



# Trowel Talk

December 15 2022, Vol 13, no. 12

## Trowel Talk Reflections

*Julianne Labreche*

As 2022 draws to a close, it's a good time to pause and reflect. This year, I'm feeling particularly grateful to those Master Gardeners who contribute to Trowel Talk— especially, our regular columnists, contributors and 'back room' editors. As dedicated volunteers, they share their skills and gardening wisdom.

It takes a team to publish a newsletter. Here's just a snapshot.

Every month, Amanda Carrigan answers questions from gardeners about a wide range of topics ranging from growing tomatoes to pruning shrubs. Behind the scenes, a team of Master Gardeners support her with ideas and suggestions. Ask a Master Gardener is a popular column in Trowel Talk, and practical too. Readers are always encouraged to send along a question or contact our Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton (MGOC) email helpline directly, a service which is free of charge.

For the past two years, Gail Labrosse has written a monthly column on the important subject of invasive plant species. These plants are the 'garden thugs' of the plant world, invading our gardens and spreading into our wild spaces where they can disrupt the natural cycles of nature. As gardeners, we need to learn more about these non-native plants; both ways

## Contents

◆ Trowel Talk Reflections	1
◆ Ask a Master Gardener	<a href="#">2</a>
◆ Plumosa fern	<a href="#">3</a>
◆ Making a Fairy Garden for Christmas	<a href="#">5</a>
◆ Beyond the Bird Feeder	<a href="#">7</a>
◆ Japanese Barberry	<a href="#">10</a>
◆ Find us	<a href="#">12</a>

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Rosehips  
*Julianne Labreche*

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## Ask a Master Gardener

Compiled by Amanda Carrigan and Ann McQuillan

Master Gardeners answer helpline questions.

*When is the best time to prune roses? Do different kinds need to be pruned at different times?*

In general, the best time to prune roses is when they are dormant in late fall or just as buds begin to swell in early spring. The advantage of spring pruning is that you can see both the structure of the plant and whether any of it has died off over the winter.

Depending on what type of rose you have and how vigorous it grows, you may want to consider the following factors:

**Hybrid tea, grandiflora, and floribunda roses** bloom on new growth each year, so prune in early spring. A cut back of about a third of the rose's size works well for most purposes. A harder pruning will result in fewer, larger flowers. If the roses are tender enough to need winter protection, then some pruning in late fall may be appropriate. That way, they will fit into their covers.

**Climbers, ramblers, and older, heritage or species roses** bloom on old wood. These may be pruned in spring for size and thinning as needed, although this can result in fewer flowers for the season. They can be thinned on a 4-year cycle, like other shrubs. More severe cutting back should be done right after they bloom, so they have the rest of the season to produce growth for next year's flowers. Vigorous plants can be cut back by about a third after flowering.

**Miniature and polyantha roses** need very little pruning. Deadhead them after blooming. Give them a light pruning to shape.

As with any shrub, remember that dead, damaged, or diseased stems, crossing or rubbing branches,

to identify them and halt their sale, as well as ways to stop their spread after they have established themselves on our property. Gail has provided an important public service with her column Gardeners' Beware. Her column has run for the past two years and will be ending this month.

Mary Crawford also ends off a monthly column in 2022 called Know Your Weeds. Each month, she profiled a common garden variety weed. Gardeners often know their plants but don't always recognize their weeds. Mary's column has been invaluable in helping us to get to know many common weeds, informing us on ways to eradicate these plants from our gardens.

In 2022, Claire McCaugley wrote a series on how our gardens satisfy and enrich our five senses. Claire took a deep dive into many plants that we can see, taste, smell, touch and hear. The series included some photos from her own beautiful and bountiful garden. One reader reached out to thank her for ideas on ways to add plants for a friend who is visually impaired.

Rebecca Last contributed a well-informed, detailed series on seeds, ranging from seed germination to harvesting them later in the season. There are other master gardeners as well, too many to mention, who contributed articles, edited and arranged the layout.

