

# NORTHAMPTON COMMUNITY GARDEN



MARCH 2002

## HOW CAN SPRING BE HERE WHEN WINTER HASN'T EVEN BEGUN?

The past few months have not felt much like winter, but the calendar says that spring is just around the corner. Local syrup makers have begun to collect maple sap, and daffodil shoots seem ready to burst into bloom at any moment.

This issue of the Community Garden NEWS is packed with tips to help you get ready for what promises to be an early start to the 2002 gardening season. Lori Shine and Mimi Teghtsoonian recommend their favorite books, websites and catalogs for plant information and seed selection. Susan Mikula guides you in preparing your plot for spring planting, and Ed Hagelstein simplifies composting for the community gardener. And don't miss the latest news from the garden. Have a great gardening season! ✿

## GARDEN NOTES

### SURVIVAL CENTER DELIVERY IN JEOPARDY

Each year the Community Garden donates bushels of produce to the Survival Center in Northampton, both from individual plots and from the Survival Center plot at the Garden. Gardeners leave produce at the picnic table, and volunteers pick it up and deliver it (as part of their community service hours).

**WE NEED A VOLUNTEER TO COORDINATE DELIVERIES** to the Survival Center. The coordinator specifies times for gardeners to leave donations and makes sure there are volunteers to deliver them. This is mostly a managerial job – you do not need to make deliveries yourself! Sabrina Bristol, who filled this post last year is unable to do it this year, and unless we find a replacement, we may have to suspend the program. If you are able to coordinate this important project, please e-mail Mimi at [mtex@smith.edu](mailto:mtex@smith.edu) or call 584-0317.

### MORE VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

We're looking for gardeners who are interested in:

- ♥ **ORGANIZING SPECIAL EVENTS AT THE GARDEN** – pot-luck dinners, picnics, tomato tastings, open houses... or something you dream up. *Interested?* Let us know.
- ♥ **JOINING THE GARDEN COMMITTEE.** Come to a meeting and see what goes on. Our next meeting is on Monday, March 18, 6:30 P.M., at the Recreation Department (90 Locust Street., behind Smith Voc).

### NEW GARDENERS REGISTRATION

If you have friends who would like to garden this year, let them know about the Community Garden. New gardeners can register for a plot on Saturday, March 30, between 10:00 A.M. and noon, at the Recreation Department.

There are plenty of plots available, so there's no need to come early to stand in line.

### GARDEN GUIDELINES AND RULES

Gardeners should note the following additions:

☾ There will be a ragweed and weed inspection on July 14. Plots should be **FREE OF RAGWEED** – a freely-seeding and fast-spreading weed and a notorious allergen – and substantially free of all weeds (i.e. more cultivated plants than weeds). Those whose gardens do not meet these standards will be notified and asked to correct the situation.

☾ A gardener who moves should notify the Recreation Department of the address change, so that s/he will continue to receive the Newsletter and other mailings – these contain important information, such as changes in rules, deadlines, and dates and places for registration and other special events. The Newsletter is the Garden Committee's chief means of communication, and gardeners are responsible for knowing its contents.

### SPECIAL THANKS

☞ To Garden Neighbor KAREN MURPHY, who was inadvertently omitted from the list in the last issue of the Newsletter.

☞ To the Northampton Recreation Department, especially RAY ELLERBROOK, who provides advice, assistance, and support; CHRIS KOSTEK, who processes registration forms, maintains our data base, and cheerfully fields phone calls for us; and EILEEN WRIGHT, our efficient accountant. ✿

—Mimi Teghtsoonian

## WHERE YOUR DOLLAR\$ GO

### ♥ WATER IN A TIME OF DROUGHT.

The water bill for 2001, after the Northampton Soccer League paid \$700 for their metered use, was \$1526. This is a major item in our budget, but remember that the summer of 2001 was the 4th driest in New England in the past century, and that the rate charged by the City for water was increased last year. Our water conservation efforts came at the best possible time to save money.

### ♥ FEE TO THE CITY OF NORTHAMPTON.

Another major item in the budget is the yearly \$1800 fee we pay to the City. Many gardeners have asked what we get for our money; here's the answer.

Every year we collect a bit more than \$7000 in registration fees for Community Garden plots. Of the money collected, we pay the \$1800 to the Recreation Department.

*Why are we obligated to pay this amount, and what does the Recreation Department do for us?*

The Community Garden is a program sponsored by the Recreation Department. Each Recreation Department program contributes some amount of money from the fees they collect to help defray expenses in the Recreation Department's budget. That's fair enough. But what exactly do we get for our \$1800 contribution?

