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Feature Article, A Veggie Tale, Feature Plant, Ask the Expert, Quick Tip:, Monthly Garden Tasks, Cool Connections, Upcoming Events



The Gardener's Dirt

Johnston County Center

May 2016

Feature Article

For the Love of Moss

Marshall Warren, Horticulture Extension Agent

I love moss. The year-round beauty of moss is visually soothing. Walking on this living carpet naturally relaxes you. There is something primal about moss. Time seems to stop when you are in a moss garden.



Picture courtesy of Marshall's feet

My fondest memory of experiencing a moss garden was when I was in college "courting" my future wife. Picture the setting - Her mother had nurtured an area of moss in their front yard under a canopy of low hanging maple trees. The roots of the trees are exposed and all the ground is covered in a dense layer of moss. Her mother would go out most days and sweep the area clean of any debris. It was an outdoor room, an extension of their home. Between the two trees, her father had made a perfect place to hang a hammock. The perfect courting spot I thought. One evening we decided to have some cheese, crackers and wine. We took off our shoes and went barefoot into the moss garden. (Barefoot is the best way to enjoy a moss garden and a swing in a hammock.) The night was still, cool, quiet and peaceful. We could talk for hours, or be quiet and still, and just hold each other. Cars would pass by, but we were hidden from the public's view, in our own secret world, getting to know each other better. Later that evening when it was getting late, we gathered up our picnic items and headed in the house. She got to the light of the kitchen first and I heard a blood curdling scream. I raced into the kitchen and there in the wine glass, enjoying the last few drops of

wine, was the biggest fat slug you have ever seen. Boy I got a good laugh from that sight and especially her reaction to it. She did not think it was as funny as me.

Over thirty years have gone by and now we have our own home with a large oak tree under which nothing would grow - except a little moss. Inspiration set in to create our own moss garden. There have been some challenges establishing it, but it is gradually filling in.

Here are some pointers I can share:

If you have shady areas where you have been trying to grow grass without luck and the moss is taking over, then why not consider having a moss garden. Nature is revealing to you a better plant for this location. Or if you have an area where there is no vegetation due to leaves that have been allowed to cover the ground, you can start your moss garden with a clean slate. Beginning with a clean slate is often the best way to have a weed resistant moss garden.

The best areas to be sure moss will thrive are those that currently have some moss growing. The area must get less than 2 hours of sunlight per day or the moss will not thrive. Mosses require shade, a stable foundation to adhere to, and adequate moisture to flourish. Mosses grow year round, but the best time of the year to transplant is in the spring. If you wait until the fall, you will have a hard time removing leaf litter.

To develop an area of moss, first remove any existing plants you do not want, especially grasses and weeds. Install any ornamental plants you want before establishing the moss. Smoothing the soil surface and clearing it of debris will aid in the rhizome attachment of the moss which will speed up the establishment and regrowth. Using a broom or leaf blower can speed the process of smoothing the soil and once established these tools can help you keep the moss free of debris.

You can either buy sheets or plugs of moss or collect your own to fill in the area. For large areas you can seed your moss by creating a slurry of moss spores. Shred the collected moss and mix with water to make a slurry. If you would like you can add some buttermilk and some water retention gel into the solution. For faster moss establishment, you can add some water retention gel onto the soil surface before you spread the moss. One pound of the powder gel will cover up to 300 square feet. Scratch the soil surface and spread the moss slurry over the area and compress firmly in place. Use of an organic based pre-emergence like corn-gluten can discourage germination of weed seeds. Water daily, even up to 6 times a day in small volumes for the first 3 weeks to help the moss quickly establish. After this, water when it becomes dry.

Controlling weeds is a necessary part of developing a moss garden. Removal by hand is the best method and least harmful to the mosses. I have experimented and found that you can control weeds with glyphosate. But you have to be very careful. Water the moss and allow it to absorb as much water as possible, wait a while to allow the grasses and weeds to air dry. Apply the glyphosate at 1/4th the recommended rate to the weeds. Wait for 1 ½ hours to allow the weeds to absorb the spray and then water the moss again to dilute and rinse off the chemical. It is also wise to test this technique on a small area first to check for success.