In 2023, two new columns in Trowel Talk will begin. The first, called In the Alcove Garden, will profile native plants that grow in a local garden at Kitchissippi United Church, maintained by Master Gardeners of Ottawa Carleton (MGOC). We hope to showcase some beneficial native plants that grow in our region, as well in our gardens. Special thanks to Candace Dressler and Amanda Carrigan for taking on this useful project.

Finally, I'll be launching a new monthly column beginning in January 2023, called Gardening for Birds. Each month will profile a bird species in our region, then describe ways to create beneficial habitat by including bird-friendly plants. Birds bring so much

beauty, song and interest to our gardens. Let's welcome them to our garden spaces.

It looks as if it will be another busy year for Trowel Talk. We look forward to your feedback, as always. All the best to you and your family in 2023. As always, happy gardening. 🌿

## Plumosa fern: Not a Real Fern, But a Lovely Houseplant

Anne Price



*Asparagus plumosa*. A larger plant in an 8-inch pot, contrasting nicely with other tropicals.

Anne Price

**P**lumosa fern resembles a fern, but is actually a member of the asparagus family. It is also known by various botanical names: *Asparagus setaceus*, *A. plumosus*, and *Protasparagus setaceus*. Unlike garden asparagus (*A. officinalis*), it is not edible.

This tropical African native makes a unique and attractive houseplant in cold climates. In warmer zones, such as North America's zones 7 to 10, it can survive outside. However, it should always be grown in pots. Otherwise, it can become invasive.

weak shoots and rootstock suckers can be removed at any time. Try to avoid pruning for size and shape in late summer and early fall. That way, the rose is not stimulated to produce new growth which will not have a chance to harden off before winter.

*Do you have any tips for getting a very pot-bound agave out of the pot? I have a lovely large one in an earthenware pot, which I put outside in summer and bring in for the winter. I've been putting off re-potting it because it's such a painful chore with all the spikes on the leaves, but now I'm afraid I've left it too long. The pot is smaller near the top (a sort of flattened sphere shape), and I don't know how I'll get the agave out without damage to the pot, or the plant.*

There are a couple of things you can try, but if it is very pot-bound they may not help. Make sure the agave is well watered before you start to repot. Sometime, this can help loosen the root ball. You can also try rinsing soil out of the root ball to make it easier to dislodge.

In order to make handling the plant easier, you may have to sacrifice the bottom leaves, especially if they are close to the pot. Use a saw to cut them off if they are too big for pruners or loppers to do easily. Use a long flexible knife blade to slice around the root ball just inside the pot as completely as possible. If the agave has pups or offsets, try to remove those with their roots first, which should make some room in the pot (rooting some of them up would be a good back-up in case the agave doesn't survive).

If you are still unable to loosen the root ball in the pot, you could cut further around the roots inside the pot. This way, essentially, you have a smaller root ball to try to remove. At this point, however, you may have to decide whether the pot or the agave is more important. It may be impossible to remove the agave without severely traumatizing or killing it, and/or breaking the pot.

With its delicate, soft appearance, Plumosa fern adds a textural element when combined with other coarse-leaved plants. It is easier to care for indoors than real ferns. There are several varieties of plants called 'Asparagus fern' but I will focus only on the commonly called Plumosa fern, distinguished by its fuzzy 'fronds'.

Plumosas can grow into shrubby, medium sized houseplants. They can be pruned to maintain an open appearance or allowed to grow densely into potted "thickets". Plumosa ferns make lovely hanging plants as shoots emerging from the plant can grow as long as six feet before the foliage emerges from the sharp spikes along the shoot.



A young plant showing its growth habit. This plant will be re-potted as a hanging plant.

Anne Price

Some owners use them in terrariums as their airy appearance lends itself well to this kind of display. If included in this environment, however, it is best to keep the plant in a small pot hidden by pebbles or planting medium as it may not adapt well to the moist terrarium soil. In addition, these plants grow moderately quickly and will outgrow the terrarium soil.

On the other hand, if you do nothing, the choice might be made for you. A pot-bound agave is more likely to flower, and they tend to die after flowering. If it doesn't flower, it will certainly be difficult to keep the plant alive and healthy when the roots get too big in the pot. It's possible the roots will eventually crack the pot. 🌱

Unlike real ferns which propagate from spores along the spine of the leaves, plumosas produce small white flowers, especially when root bound. Propagation of plumosa ferns is easier by division than by seed. To divide, use a sharp knife to cut through the root ball. Replant divisions into separate pots suitable to their size. Plumosa ferns grow quickly and may require repotting once a year or root pruning to control size.

