

**NC STATE** EXTENSION

## Master Gardener | Johnston County

**The Gardener's Dirt Newsletter**

February 2018



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**Feature Article****Choosing Seeds / Plan for the Year**

By Silvia Caracciolo, Extension Master Gardener Volunteer

With the promise of spring in the near future, the rush of energy starts to build. Garden beds are prepared. Soon seeds and seedlings will be planted.

Nature takes a seed and turns it into a healthy, delicious food. How do I select seeds? There are a few considerations you need to make. First, you need to grow foods your family likes to eat. Seed catalogs are full of pretty varieties, but are those the things that your family will want? Sitting down with your family to eat fresh food from the garden makes you feel like a fabulous chef and including your family in the project is just amazing.

Making choices about plants and how beautiful they look is one thing. It is better to look for what is nutritionally sound. Calorie rich foods include root vegetables, potatoes, grains and beans to name a few. These plants won't meet all of your nutritional requirements, so consider vitamin rich crops such as salad vegetables, kale, turnips, and cauliflower. Don't forget your herbs! Once the season is over, buying vegetables in the store no longer provides the quality or taste you have become accustomed to fresh from the garden.

How do I choose a seed company? We have access to many more seeds than ever. Look for a seed company that has the closest geographical location to you. These seeds are more likely to have success in your climate. Most seed companies have free

catalogs.

You can purchase seeds from catalogues, big box stores, farm and ranch stores. Try to buy what you think you will need. Excess seeds can be stored by keeping them in a cool, dry place. As seeds get older their germination rate decreases - so plant more than one seed to ensure productivity. While browsing the catalogs notice they have symbols to indicate organic, heat tolerant, cut flower, trellis needed and etc. Some have comparison charts on the varieties they offer including disease resistance, germination guides, sowing and harvesting seasons. This will help in decision making.

Types of seeds differ. Organic seeds are grown under organic conditions. Film coating on seeds prevent the loss of fungicides, nutrients, coloration and hormones (see the link provided below). Pelleted seeds have additional materials added to enlarge the seed size to help planting when using farm machinery on very small seeds. There are seeds from the original plant and dried for replanting purposes. "Seed to Seed" is an informative book that describes techniques for saving seeds.

There is a difference between heirloom and hybrid seeds. Heirloom plants are protected from cross breeding. Saving their seeds will produce more of the same plants. Gardeners have to take special care when growing these varieties. Hybrid seeds are crossed by human intervention to produce certain traits. The seeds from hybrid plants are not always viable.

You need to evaluate your garden space. Know the parameters of each plant by looking on seed packets. Some plants have the same nutritional needs and can be planted as companion plants. Know your growing zone and frost dates.

Journals will keep information at your fingertips. Write any important information down. Journaling will help you keep your crops rotated and give you data on growing seasons. Recording the variety and where you purchased the seeds will make it easier when it comes time to purchase again. If that variety didn't work try another until you find what works in your garden.

Don't let being a first time gardener intimidate you. Read and make informed decisions about what you want. Start small and grow more as your confidence grows and you will fill your home with beautiful bounty. Call the Johnston County Agricultural center (919-989-5380) for any questions you might have. Our Horticulture Agent, Marshall Warren or an Extension Master Gardener Volunteer will be happy to assist you. "Happy seeding"!

[www.seedquest.com](http://www.seedquest.com)

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# Grow Native

## Bringing Nature Home - Part 2

By Katie Maynard, Extension Master Gardener Volunteer

The song birds that brighten spring mornings have been in decline since the 1960s, having lost 40% of their numbers so far. Birds that breed in meadows are in even more trouble. Once common species, the northern bobwhite, eastern meadowlark, field sparrow, and grasshopper sparrow have declined 82%, 72%, 68%, and 65%, respectively, in total numbers, and are completely absent from many areas that used to support healthy populations. Our fellow creatures need food and shelter to survive and reproduce and in too many places we have eliminated both. We humans have taken 95% of our natural areas, which provided necessary food for all the mammals except us, and made it unnatural.