Mosses can take their sweet time to fill in. We can give them a helping hand and increase their growth rate by ensuring that their needs are met.

Resources:

<http://mossacres.com/>

<http://mossandstonegardens.com/>

Container Vegetable Garden

Dolly Santivicca, Master Gardener

The simple pleasure of biting into a juicy, ripe tomato fresh off the vine! What a timeless and unbeatable experience! Due to lack of space, heavily shaded yards, HOA restrictions, or health issues, the joy and rewards of gardening can seem out of reach to many.

With vegetable container gardening, however, anyone can enjoy the pride and accomplishment of growing and harvesting the bounty of fresh backyard edibles, while saving money! Let me try to answer some of the questions you may have and give basic tips to help you easily enjoy this year-round gardening experience.



Photo courtesy of sunset.com

What grows well in containers?

With our Zone 7b-8a Johnston County climate and micro-climates, we have the opportunity for a year round gardening experience using a greater variety of plants. With the exception of corn, melons and winter squash, almost all vegetables and herbs can thrive in properly prepared container gardens. Container plantings may be rotated, or replanted, 3 or 4 times a year, offering a greater opportunity to grow the veggies YOU like. Plant selections are limited only by your taste buds!

Can some fruits also be container plants?

Yes! You can grow a blueberry bush, strawberries, citrus trees, figs, or even dwarf cherry and apple trees!

Are seeds or transplants best to plant?

Both have advantages and disadvantages, depending on the crop and the season. Seeds, planted according to packet directions, will be more economical. Many cool season crops, such as carrots, radish, kale, turnips, should only be started by seed. Some crops, like lettuce and swiss chard, thrive by both alternatives, while broccoli, cabbage or collards are best as transplants.

Similarly, warm season crops - tomato, eggplant, and pepper plants - quickly thrive as transplants. However, beans should be planted as seeds only. Squash, zucchini, and cucumbers will produce equally well by seed or transplant. Herbs often survive best as transplants. Protect new plants from sun and temperatures under 50 degrees, until acclimated.

What kind of containers should I use?

Choosing the ultimate container might be daunting, but almost any vessel that will contain your soil and provide good drainage is acceptable. Some examples of container types are ceramic, clay, terracotta, concrete, plastic pots, wooden barrels,



Photo courtesy of
floridalandscapingtoday.com

or bushel baskets. Even an old wheelbarrow or toy wagon may be used as a container as long as it's large (10"+ wide) and deep enough (minimum 8") to accommodate the plant roots and foliage requirements for good growth and drainage. Yard sales and thrift shops can be sources of items that can be re-purposed as containers!

Avoid metal containers due to heat and cold transfer to the plant. Bigger is better when container gardening! They are easier to maintain, offer proper soil depth, retain moisture, and provide proper soil temperature and drainage. Keep in mind, for example, that one tomato plant alone requires the equivalent of a 5 gallon container!

What type of soil should I use?

Quality soil is a requirement for excellent production. Soils should be light, full of nutrients, non-compacting and drain well. The new gardener might initially choose a quality prepared packaged potting mix that meets these criteria plus eliminates weed seed.

A SOIL RECIPE FOR THE SEASONED GARDENER:

Add one part each: (using 1 gallon per part works well for this recipe)

Compost or sterile potting soil

Perlite or coarse vermiculite

2 Tbsp lime

2 Tbsp slow release fertilizer

MIX WELL and it's ready to use!!

How much sun, water and fertilizer do Vegetable Container Gardens need?

Practically all veggies require 6 to 8 hours of full sunlight a day for best results, but many may tolerate light shade. Cool season varieties love temperatures between 50 to 72 degrees, while warm season crops prefer 68 to 95 degree days. Generally, treat herbs as warm season crops.