Plumosas don't require frequent watering, and are very forgiving if neglected. Shoots will turn yellow in response to lack of water but can be pruned out, producing new growth quickly. Owners are recommended to use regular potting soil and water when the top 5cm of soil is dry. Misting the lovely foliage isn't necessary but doesn't do any harm. Light requirements are "bright indirect", meaning don't put the plant in direct sunlight. Fertilize moderately and, if possible, put the plant outdoors during the warm season. As with other tropical plants being moved outside, put the plumosa in a shady, protected spot to prevent the foliage from burning.

These are lovely, easy care, unique plants to add to an indoor plant collection. In my experience, small independent plant shops are most likely to sell them. They may pop up occasionally at some big box stores which carry plants too.

**Tip:** *Protect less hardy plants by piling mulch over them once the ground has frozen. Protect grafts on young trees with foam pipe insulation applied over the graft. Encircle the stems and trunks of shrubs and trees with small gauge hardware cloth to well above the expected snow line to protect from bark nibbling creatures.*

# Making a Fairy Garden for Christmas

Judith Cox



Indoor Christmas Fairy Garden

Judith Cox

Every summer, I like to make a fairy garden for my front porch and another for the bottom of the garden. It's fun, and a way to introduce children to the magic of gardening. I try to follow the guidelines of building a fairy garden by having the elements of fire, earth, water, and air incorporated into the planter. I will admit that I might take a few interesting liberties with my interpretation, but the planter ends up looking nice.

While I have always maintained that a good fairy garden is a pollinator garden, it is different for an inside fairy garden. There are rarely any pollinators for an inside garden. There have been many books

written about the types and temperaments of fairies outside, but very few explore the fairies that might live inside your house. In that case, I have decided to build this fairy garden as a Christmas centerpiece with lots of fun accessories.

You have many choices for plants when it comes to an indoor Christmas fairy garden. You could try a cactus garden with various small cacti and draping succulents. Add some desert accessories for an interesting twist. If you have a collection of African violets or gesneriads, you could build your garden around them. The African violets with their beautiful deep colours could add a jungle flavour, and if you add primarily white accessories, those flowers

would shine. A Christmas cactus plant could also form the base of a Christmas fairy garden. Make the Christmas cactus the center of the planter, as if it were a tangled Christmas tree. Try hanging tiny ornaments and lights from this Christmas cactus tree.

You can use any or all of your houseplants in your little garden, but in my case, I have too many cats. This means that my plant material and my design options are limited. While I would like to use some of the plants that are locked up in my plant compound, I shall be using citrus-scented geraniums (*Pelargonium*) instead. I have discovered that most cats do not like any scent of citrus, so I have a geranium called 'Frensham Lemon' and another called 'Skeleton Rose' in the front window. I am overjoyed that I can enjoy these plants without them being constantly 'tasted'.

### **Let's get started.**

To make your Christmas Garden, the first thing that you will need is a container. I like wide, shallow containers as there is more room for me to add accessories. Once you have your container, you will need to fill it with soil. I use heavy, inexpensive soil as it is easier to tamp down to provide a base for my accessories. I have discovered that it is better to leave my plants in their pots, then place the pots into the Christmas planter. The plants can be in organic soil with good drainage as they sit in their pots. This way I can water the plant directly instead of trying to water them when they are planted in with the accessories. It makes far less mess.

After you fill your container with heavy soil, decide where you want to place your plants. I put my Frensham Lemon geranium towards the back of the planter. I like to work with odd numbers as I find they generate more interest. In this case, I am using one plant, but I can change my mind and use three plants or more if that is what I want. I am using this geranium as a statement plant. It will stand up at the back as the small Christmas accessories are placed around the front of the planter.