Studies of habitat islands with known histories, such as Barro Colorado Island in the Panama Canal and Ashdown Forest in England, have shown that species are lost at the same proportion with which a habitat is reduced in size. So, unless we want to lose 95% of the species we must do just a few things to begin to save the species that have not been lost. We need to share our landscapes with other living things.

Thankfully, each of us gardeners and homeowners can fairly easily have a substantial direct effect on reversing this trend without too much effort. If Homeowners just plant the borders of their properties with native tree plants such as white oaks (*Quercus alba*), black willows (*Salix nigra*), red maples (*Acer rubrum*), green ashes (*Fraxinus pennsylvanica*), black walnuts (*Juglans nigra*), river birches (*Betula nigra*) and shagbark hickories (*Carya ovata*), underplanted with woodies like serviceberry (*Amelanchier canadensis*), arrowwood (*Viburnum dentatum*), hazelnut (*Corylus americana*), blueberries (*Vaccinium* spp) it will make a huge impact on increasing biodiversity. Our studies have shown that even modest increases in the native plant cover on suburban properties significantly increases the number and species of breeding birds, including birds of conservation concern.

Who knew we were doing so much damage? Right? We were just trying to make our yards more attractive. But, we have planted Kousa dogwood, a species from China that supports no insect herbivores, instead of our native flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*) that supports 117 species of moths and butterflies alone. In hundreds of thousands of acres, we have planted golden raintree from China instead of one of our beautiful oaks and lost the chance to grow 532 species of caterpillars, all of them nutritious bird food.

Now we find ourselves in the unintentional situation of having radically damaged the food chains through the proliferation of exotic plants. The non-native plants dominating our yards, neighborhoods and communities are of little, if any, food value to native wildlife.

This is particularly true in urban/suburban settings.

While Carolina chickadees do eat a lot of seeds, they raise their young almost entirely on caterpillars. During the 16-18 days it takes for chickadees to fledge, a pair of adults will feed their voracious young anywhere from 6,000 to more than 10,000 caterpillars.

Even the eastern bluebird feeds its young caterpillars. Studies have shown that a pair of bluebirds feeds their young 300 caterpillars a day.

The yellow-billed cuckoo, sometimes referred to as the rain crow, has an insatiable appetite for tent caterpillars. They have been known to descend on a tent caterpillar nest and gobble up 100 or more caterpillars before flying off in search of more food.

Tallamy's research has shown that native ornamentals support 29 times more biodiversity than do alien ornamentals. The oaks host more butterfly and moths than any of our trees, an astounding 557 species of moths and butterflies. Hickories support 235 species and native dogwoods 116 species.

Here is a link to a list of Tallamy's suggestions for the best native plants to add to your yard or garden.

<http://www.bringingnaturehome.net/what-to-plant.html>.

Here is a link to the top 25 plants in NC for pollinators.

<https://growingsmallfarms.ces.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Top-25-Plants-and-Suppliers-2.pdf?fwd=no>.

*Doug Tallamy's book **Bringing Nature Home: How Native Plants Sustain Wildlife in Our Garden** was published by Timber Press in 2007 and was awarded the 2008 Silver Medal by the Garden Writers' Association. **The Living Landscape**, co-authored with Rick Darke, was published in 2014.*



Photo Courtesy of Pixabay

## A Veggie Tale

### That Strange Vegetable Called Asparagus

By Tommy Bagley, Extension Master Gardener Volunteer

I have always liked asparagus, even as a child. Can't say many of our children and grandchildren like it. I did a survey of my grandchildren. Most of them now love this strange vegetable now because of a new way to cook it that we never had in the "old world". The big way now is to put salt, pepper and garlic powder on it and grill it or to lay it on a pan to cook in the oven. None of them had ever heard of cooking it in a pot or even eating canned asparagus, something I grew up on. And none of them had ever eaten it raw! Oh my, one of the other best ways to eat. Shucks, it's a

great thing to work in the Clayton Community Center Garden just to snack on a few spears of this fine stuff in the spring.