Water is critical for veggie production! Soils should be consistently damp, yet well drained. If the soil feels dry a few inches into the container, it should be watered. However, water-logged soil may cause root rot or fungal diseases, plus poor oxygen and nutrient transfer in the plant. Temperature, winds, the type of container, and amount of sunlight will determine watering requirements.

In the heat of the summer, depending upon the size of the container, it may be necessary to water as much as twice a day!



Photo courtesy of gathernc.com

Quality prepared, nutrient rich soil, organic or with added chemical fertilizer, initially contains sufficient elements to sustain your container crops for 3-4 months. Additional organic fertilizer, such as diluted fish emulsion, or chemical fertilizers, may be needed as watering washes out nutrients or as crops are grown in succession year round.



Photo courtesy of
therealestatecoconut.com

The best of both worlds!

Add edibles, such as herbs, lettuce, beets, etc. to your flower containers, or plant edible flowers like nasturtiums, violas, or mums. Marigolds, nasturtiums, and herbs like rosemary, basil and oregano planted among vegetables have been effective in deterring certain insect pests. Just remember to combine plants with the same light and water requirements!

Resources:

<http://watauga.ces.ncsu.edu/files/library/95/container%20factsheet.pdf>

<http://surry.ces.ncsu.edu/files/library/86/containergardenpub.pdf>

Hort info leaflets 8102 and 8105 by Larry Bass EHS

Feature Plant

Redwing-Heteropterys glabra

By Choice Plant Series, JC Raulston Arboretum

Hardy plants from the southern hemisphere are

few and far between in most American gardens. Many of the plants, especially from South America are either tropical or, if from higher elevations in the Andes, do not appreciate the high heat of our summers. One plant native to the area where southern Brazil, northern Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay meet has proven to be an exceptional garden plant in warm temperate gardens.



Heteropterys glabra or redwing as it is commonly known is one of about 150 species of plants in the genus. Its scientific name is derived from hetero, meaning different and pteryis meaning wing signifying the winged seeds held in threes. This genus in the mostly tropical Malpigiaceae family is composed of vines, small trees, and shrubs throughout South America, the Caribbean, and one species in Africa. Plants in this genus have been used as aphrodisiacs, stimulants, and in some cases have been found to have antiviral effects.

Gold flowers appear by early summer in bright sprays followed quickly by brilliant red fruits that closely resemble maple keys. Redwing will continue to produce flowers alongside the fruit into the fall for a continuous hot combination. The foliage on this vine emerges flushed with burgundy before turning glossy green. The multihued flower and fruit display make this a worthy candidate for any garden.

Redwing is a woody vine that will grow up a support or through the lower branches of small trees or large shrubs. The stems will twine gently providing support for the upright growth. Without support, it will make a mounded, shrubby plant with branches weaving through its neighbors. Young plants will often die back to the ground for their first couple of years in the garden but once established the stems will stay green during all but the coldest winters.

Planting *Heteropterys* in a sunny spot ensures the best flower and fruit show but it will grow well in a shadier location. It may need some training to grow up a structure when young or it can be planted under a low branched tree. It tolerates considerable drought and root competition once established but will be more prolific in a slightly moist, well-drained soil. It makes an outstanding landscape plant and should be more widely planted in USDA hardiness zones 7 and warmer where the graceful form, flowers, and fruit will add a bolt of bright color to the garden.

Ask the Expert

Garden Soils are "Death in a Bag"

Jim Putnam, Earthworks Nursery & Garden Center

"I don't know what I did wrong. I dug a big hole and then I mixed in this black soil that I got from....(fill in the blank with boxstore, whatever)...and it died." This is a story I have heard many times. Welcome to central North Carolina. When we dig holes here, we are creating a clay pot in the ground. If we fill that clay pot with heavy organic soil mixes, our plants stay too wet and they die.

Digging holes in the clay can be difficult. This makes homeowners think there is something wrong with it. There is not anything wrong with the soil. The clay is rich in nutrients, great at holding water in reserve, and because of its density, the clay prevents fertilizer leaching.