*Let's break this down and look at it a few different ways:*

First, there are 420 plots, so we can say that for \$1800, each plot contributes \$4.28 each year for the Recreation Department expense in our budget.

Or, if we think about it on a daily basis, the Community Garden pays \$1800 for about 260 working days each year. The Community Garden as a whole pays about \$6.92 per normal 8 hour day to the Recreation Department, or \$.86 per hour for services rendered.

*Here's what we get:*

- A mailing address and someone to open our mail, file it, and call one of us if something needs attention.
- A phone number and an answering service. We have 220 gardeners. If each one calls the Recreation Department twice a year, that's about 440 phone calls. In addition to that, we usually get about 100 calls around new gardener registration and spring and fall inspections.

• A full-charge bookkeeping service, and a bank account for our registration fees. We're also able to use the City purchase order system with approved local vendors. This way, we can charge lawn mowers, paint and tools to our City Community Garden Account, instead of having a gardener pay for large items out of pocket. Our City water bill is also handled this way. The Recreation Department also provides us with financial information and reports so we can plan our budget.

• A mailing list service. The Recreation Department enters all our 220 gardener registrations into database software so we can make labels or print lists for inspections and phone calling projects. They also make address changes during the season.

• A copy service. The Recreation Department makes copies of our registration forms, newsletters and other mailings, amounting to more than 2000 copies per year.

• A meeting place for committee meetings and garden registration.

• The Recreation Department has also supplied gas for our mowers and arranges for Smith Voc. to help us turn our compost pile twice a year.

So for \$.86 per hour during business hours or \$4.28 per plot for a whole year, I think we are getting our money's worth.

*What do you think? We'd be happy to hear your opinions or comments. You can mail them to the Recreation Dept. at 90 Locust Street, Northampton, MA 01060. 🌱*

*—Mimi Teghtsoonian and Sylvia Bonadio*

## ARMCHAIR GARDENING

WHILE THE HOWLING WINDS OF WINTER have been surprisingly mild this year, I'm sure I'm not alone in still feeling my traditional attack of Spring Fever. Somewhere in the middle of February I start longing to get back into my garden – wondering how the garlic or the irises are overwintering, trying to remember where I planted what.

This time of year is the perfect time to plan your garden, read up on techniques and plantings to improve your lovely patch of land, and gear up for the busy planting and harvesting seasons ahead. Here are some recommendations to cure those late winter blues:

Many seed companies have websites where you can browse the colors of summer, order seeds directly, or get a free catalog. Try [WWW.BURPEE.COM](http://WWW.BURPEE.COM) or, for organic seeds, [WWW.SEEDSOFCCHANGE.COM](http://WWW.SEEDSOFCCHANGE.COM). You'll find many more if you start exploring.

Where should I put the carrots? Why didn't my cucumbers do well last year? How can I get more blooms out of my daylilies? Countless books offer advice

on companion planting, garden planning, and troubleshooting.

Here are some of my favorites.

For expert, detailed advice on flowers and vegetables, but especially flowers, try James Underwood Crockett's book, *Crockett's Victory Garden*. Jim Crockett, the longtime host of a PBS gardening show, will let you know how deep to plant your dahlias, how (and why!) to make a cold frame, and make even the least experienced gardener feel capable. This book is structured with a chapter for every month, and Crockett always provides ideas for what you can be doing for your garden, even in the coldest months.

### GARDEN COMMITTEE MEETINGS

The garden committee meets on the third Monday of each month at 6:30 P.M. During the winter months, the meeting is at the Recreation Department office, behind Smith Voc.

All gardeners are welcome to attend and participate; check with the Recreation Dept. (587-1040) the day of the meeting to confirm the time.

Gardeners are welcome to suggest items for the agenda. E-mail Mimi at [mtex@smith.edu](mailto:mtex@smith.edu) or call 584-0317.

Frieda Arkin's *The Essential Kitchen Gardener* is really a dictionary of plants, pests, and diseases. The book can be a real life-saver when a problem arises, but it's so well-written that you'll want to read straight through, from Alternaria disease to Zucchini. What I like is that it also gives harvesting and sometimes cooking advice for various herbs and vegetables. Arkin answers the strange questions that pop up around the dinner table at my house, such as "Are you sure that part's edible?" and "Do you know what you're doing with that artichoke?" And she might turn you on to some new plants to try in your garden this year.

Though it may be difficult to find, *A Cook's Guide to Growing Herbs, Greens, & Aromatics*, by Millie Owen is a terrific guide for the hunter/gatherer in you. Advice on outdoor and indoor plantings of herbs, and on foraging for wild herbs and greens, makes you want to pop a fiddlehead fern in your mouth right this moment. But that's only the first section of the book. The second part gives recipes, using all sorts of herb mixtures and the bounty from wild foraging expeditions, and it includes advice on drying and storing herbs as well.