I enjoy using Wikipedia and I find such an interesting write-up and I certainly enjoy knowing historic things about things we eat. Asparagus is used both as a food and a medicine. It also has diuretic properties. It was pictured on a Egyptian frieze dating to 3000 BC. Greeks and Romans ate it fresh when in season and dried it for use in the winter. Asparagus has a huge history in Europe for thousands of years. It moved to French monasteries by 1469, England by 1538, Germany by 1542 and across the pond not until 1850's.

I dug up our very old asparagus several years ago and have not planted any since. I definitely need to plant more. I had read that the production slows pretty dramatically after 25 years. When it is planted you need to let the spears run up for several years which helps it to get bigger and produce better for many many years. What a wonderful perennial vegetable that will last until your children are grown.

China is by far the largest producer with 7 million tons in 2013. If you can't eat Asparagus the old way give the grill/oven method a try. It's like two different vegetables.



Photo Courtesy of  
Joanne King

## Garden Visits

### Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden

By Joanne King, Extension Master Gardener Volunteer

The Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden is located in Belmont, NC, about fifteen miles west of Charlotte and about twenty minutes south of I-85. The sign on the highway, never lured me to find the time to make the short detour to visit. A friend of mine made a donation of orchids to the Garden, as he was retiring from his lifelong hobby and wanted to find a good home for his beautiful plants. This is the spark that sent me there.

The route to the Garden from the busy highway is rural. I was beginning to wonder where the roads were taking me. The Botanical Garden began as 380 acres of meadows and woodland along Lake Wylie in Gaston County. Those 380 acres now have beautiful plantings, open space, a center for education programs and events. It was the vision of Daniel Jonathon Stowe, a textile executive with prominent businesses in the area, to preserve his farmland for the enjoyment of future generations rather than development. Upon retiring in 1991, he formed a conservancy with his gift of land and funds. The master plan encompasses 50 years of development. The initial phase opened to the public in 1999, with subsequent areas opening in 2003, and 2008.

The visitor pavilion is a spacious area, with a beautiful stained glass dome overhead. There is a gift shop, classrooms, and large open space for events and private functions. You enter the garden into a Four Season garden that surrounds a large patio area, and is flanked by two pergolas on either side. The orchid conservatory is in a separate building nearby. The White Garden is a favorite venue for weddings. From the Four Season garden, the eye is drawn straight back to the Canal garden, a narrow water channel about 300 feet long. In the Magnolia Allee, there is a tunnel fountain that arches over the walkway. From there, you meander through paths that make their way around and circle you back to the visitor pavilion. These areas are full of perennial plantings, ribbons of small waterways, evergreen shrubs and trees. Access to Lake Wylie is through trails, which offer a peaceful walk through meadows and woodlands. Lost Hollow, the children's garden, opened in 2014 and Phase II will add features and enriching opportunities for children.

It took me nearly 20 years to actually visit the garden. I won't wait another 20 years to go back. When I go back, I am confident I will see the continuation of their plans to bring Mr. Stowe's vision to light.

**Website:** <https://www.dsbg.org/>

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## Monthly Gardening Tasks

### February Gardening Tasks

#### LAWN CARE

- Cool season grasses should be fertilized mid-month. If a soil sample has not been taken, use a fertilizer of at least 30% slow release nitrogen at the rate of 1 pound of nitrogen per 1000 square feet.
- Crabgrass usually will start to germinate about the same time the Forsythia blooms. If you have had problems with crabgrass in the past, then you may want to apply crabgrass preventer (pre-emergence herbicide) when the Forsythia blooms.
- Pulling wild onion/wild garlic is the best way to get rid of these pesky bulbs, but make sure you get the bulb. If there are too many to pull, a product with 2,4-D works well for control. Be sure to follow the manufacturer's directions found on the label. Complete control may take two or more years. Apply 2,4-D at half the recommended rate on centipede lawns otherwise it will damage the grass.