Frensham Lemon Geranium in its pot

*Judith Cox*

Now that I have the plant where I would like it to be, I have all sorts of opportunities to place various accessories. This is a difficult step, so I am going to try a few different configurations before I decide. If I try to place too many accessories, I risk making my garden look like a rummage sale. It is already straddling that line between sweet and kitsch. I want it to be something that people will look at and smile. If I spend too much time organizing it, it will look too structured.

I left the planter alone for a while, until I could look at it with fresh eyes. I wanted it to have a Christmas warmth and a winter feel and look like there is something going on. Instead, it looks like my geranium is participating in some sort of druid naming ceremony.

I had a lovely little white bridge that I really liked, so I put it down and moved the houses and trees around. Now I feel better about it. Remember, that you can

always change your garden. Add more plants. Add more accessories. Take things away that do not work for you.

I added some snowflakes, snowmen, a fairy and some lights and my sweet little Christmas Garden is born.

This is a wonderful way to spend a December afternoon. Your planter can be as simple or as elaborate as you choose to make it. You easily find Christmas accessories at dollar stores or craft stores. Sometimes, nurseries will carry interesting additions. This indoor planter can be adapted to other holidays all the way up to spring. Change the accessories, add new plants, and have fun. 🌱



A happier winter scene but could use some snow  
Judith Cox

***Anyone who thinks that gardening begins in the spring and ends in the fall is missing the best part of the whole year. For gardening begins in January with the dream —Josephine Nuese, author***

## Beyond the Bird Feeder

Mary Crawford

**W**ould you like to encourage more birds into your outdoor space through plants? Designing a bird-friendly garden can be fun and remind us how many needs we have in common with these beautiful creatures.

Food and shelter are key, of course, as is safety. Cats, chemicals, and windows all pose lethal hazards to birds, so keep kitty indoors or under control, avoid pesticides and herbicides, and reduce the attraction of your windows.

Native plants, that is, plants that have co-evolved with the birds in an area, are prioritized in the recommendations below for many reasons. They pro-

duce more and higher quality nectar and food, are reliable hosts for preferred insects, and are more easily recognized by the birds. They also do not pose the same risk of aggressive invasion, both within our gardens and in wild spaces, as do many non-native plants.

Trees and shrubs offer birds vantage points for observation, cover for protection, places to nest as well as seeds, berries, fruit, and insects. Where possible, consider planting coniferous (evergreen) and deciduous (leaves that drop) trees and shrubs of varying sizes as a starting point, then add flowers and vines.

### Coniferous trees

Eastern white cedar (*Thuja occidentalis*) may already exist in your backyard as hedging, but even one or two alone can make an impact. Chickadees, finches, nuthatches and grosbeaks feed off the seeds and nest in the branches. Eastern red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) produces blue-gray fruit much sought after by cedar waxwings. With its dense growth, it provides excellent cover for robins, juncos, and warblers. Many fine native species of pine (*Pinus*), spruce (*Picea*), and fir (*Abies*) likewise provide seed, while junipers (*Juniperus*) and yews (*Taxus*) have delectable fruit-like cones.



Yellow rumped warbler on cedar  
Mary Crawford

### Deciduous trees

Red and sugar maples (*Acer rubrum*, *A. saccharum*) provide welcome shade in summer as well as excellent tall perches. The fallen leaves in autumn help overwintering insects that are part of the food cycle too, so put away the leaf-blower and try not to rake much. Avoid the Norway maple (*Acer platanoides*). It is now on many “Do Not Plant” lists. This non-native maple has proven itself an aggressive invader of urban and forested spaces, overtaking native maples in large stands and destroying undergrowth with its thick canopy.

Serviceberries have showy spring flowers that turn into berries beloved by waxwings and woodpeckers. Cardinals and robins nest in them. Species to look for include the Canada serviceberry (*Amelanchier canadensis*) and downy serviceberry (*A. arborea*), among others.



American robin  
Mary Crawford

Cherry trees, including chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*) and pin cherry (*P. pensylvanica*), produce fruit that attracts many species of birds, including robins, cardinals, thrushes, woodpeckers, jays, and grosbeaks.

### Shrubs

*Viburnums* are deciduous shrubs with some highly desirable species. The nannyberry (*V. lentago*) and high-bush cranberry (*V. trilobum*) provide berries for cardinals, robins, and cedar waxwings. They also host the larvae of many species of moths and butterflies, making them doubly appealing to birds, especially for feeding their young.