Why not also read up on the natural world surrounding you, even in winter? The National Audubon Society's *Field Guide to New England*, widely available and reasonably priced (and sized for a day hiker), can help you identify birds, trees, wildflowers (well... eventually), and even lichen, and includes a section on the region's National Parks as well. Impress your friends by knowing the name of every roadside bush on the way to Acadia this summer. 🌱

—Lori Shine

## SEED SOURCES

DON'T MOPE from November 'til March! One antidote to the winter blues is planning your garden and making out seed orders. Listed below are some seed catalogs that one gardener has found especially useful.

- ♥ THE COOK'S GARDEN. An interesting selection of Vermont-grown seed varieties; useful cultural advice. (P. O. Box 535, Londonderry, VT 05148; WWW.COOKSGARDEN.COM).

- ♥ HIGH MOWING SEEDS. Certified organic seeds – many grown biodynamically – for open-pollinated and heirloom varieties. Instructions for seed saving in catalog and on seed packets. (813 Brook Rd, Wolcott, VT 05680; WWW.HIGHMOWINGSEEDS.COM; 802-888-1800).

- ♥ IRISH EYES/GARDEN CITY SEEDS. Extensive listing of potato and garlic varieties, as well as seeds. (WWW.IRISH-EYES.COM; toll-free 877-733-3001).

- ♥ JOHNNY'S SELECTED SEEDS. A Maine-based company supplying vegetable, herb, and flower seeds. Their catalog excels in providing technical information on how to plant and tend the seeds they sell. (184 Foss Hill Road, Albion, ME 04910; WWW.JOHNNYSEEDS.COM; 207-437-9294).

- ♥ PINETREE GARDEN SEEDS. Home gardeners love Pinetree because they provide small quantities of seed for small amounts of money. Their selection is good – old favorites and new introductions both. If I could have only one catalog, this would be it. (P. O. Box 300, New Gloucester, ME 04260; WWW.SUPERSEEDS.COM; 207-926-3400).

- ♥ SHEPHERD'S GARDEN SEEDS. The catalog is a work of art – nice layout and lovely illustrations. The seeds are a bit pricey, but they feature interesting varieties. (30 Irene St, Torrington, CT 06790; WWW.SHEPHERDSEEDS.COM; 860-482-3638).

- ♥ TOTALLY TOMATOES. Just about any tomato variety you could imagine, and some you couldn't; also lots of peppers. (P. O. Box 1626, Augusta, GA 30903; WWW.TOTALLYTOMATO.COM; 803-663-0016).

- ♥ Locally, the HADLEY GARDEN CENTER, on Route 9 between Northampton and Amherst, and ANNIE'S GARDEN CENTER, on Route 116 between Amherst and Sunderland, carry seeds from a number of these suppliers, and others as well, so you might want to check with them first. 🌱

—Mimi Teghtsoonian

## PREPARING FOR PLANTING

THIS SPRING begin your great garden with healthy soil. Whether your garden is large or small, plant growth and production will be enhanced by good site preparation and soil conditioning before the first seed is set.

### EVALUATE YOUR SOIL

Here is where I urge you to get a soil test. Although you can use a do-it-yourself test kit for a quick check of your pH, I strongly suggest a professional soil test.

Generally speaking, you will take small samples from different locations around your garden, package them as directed, and send them off to the soil testing lab. What you receive back is a detailed analysis – most likely a computer printout – that will tell you the soil's pH and what nutrients will be needed to amend it into healthy balance. Some labs will also make specific recommendations for different crops – say, vegetables or flowers or fruits – and advise about the addition of humus.

In our area you can contact the UMASS Extension Service Soil Testing Lab by telephone at (413) 545-2311 or review their tests and prices on line at WWW.UMASS.EDU/PLSOILS/SOILTEST/

### TILLING & DIGGING

Once you know what direction to go with your soil nutrients, it is time to prepare your site. First, be sure the earth is ready for you. We are all anxious to set about gardening as soon as the first warm spell hits, but digging or tilling in too-wet soil will cause compaction. To check the soil for readiness, take a handful of dirt and squeeze it, then wiggle a finger into the center of the clump – if it crumbles, you are ready to go; if not, be patient, you'll need to wait a bit longer.

If the soil is dry enough, remove any turf or weeds. Some will say just plow them under but this shortcut has rarely worked for me – I always end up with tufts of grass quickly reestablishing throughout the plot.

