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Growing Your Garden: From Start To Finish

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Growing Your Garden: From Start To Finish

Defining the Organic Gardener: The Challenges to Staying Chemical-free

Gardening season is here and you are ready to get your hands dirty and your garden blooming. Perhaps you have decided that this year you will plant your own vegetables. Or maybe there is an herb garden in your future. Unfortunately, you are also very conscious about the plights of the vegetable gardener, namely the bugs, weeds, and stunted growth of some vegetables.

You figured you would get all the help you need from the gardening chemicals section at your local garden center; however, your reading of the labels has assured you that killing slugs may also equate your killing off the outdoor cat population of your neighborhood, not to mention your child or dog.

While pondering this quandary you realize that your best bet is to stay organic, yet you wonder what exactly an organic gardener is. How do you define "organic"? Does it mean to stay entirely away from chemicals, or is there a golden middle ground.

The quick answer, of course, is to stay away from chemicals altogether. This might sound hard to do if in the past you have been accustomed to reaching for that spray bottle of bug poison or fertilizer when things went out of control, but going organic is actually easier than you think. Here are some tips and tricks that will set you on the course of organic gardening and keep you chemical-free.

Whereas in the past you might have reached for the blue magic granules to make your plants grow bigger and better, as an organic gardener you no longer have to haul out the foul smelling chemicals. Instead, your options are much more varied. Available at gardening supply stores everywhere are inexpensive bags of humus - simply a fancy name for composted plant matter. This plant material has been broken down into its building components that can now be used to feed growing plants.

If you are ambitious and have the space, then you may actually wish to have your compost heap. All you need is a corner in your garden that will be out of the way, and a way to corral the plant matter, and you will be able to put grass clipping, leaves, and even food waste to good use. To further add nutrients to the soil, you are able to purchase manure that will add nitrogen to the soil and increase its fertile nature.

Quite possibly the biggest are of concern to the organic gardener is the matter of pest control. It is all good and well in theory to think of ways to keep your tomatoes safe and healthy, but once a colony of worms has moved in, it is hard to resist the spray bottle. While old wives' tales abound, many of them truly are only stories and have very little grounding in the truth.

Of course, the most time consuming, but also effective, method of pest control is for you to physically collect them and move them off your plants. This works great with larger species, such as tomato bugs or snails, but may not work so well with aphids. Short of picking off these little pests, you will need someone else to do this work for you. Willing helpers are ladybugs,

which love to eat aphids. You can actually purchase ladybugs at the local garden store and locate them in your vegetable patch. Slugs, the age old nemesis of gardeners everywhere, can be controlled by simply allowing nematodes, a fancy word for a special kind of roundworm, to enter the soil. Soon these nematodes will be feasting on the slugs!

Last but not least is the other bane of the gardener's existence: weeds! The physical method of weed-pulling is always the best way to get rid of pestering plants, but other precautions can be taken to discourage weed seeds from taking roots. For example, commercially available weed barriers will prevent unwanted plants from growing while also helping your garden to retain moisture.

As you can see, organic gardening does not have to be a mysterious process, but instead can be a very rewarding process that will leave you with a healthy yard, safe to eat vegetables and herbs, and also a healthy and thriving biosphere where animal species will love to come and visit!

Defining the Xeriscape Way of Gardening

Many a gardener has been scared away from the notion of xeriscaping by the fear that this will transform their yard into a barren, desert-like landscape, replete of plants, but sporting a few cacti and lots and lots of lava rock. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth!

In reality, the idea of a thriving xeriscape does involve flowers, shrubs, and trees that need markedly less water than other species, usually because they are indigenous to the region where the garden is located.

For example, rather than trying to grow a high-maintenance tropical plant in a decidedly non-tropical climate, it is best to grow plants that are accustomed to the lack of moisture that is experienced in certain regions. This not only cuts down on the amount of water needed for the plants, but it will also prevent the overuse of water as it results in rapid evaporation and also run-off.

How often have you walked by a beautiful garden that is being watered, only to shake your head because the watering is done during the hottest time of the day when the water droplets will not only serve as little prisms which concentrate the sunlight to the point of burning the foliage, and perhaps also because much of the water is running into the gutter and down the street rather than benefiting thirsty plants.

Of course, a xeriscaped garden does not happen overnight, but instead requires careful planning. Here are some examples:

Decide where flowerbeds will be, and where you will have grassy areas. Generally speaking, grass should be avoided, unless of course you have children or pets that enjoy playing on it. If you do opt for grass, speak to your local nursery staff to find out which kinds of grass are pretty drought resistant.