#### TREES, SHRUBS AND ORNAMENTALS

- Cut back dormant ornamental grasses to about 10 to 14 inches above the soil before new growth starts. Evergreen ornamental grasses (or grass-like ornamentals) such as Liriope and Mondo Grass should be cut short or mowed to remove last year's unsightly foliage. If the clumps have become too big for the area they can be divided and shared with friends or planted in other areas of the

yard.

- Summer blooming shrubs bloom on new growth so they can be pruned hard in February to encourage new growth and more flowers. Examples include Abelia, Hibiscus, Hydrangea, Beautyberry, Butterfly bush, Althea, Rose of Sharon, and bush or Tea Roses.
- Spring blooming shrubs such as Azaleas, Rhododendrons, Forsythia, Spirea, Quince, Weigela, and Climbing Roses bloom on last years growth and should not be pruned until after they have flowered.
- Deciduous trees, especially those that bloom in the spring, should not be pruned this time of the year. Examples being Dogwoods, Red Buds, Maples and several others.
- Wait to prune the dead stems of hardy lantana until you begin to see new growth emerge in the Spring. The dead stems help keep it winter hardy.
- For many evergreens this is the best time of the year to prune if they haven't been pruned already.
- Summer blooming roses can be pruned this time of the year. Remember not to remove more than 1/3 of the growth. Remove old mulch and leaves from around plants as this removes many overwintering fungal spores. Put down fresh mulch.
- Bare root roses and trees can be planted this time of the year. Soak the roots overnight to rehydrate them before planting.
- Spring flowers such as Sweet Williams, Pansy, Viola, Calendula, Forget-Me-Nots, English Daisies, Poppy, Alyssum and Dianthus can be planted now. Don't forget to deadhead pansies and fertilize toward the end of the month.

### **EDIBLES**

- Asparagus crowns can be planted now through March.
- Transplant cabbage, broccoli, and cauliflower out into the garden.
- Strawberry plants can be planted now for spring fruits.
- Beets, carrots, peas, lettuce, mustard, radish, spinach, Irish potatoes, and turnips can be sown outside.
- Starting seeds indoors is easy and economical. Sometimes it is the only way to get the color or variety of the plants you want to grow. It is not necessary to use "grow lights", ordinary florescent tubes will usually be enough. For more information you can read the pamphlet "Starting Plants from Seeds", it is on the web at <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-8703.html>
- February and March are good months to prune fruit trees.
- It is time to start a spray program for peach trees to control the many diseases and insects that attack peaches.

### **INSECTS**

- Control overwintering insects such as scale and their eggs by hand picking or using a dormant oil spray (also known as horticultural oil). Be sure to check for scales before spraying. Follow the manufacturer's directions when applying any pesticide. Do not apply dormant oils to broadleaf evergreens when freezing temperatures are expected.
- Cool-weather mites are not visible to the naked eye. Junipers

and other needled evergreens are a favorite hangout of these mites. If you had some of these plants that were an unsightly brown last year, check them with a hand held magnifying glass to see if cool season mites are to blame. Horticultural oil or other registered insecticides can improve their situation and appearance.

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## Update from January article

### Pop-Up Plants article

Some plants that pop-up in our yards may be an invasive exotic species and some exotic species can cause particular problems for our native plants and wildlife in the Southeast. Without natural checks, an exotic species can invade the native habitat, crowd out native plants, and reduce the diversity of foods available to birds and other wildlife. When at all possible, these plants should be removed from the landscape and replaced with native plants. If you have a pop-up plant and you want to check to see if it is considered an invasive exotic species, follow the link below to see.

<https://projects.ncsu.edu/goingnative/howto/mapping/invxse/index.html>



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## Cool Connections

### Helpful Links

[Read more»](#)



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## Upcoming Events

[Fruit and Nut Tree Pruning Workshop Demonstrations - February 3, 2018](#) (Two Demonstrations at Separate Locations in One Day!)

[Blueberry and Grape Production and Pruning Workshop - February 17, 2018](#)

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before the event.

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