For a small garden, or one with raised beds, I suggest you do your digging by hand with a spade or a fork. For larger gardens you may wish to have it roto-tilled; if so, check the Community Garden bulletin board at the tool shed for advertisers. If you choose to use a machine, be careful not to over-till. Today's powerful tillers can

damage soil texture in a wink. You are aiming for good, workable soil, free of hindrances. To this end, whether hand turning or machine tilling – remember to toss stones, bits of glass or metal, and any trash into a bucket and discard in the dumpster.

## SOIL AMENDMENTS

To create a truly lush garden, you will have to build the soil from within. Organic soil amendments improve soil structure and provide a nutrient base for good plant growth. A generous addition of compost, aged well-rotted manure and peat moss dug into the top three to six inches of your plot will get your garden off to a good start and subsequent applications will replenish the nutrient supply. Do not use fresh manure, because it contains high levels of ammonia and can damage seedlings and young plants. Well-decomposed animal manures also add humus to your soil which in turn improve its moisture-holding ability – a great benefit in a potential drought year.

You will also want to adjust your soil pH according to the report from your soil test. The lab will suggest either the addition of lime if your soil is too acid, or the addition of sulphur if the soil is too alkaline.

## RAKING OUT

The final step in site preparation is raking out. Seeds germinate best on a fairly smooth level surface. The best way to achieve this is with a rake. Using the tines of a metal rake, comb the soil first in one direction and then in another, removing the last stones and weed roots as the rake brings them up. Then turn the rake over, and use the flat edge to smooth over the soil surface and minimize any hills and valleys that will impede the even absorption of water.

A little investment in site preparation and soil conditioning will go a long way toward establishing a beautiful, productive garden. 🌱

— Susan Mikula

## COMPOSTING MADE SIMPLE

THE IDEAL GARDEN LOAM for general growing purposes contains 33% humus. Humus helps retain moisture and nutrients and also makes the soil airy and light to promote root growth. This is especially important if your garden has clay soil, because in hot dry weather, clay can bake as hard as a sidewalk.

To save time and effort, I maintain a compost pile to produce humus on my two plots rather than carrying the plant debris to the main compost pile at the west end of the gardens and then hauling it back after it's been reduced to humus. The type of plant material composted is usually corn stalks, okra plants, squash vines, tomato plants and, of course, the eternal weeds. But no matter what it is – if you grew it, you can compost it. The method

I use requires no special equipment like a wire bin or composting drum, and, most important, requires no turning of the pile.

If you have enough garden debris this summer or when you clean up your plot this autumn, select a suitable spot in your garden for the compost pile, keeping in mind that a central location offers the most convenience if your garden layout allows it. The dimensions of the pile will be determined by what you grow. If you have a lot of 6-foot cornstalks or sunflowers, consider an area of 6 feet by 3 feet, or you can elect to cut your taller plants into smaller pieces to accommodate a smaller pile. Ordinary hedge clippers are excellent for cutting standing cornstalks into smaller pieces.

Start the pile with a 6-inch layer of vegetation, taking care to align the stalks and large stems in the same direction, minimizing voids to produce a compact pile. Try to make the layer somewhat dished or concave to collect rainwater which will speed the composting process.

Stand or walk on the pile, using your body weight to compress the material and then cover the vegetation layer with 1 inch or less of soil. Repeat this procedure, adding successive layers until all plant material has been used. Cover the top and sides of the pile with about 2 inches of soil, and you're done. If the top did not turn out concave, place additional soil around the top edge to form an earth bowl to catch rainwater.

Depending on the weather and other factors, the pile will turn to humus in one to three years. In the meantime, plant what ever you like on top of the pile and remember to water it in dry weather.

Tomatoes and bush varieties of squash have done very well on my compost pile. During the summer, it is preferable to cover the sides of the compost pile with black plastic or some other dark-colored mulch. This will increase the pile's internal temperature and accelerate the decomposition process. Also, the mulch will prevent weeds, which would otherwise thrive in this environment.

Speaking of weeds, at the end of the growing season when you pull up all the plants in your garden, some certainly will be mature weeds complete with seeds. The seeds that don't fall to the ground when you pull up the plant will end up in your compost pile and may number in the millions. Seeds have evolved to be extremely hardy, and many will survive the composting process. Therefore, use your humus well below the soil surface where weed seeds will not germinate and where it will benefit your plants most, in the root area. Happy composting. 🌱

— Ed Hagelstein

## CALENDAR

MARCH 30 / Saturday  
New gardener registration  
10:00 - noon

JUNE 2 / Sunday  
Plots should be planted

JUNE 3 / Monday  
First inspection

JULY 14 / Sunday  
Ragweed inspection