Once you have staked out your flowerbeds and your grassy areas, it is time to think about watering. Sprinklers send water all over the place, while soaker hoses will deliver it concisely to the area you intend to water.

Visit a reputable nursery and discuss which xerophytes are available in your area. Xerophytes are plants, which will thrive in your xeriscape, usually because they are native to your area. Discuss blooming times, colors, sizes and also maintenance. Of further importance is which kinds of soil conditions these plants are able to tolerate. You may need to prepare your soil accordingly before planting any xerophytes.

If you are not quite ready to let go of your pansies, vegetables and water loving ferns, you can still create a xeriscape by simply hydro zoning these plants. Hydro zoning is a fancy word for grouping together, usually in flowerbeds or containers, the kinds of plants that have very similar watering needs. This will prevent from your having to overall waste water by simply allowing you to give extra water to those plants that cannot survive on the little watering the xerophytes demand.

Just what plants could be included in your xeriscape? Well, here is a list of the most well-known specimens:

Acacia trees and shrubs make a wonderful addition to your xeriscape. Their deep roots will get to the water pockets stored below ground, and their beautiful dark leaves add depth to any landscape. Flowers are very delicate and yellow in color. Quite possibly the most common acacia tree used in landscapes today is the Silver Wattle, which derives its name from the silvery leaves it has.

Oleander is another shrub that is famous for its deep roots that access water pockets far below the surface. It is an evergreen shrub with white, yellow, or sometimes pink blooms. Because this plant is considered highly toxic, it should not be planted in areas where children or pets may have access to it.

Pine trees are legendary for their ability to survive in low water areas. Being evergreens, these trees will add color to your landscape, even when other trees may loose their leaves and look barren.

If you do decide to add cacti to your garden, then the most commonly seen kind is the prickly pear. Not only can they survive extreme heat, but they can also do quite well in the cold. Since the more mature plants sport long spines, it is best not to plant the prickly pear near areas where children are at play.

For an excellent ground cover, the ice plant is a favorite succulent amongst gardeners. Its dark green leaves add depth to the flower beds, while its beautiful purple and pink flowers, sometimes even yellow blooms have been seen, add color.

Simple Solutions to Starting Your Seeds

Seeds contain the embryo of a plant, and under the right conditions, this seed can open up and allow a seedling to grow and another plant to see the light of day. While many plants can be bought from nurseries as seedlings or already growing flowers, vegetables, trees, or plants, more and more gardeners want to start their gardens from scratch.

Additionally, sometimes certain gardening options require the usage of seeds, such as patching holes in your lawn, or beginning a bed of wild flowers. Yet gardeners are sometimes not so sure how to start seeds, after all, there are many insects out there that see seeds as either a staple to their diet or a yummy addition to the menu.

Here are some simple solutions to starting your seeds that will have you gardening with your own grown plants in now time:

Seed trays are wonderful for the hobby gardener. They come in a number of sizes and varieties and will permit you to sow one to three seeds per cup. Some trays are so sturdy that they may be reused, while others are made of thin plastic that will need to be tossed out after using them. Still others are made of biodegradable plant materials that can actually be put into the soil with the seedling to serve as further compost once degrading.

Fillers for the trays also vary. Some require the purchase of potting soils or starter soils, while others already come prepackaged with little disks or squares made of peat moss and other organic fillers. When water is added, they expand to many times their original size and allow for a seed to be planted right on top. Read the directions on the seed package to find out how many seeds to plant together to prevent crowding of the emerging seedlings, and also to find out if the seeds need the sunlight or darkness to thrive.

Individual flowerpots are a great solution for large seeds and large plants. If you are planting a tree, it is best to start it off in an individual flowerpot, since a small seed tray would be too confining for the emerging seedling and its cluster of roots. Additionally, the flowerpot will permit the tree's seedling to grow strong prior to being transplanted, whereas the sowing of the seed in a smaller container may require it to be moved prior to being able to handle such as transplantation without damage to the roots.

Of course, whenever using a flowerpot for your seeds, be sure to use high quality potting soil or seed starter and never, ever recycle soil from other plants that may have died in their pots. Many fungi and plant diseases remain in the soil and will simply attack a new plant if given the chance.

Propagators are contraptions that will permit you to mimic the high temperatures and humidity found in tropical climates. If you are looking to grow some tropics plants, but your usual temperatures and overall climate do not lend itself to such a feat, then a propagator is the controlled environment you will need to ensure that your seeds have a good start.