Native bush honeysuckle (*Diervilla lonicera*) is a smaller shrub rich in nectar. Check carefully to distinguish it from highly invasive exotic varieties. Avoid the tatarian, amur and Morrow honeysuckles (*Lonicera tatarica*, *maackii*, and *morrowii*) that have degraded wild areas.

There are many species of native dogwoods (*Cornus*) that are not only attractive in the garden but also very useful to birds. Check out the suitability of red osier dogwood (*C. stolonifera*) and pagoda dogwood (*C. alternifolia*), for example, and look for cardinals, warblers, waxwings, finches, kingbirds, grosbeaks, and possibly even grouse or wild turkey to visit.



Cedar waxwing  
Mary Crawford

### Flowers and Grass

Flowers are a much-loved part of any bird garden and create a laddering effect against the backdrop of trees and shrubs. Think diversity as well as mass. Birds can more easily find flowers in a grouping but also benefit from a range of options. Consider spring through fall bloom-times.

Annuals, which complete their life cycle within one growing season, bloom continuously. Perennials come back year after year but bloom for a shorter period and usually take a season to become established.

The first bird we often think of feeding with plants is the hummingbird, a kind of “bee-bird” that lives off nectar. Attracted by colour, especially red, orange, and pink but also purple and blue, hummingbirds love tubular shapes. Listed roughly in order of their bloom time, the following native perennials are excellent choices: columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*), blue flag iris (*Iris versicolor*), beebalm (*Monarda didyma* & *M. fistulosa*), anise hyssop (*Agastache*

*foeniculum*), cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*), and great blue lobelia (*L. siphilitica*).

Several non-native annuals are notable in attracting hummingbirds, especially *Salvia* and *Zinnia*. Be advised that cultivated varieties (cultivars) of any plant—native or non-native—can be of reduced value to pollinators in general. Changing the size, colour, or shape of the flower often changes the availability or quality of pollen and nectar. Double blooms, for example, make a flower difficult to access. Benefit to wildlife does not usually factor into the selection process of hybrids and cultivars.

Late season seeds, devoured by finches, juncos, and chickadees, are produced in abundance by coneflower (*Echinacea*), black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia*), several goldenrod species (*Solidago*), wild aster (*Symphotrichum*), and of course sunflower (*Helianthus*)—many are native to North America but not to Ontario. Leave some flower heads on until spring if you can.

Tall grasses contribute to a bird-friendly space by providing seeds, cover, and homes for juicy insects. An easy way to achieve this is simply to stop mowing a section of lawn. Native grasses can also be mass-planted and include such options as little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), eastern bottlebrush (*Elymus hystrix*) and Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*).

### Vines and Brush

The truth is, birds like a little mess. The more comfortable we can get with tangling vines and the idea of a brush pile, the better for our avian guests. Trumpet honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*) is ideal for hummingbirds. Waxwings, robins, and other songbirds eat the blue berries of Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*).

### On your way

With any choice of plant, some research is needed to ensure a good fit with your available light, soil and space. There are plants for every soil and light type and every size constraint, many more plants than

could be featured here.

Finally, remember that birds, like us, need water. My husband and I were surprised to see birds and insects drawn to our low-budget bird bath—a ceramic plant tray set down in the garden. A regular refresh with the hose keeps the water clean. With all the challenges that birds face, it's exciting to think of ways we can help with their basic