Roots need air just like the leaves do. Clay, although very dense, does have air in between

the soil particles. These soil and manure mixes are heavily marketed and look great when the bag is opened, but because of their water holding ability, these mixes actually fill the air pockets in the soil with water. This causes the roots to die and rot away. Once that process begins, it is almost impossible to save the plant.

The best thing to use when planting in our area is pine bark fines. This is simply pine bark left over from lumber production that has been ground several times. Its coarse texture mixed 50/50 with the clay prevents the clay from re-compacting as tightly and adds additional drainage and air holding capacity. Pine bark is also inexpensive which is another reason the stores do not promote its use.

When planting, it is also helpful to use a liquid starter fertilizer. These are low in nitrogen to prevent the possibility of burning new transplants. Requiring water to use, no one can forget the crucial step of watering in the plant.

We have complete planting instructions for our area at this link. [Planting Instructions](#)

Quick Tip:

Fun for You and Your Fairies!

By Savannah Little, 10 years old Daughter of Master Gardener Valerie Little

Have you ever believed that you've seen a fairy or pixie? Since 1893 people have been building small gardens to welcome fairies to their homes. These small gardens originated as Bonsai dishes at Chicago's World Fair. They're mostly made by females. The cute petite gardens are usually constructed with tiny plants such as mosses, succulents, ferns, ground covering plants and Bonsai trees. Add small knick knacks to uphold the mystical feel and "lure in" fairies and/or woodland sprites to bring good luck to your garden. Constructing a fairy garden might help you take care of that fairy you've seen before!



Photo courtesy of
Savannah Little

Monthly Garden Tasks

May GARDEN TASKS

LAWN CARE

- Don't fertilize cool-season turfgrass (fescue, bluegrass). It has been growing actively all winter, and it will begin to go dormant as summer heats up. Let it slow down naturally, and it will be better able to withstand the heat and drought of summer. Call for a Lawn Maintenance Calendar for your type of turf. It tells you how to care for your lawn month by month - such things as fertilization, mowing and watering.
- Most of the weeds you see now are winter annuals. The time to control these was last August. In a couple of weeks, the weather will be too hot for these winter annuals, and they will start dying. Don't waste your time and money to spray them with herbicide. The best thing to do is mow them before they produce and spread seed. Put it on your calendar to spray for them in August.



- Warm-season grasses such as Bermuda, Zoysia or Centipede can be planted now. Mow cool-season grasses, such as Fescues, at a height of 3- 3 1/2 inches to help them survive hot, dry periods.

TREES, SHRUBS & ORNAMENTALS

- Pinch your plants. Use your index finger and thumbnail to break out the lead growth at tips of branches. Pinched plants have shorter, sturdier stems, more lateral branching and more blooms. Pinch back mums, zinnia, salvia, cockscomb (celosia), petunias, marigolds, snapdragons, and garden phlox.
- It's time to plant summer beauties such as gladiolus, dahlias, caladiums, cannas and all those colorful bedding plants.
- Dead or diseased limbs on woody ornamentals should be apparent by now. Prune them out.
- Stake floppy plants, such as peonies, dahlias, and Boltonia (Michaelmas daisy), while they're small so they'll have support when they need it. After plants have grown large, they are difficult to stake.
- Cut roses properly. Removing too much wood and foliage when cutting flowers can seriously weaken your rosebushes, especially during the first year. Leave 2-3 well developed leaves (groups of five leaflets, not three) between the cut and the main stem.
- Grow great bearded iris by giving them excellent drainage, fertile soil, sunshine, and beds free of competing weeds and grass. Divide frequently (in August) for larger and finer blooms.
- Prune spring-flowering shrubs after they bloom. The best time to prune azalea, rhododendron, forsythia, spirea, flowering quince, kerria, pieris, and weigela is just as flowers begin to fade. Don't wait till summer, or you'll cut off next year's flower buds. To keep your shrubs ever young, prune one-third of the oldest canes back to the ground each year.
- Prune wisteria frequently throughout the summer to control vegetative growth and get better blooms next spring.
- Keep dogwoods healthy. Spot anthracnose and powdery mildew are two major disease problems that show up on dogwood trees in late spring and summer. To help dogwoods overcome diseases keep them watered, maintain soil fertility, and clean up fallen leaves to minimize the spread of the disease.
- MULCH! Prepare for dry summer weather and control weeds at the same time by using a layer of mulch 2-3 inches thick.
- Banish bermudagrass (wiregrass) from your planting beds. Keep it pulled to prevent it from overrunning your garden.
- Plant seeds of annual vines such as moonflower, scarlet runner beans or passionflower. Mix plants with the same growing requirements in your container gardens. Do not mix sun-loving and shade-loving plants together in the same container.

