across the country, including March 2 in Ottawa.

Aside from the fun of different varieties and the sense of connection to land and history, growing heritage varieties enhances genetic diversity and reduces the chance that an entire crop will be wiped out. When the blight struck Ireland in 1845, it resulted in the Great Potato Famine. Over a million Irish died, in part because they were only growing a single variety of potato (*Solanum tuberosum*).

Today, heritage potatoes are making a come-back. Check your local farmers' market this summer for blue potatoes, tiny banana-shaped yellow potatoes and mid-sized russet potatoes with lovely deep red skins.

And keep an eye out for other unusual heritage varieties, like purple carrots. There's a whole world of living heritage out there to explore!

Rebecca Last
Master Gardener

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EVENTS OF NOTE!

Garden Design Workshop (beginner level)

Hosted by Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton
April 27, 2013
Building 469, Uplands AFB
10 de Niverville Private, Ottawa
For more info, click [here](#).

National Master Gardeners Convention (open to the public)

April 5-7, 2013
Deerhurst Resort, Huntsville
For more info, click [here](#).



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 21-24, 2013 – Ottawa Home & Garden Show – Ernst & Young Centre, 4899 Uplands Drive, Ottawa – Visit us at our booth. We'll be there all weekend at this annual spring show, to answer your gardening questions.

SPEAKING EVENTS & WORKSHOPS:

Overwintering Roses and Geraniums – February 20 – 7 p.m.

Diane McClymont Peace, Master Gardener
Osgoode Public Library, 5630 Osgoode Main St., Osgoode
Hosted by Osgoode Garden Club

Renovating an Old Garden. – March 12 – 7 p.m.

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener
Champlain Park Fieldhouse, 149 Cowley Ave., Ottawa
Hosted by the Champlain Garden Club

All About Dirt – March 18 – 7 p.m.

Edythe Falconer, Master Gardener
Brockville Wesleyan Church, 33 Central Avenue West, Brockville
Hosted by the Brockville Horticultural Society

Gardening in Smaller Spaces – March 19 – 7:30 p.m.

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener
Stittsville United Church, corner of Fernbank and Main Street Stittsville
Hosted by the Stittsville Horticultural Society

Down to Earth in the Garden – March 21 – 7:30 p.m.

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener
City View United Church, 6 Epworth Avenue, Nepean
Hosted by Nepean Hort Society.

Growing Organic Food – March 21 & 27th – 7 p.m.

Tom Marcantonio, Master Gardener
Carlingwood Branch, Ottawa Public Library, 281 Woodroffe Ave, Ottawa
Hosted by the Ottawa Public Library (guests welcome)

Shade Gardens – March 25 – 7:30 p.m.

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener
St. Mary Magdalene Anglican Church on 537 Highway 105. Chelsea, PQ
Hosted by Gatineau Valley Gardeners

The Beauty of Annuals – April 2 – 7:00 p.m.

Diane McClymont Peace, Master Gardener
Old March Town Hall, 821 March Rd., Kanata (entrance is on Klondike Rd.)
Hosted by Kanata-March Horticulture Society

Small Gardens – April 9 – 7:00 p.m.

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener
Navy Club on Sixth St. E., Cornwall
Cornwall and District Hort Society

Big Bold and Beautiful – Size matters in the Garden – April 9 – 7 p.m.

Nancy McDonald, Master Gardener
Building 72, Arboretum, Central Experimental Farm, Ottawa
Hosted by Friends of the Farm, click [here](#) for admission fees & other details

Gardening made Easy in Raised Beds and Containers – April 12 – 10 am

Catherine Disley Engler, Master Gardener
The Good Companion **Seniors' Centre** 670 Albert Street, Ottawa
Call to reserve seating (613) 236-0428



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

- Most houseplants are semi-dormant due to shorter days. This makes the winter an excellent time to repot them.
- Consider attending a garden lecture or garden club meeting to get your gardening fix during the winter months.
- Start to get supplies ready for starting seeds under lights, but it is still too early to start most annuals – wait until mid to late March.
- If you have a gardening or plant identification question, ask a Master Gardener (contact information to the right).

Tip of the Month:

Each year the Perennial Plant Association picks a "Perennial of the Year". The criteria are:

- suitability for a wide range of climatic conditions
- low-maintenance requirements
- relative pest- and disease-resistance
- ready availability in the year of promotion
- multiple seasons of ornamental interest

This year's "Perennial of the Year" is *Polygonatum odoratum* 'Variegata' or variegated Solomon's Seal. It is not as aggressive as the pure green form. It certainly meets the criteria listed above. Watch for it at your favourite nursery this spring. *Editor's note:* I've grown it for a number of years and am very pleased with its performance.



Polygonatum odoratum 'Variegata'