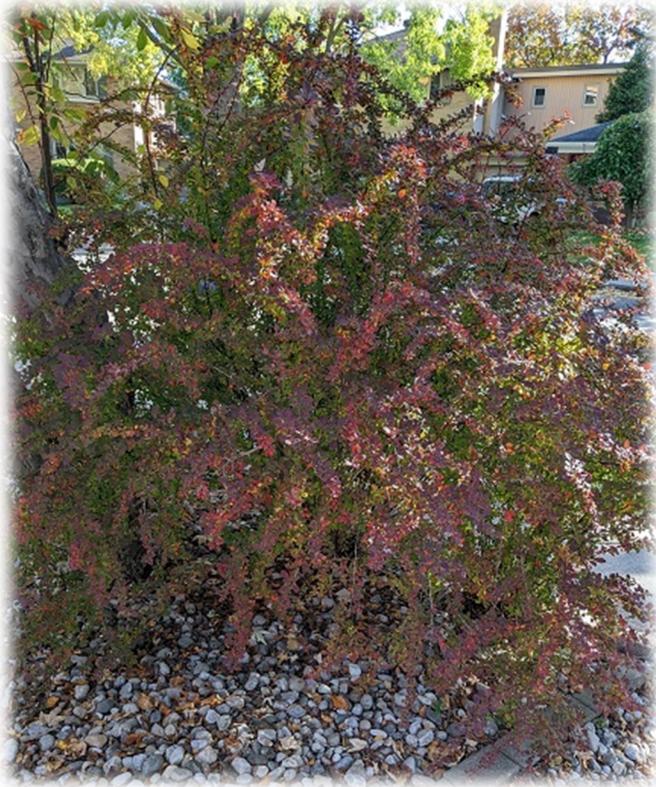
needs—and reap the pleasures of their presence in our midst. Enjoy creating your own bird-friendly space. ♻️

*Chickadees collect more than 300 caterpillars per day which adds up to 6,000 to 9,000 caterpillars a season to feed one family of young chickadees*



## Gardeners Beware: Japanese Barberry—*Berberis thunbergii*

Gail Labrosse



Japanese barberry shrub

Gail Labrosse



Japanese barberry fall 2022

Gail Labrosse

*This is the final column of Gardeners Beware. Invasive plant species, which are non-native, pose a significant threat to nature. Native plants support large numbers of birds, butterflies and bees. Growing native plants in a garden will transform it into a dynamic space.*

**J**apanese barberry was introduced to North America in the 1870s. This native to Japan was often used in gardens, as well as for erosion control on slopes. It became a popular ornamental plant due to its beautiful berries and leaves.

A round-shaped bush that grows 1 – 1.5 m tall with thorns and bright red berries all along its many branches, barberry is also a prolific seed producer. Its seeds ripen in autumn and cling to the shrub during winter. Barberries adapt well to all soil types and can grow in full sun or full shade. They are known to affect native habitats because of their potential to modify soils.

In Canada, this invasive species is found throughout southern Ontario, Quebec and Nova Scotia. Ninety percent of its seeds, which are spread great distances by birds, germinate to form new, dense, thickets.

Attractive as it is, this invasive, non-native shrub has no diseases or predators to control it in our ar-