VEGETABLES & FRUITS

- Plant veggies now that the soil is warm and the danger of frost is past. Sow seeds of beans, squash, cucumbers, and corn. Set out transplants of tomatoes, peppers, eggplant and okra. <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/ag-06.html>. Pinching also works well for many vegetable plants, including tomatoes and peppers.
- Watch for slugs. These soft, slimy, slender pests have a special taste for tender young crops. Holes in leaves or on the leaf margins and a silvery slime trail in the morning indicate a slug feast the previous night. Slugs hide under boards, stones or debris during the day.
- Train and support tomatoes, pole beans, peppers and eggplants. Side dress sweet corn when it is knee-high.
- Make consecutive plantings of beans over a few weeks to extend your harvest.

- Plant vegetables in your flowerbeds! Eggplant, pepper varieties, and cherry tomatoes make colorful additions to the garden. Bush beans and climbing beans have attractive foliage and charming small flowers. Vegetables can also mingle with flowers in pots on a patio or deck.
- Welcome back hummingbirds! Females will be in the area first; the males will follow soon. Salvias, honeysuckles, penstemons, and other tube-shaped flowers, especially red ones, will attract hummingbirds to your garden. Fill feeders with a solution of 1 part sugar to 4 parts water. Wash feeders and replace the food at least twice a week.

Cool Connections

[NC Extension Gardener Manual](#)

[Past Issues of Gardeners Dirt](#)

[NCSU Publication Links](#)

[NC Extension Gardening Portal](#)

[NC Extension Plant Database](#)

[Going Native \(Selecting and Planting Native Plants\)](#)

[NCSU Pruning Trees and Shrubs](#)

[Cooperative Extension Search](#)



Upcoming Events

Spring into Summer Gardening Symposium

Thursday, June 2 from 9:00 am-3:30 pm. The Spring into Summer Gardening Symposium, hosted by the Wilson County Extension Master Gardeners and the Wilson Botanical Gardens, will be in the Wilson Agricultural Center located at 1806 SW Goldsboro Street, Wilson, NC 27893. The Wilson Botanical Gardens surround the Agricultural Center.

Pre-registration for this event is required. The cost is \$25 per person and includes lunch. Additional information about the Conference and registration can be found at www.wilsonbotanicalgardens.org or by calling 252-237-0113. The registration deadline is May 26.

NEWSLETTER EDITED BY: Brenda Clayton

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race, color, creed, national origin, religion, sex, age, veteran status, or disability. In addition, the two Universities welcome all persons without regard to sexual orientation. North Carolina State University, North Carolina A&T State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and local governments cooperating.

Disclaimer agrichemicals:

Recommendations for the use of agricultural chemicals are included in this publication as a convenience to the reader. The use of brand names and any mention or listing of commercial products or services in this publication does not imply endorsement by North Carolina Cooperative Extension nor discrimination against similar products or services not mentioned. Individuals who use agricultural chemicals are responsible for ensuring that the intended use complies with current regulations and conforms to the product label. Be sure to obtain current information about usage regulations and examine a current product label before applying any chemical. For assistance, contact your county Cooperative Extension agent.

Contact: **Marshall Warren**, Extension Agent Commercial and Consumer Horticulture

2736 NC 210 Hwy, Smithfield, NC 27577
919-989-5380

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