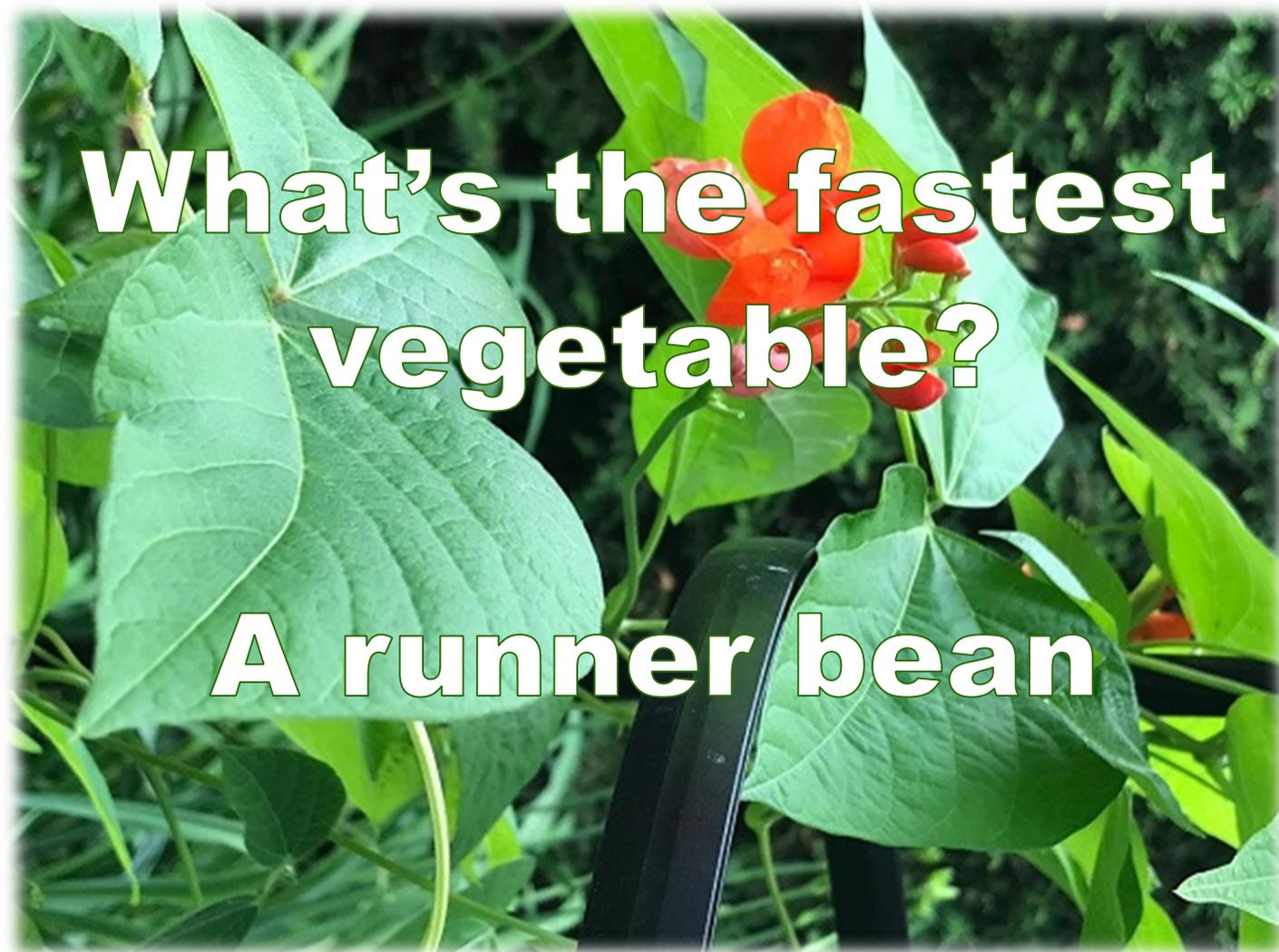
ea but takes space and sunlight from our native trees and plants. If you find it in the wild, please contact the Invading Species Hotline at 1-800-563-7711 or visit [EDDMapS](http://EDDMapS) Ontario to report a sighting.

### **Try this Native Alternative Instead**

Native viburnums (*Viburnum lentago*, *V. lantanoides* and others)- Are small flowering trees or shrubs. They grow in sun or full shade in moist soils. Lacy white flowers are followed by berries which later change from red to blue. They have green leaves during the growing season that turn yellow-bronze in the fall. Native viburnums attracts gamebirds, songbirds and mammals and are host to the spring azure butterfly.

Major source: <http://www.invadingspecies.com/invaders/plants/japanese-barberry> 🌱

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Master Gardeners of  
Ottawa-Carleton

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and shiny helpline address!



We are happy to answer your gardening questions!

## Article suggestions box

This is your chance, as a reader, to suggest an idea for an article you would like to see in Trowel Talk. Click on the button.



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Letters to editor: [newsletter@mgottawa.ca](mailto:newsletter@mgottawa.ca)  
Banner Photograph: . Holly—Ilex x meserveae,  
S.R.Bicket

Trowel Talk can be found on the [Lanark County Master Gardener's blogsite](#) and Ottawa Carleton Master Gardener's Website <https://mgottawa.ca/>



### Clinics

Closed

For information on gardening in and around the  
Ottawa valley:  
<https://gardeningcalendar.ca/>



### Talks and Events

Tuesday, January 10, 2023, 7 pm  
Judith Cox

#### Promising You a Rose Garden

[West Carleton Garden Club and Horticultural Society](#)

Wednesday, January 11, 2023, 7:30 pm  
Julianne Labreche

#### A Garden for the Birds

[Barrhaven Garden Club](#)