They may be as expensive or inexpensive as you can afford, and depending on the size you desire and the budget you are working with, you will truly get what you pay for. These mini-

greenhouses will help you to regulate the heat, humidity, light and darkness cycles, and even ventilation for the individual pots you place inside them.

Before planting your seeds, you will also need to decide how they will best germinate. The back of the seed package should give you a good bit of information on the process. In general, there are three methods of preparing seeds for being planted:

Do nothing, but simply plant your seed in an appropriate receptacle.

Soak the seeds. Sometimes for as little as two hours, other times for as long as overnight.

Crack the seeds, or otherwise damage them slightly to allow moisture and nutrients to enter and allow the plant embryo to begin its growth process. Sometimes a little poke with the tip of the knife is enough, while other times you may need to get out your hammer and chisel, depending on the size of the seed and the hardness of its shell.

Sowing Your Seeds: A Little Know-How Goes a Long Way

The sun is shining, the birds are singing, and the warm, moist soil is beckoning for your attention. You are ready to get out there and do some planting, except you are not planting small flowers that you have picked up at the gardening store yesterday; instead, you are determined to sow your seeds this year. You have painstakingly researched what kinds of plants will grow well in your area, and you have purchased seeds from the best and most reputable sources available to ensure freshness.

Seeds are amazing little things. They basically contain the plant embryo as well as the nutrients the little thing needs to break out of the seed coat and begin the germination process. The goal is for the little plant embryo to develop into a seedling. Of course, for germination to occur, a number of conditions must be met, and each is germane to the individual plant itself. As a gardener wanting to start the growing process from scratch, you need to familiarize yourself with the needs of the different plants you are going to grow as well as the needs of the seeds you have purchased.

While one size does not fit all, there are some overall methods to follow when planting. Here are some tips for sowing seeds into individual flowerpots:

Prior to unpacking your seeds, consider the eventual size of the plant you will have. Make sure that the pot will be big enough to house the grown plant, or at least until the seedling is strong enough to be transplanted.

Make sure the pot has a hole on the bottom for drainage, so that no mold will grow in your flowerpot!

Now go ahead and put some high quality potting soil or compost into your pot. Avoid top soil, since it is devoid of the nutrients a seedling will need to establish itself.

Once you have the adequate amount of soil in the pot, gently press it down and then water it thoroughly.

Now is the time to sow the seeds. Be certain to follow the manufacturer's recommendations and do not put in more seeds than the soil and the pot can handle.

Keeping in mind the needs of the seeds, move your flowerpot to a location where the soil will receive the optimal warmth and watering needed to help the seeds to germinate.

If you are going to be planting your seeds outside rather than germinating them in a flowerpot or seed tray first, there are some unique tips to keep in mind:

Consider if you want to simply spread your seeds, or if they will go into specified locations, such as rows or a bordered flowerbed.

Grass seeds are usually just spread, whereas vegetable seeds are oftentimes sown in rows to keep the different vegetables apart.

For the spreading of seeds you can use a hand-powered spreader, such as you would use for fertilizer. For the more precise method of putting seeds in rows, however, you will probably want to do the work by hand.

Make sure that the ground upon which the seeds will land is prepared. You don't want it to be hard, devoid of nutrients, or strewn with rocks. Instead, you want a soil that has been prepared with some compost, is soft, and well drained.

Once your seeds have been grown, you will need to keep an eye out for birds that love to gobble up those delicious treats! Similarly, when the seedlings sprout, be sure to watch for damaging insects, slugs, snails, and even cats that have been known to gnaw at a plant or two.

As you can see, sowing your own seeds can be a thoroughly rewarding experience. With a little bit of know-how, and some early preparation, your patience and hard work will be rewarded with a crop of healthy plants and flowers that will grace your yard – depending on the kinds of seeds you are sowing – for many seasons to come. Just remember that you cannot hurry those little seeds along, and the best way of ensuring a bountiful crop is to not cut any corners during the preparation of the seeds' living environment.

Your Garden Design: It's All About Focal Points

It is planting season, and this year you are determined to make your garden into a lush paradise complete with flora and also fauna! You will attract humming birds, butterflies, and ladybugs while keeping other bugs at bay. You are seeing yourself, in your mind's eye, hosting lavish backyard barbecues while regaling your neighbors with your gardening successes. The summer evening breezes will find you in your lawn chair with a good book and a glass of lemonade by your side. Your garden will be easy to maintain yet beautiful, functional yet playful.

Unfortunately, at this point in time, your backyard is nothing but a patch of dirt with the remnants of some struggling grass here and there. Also visible are some of the landscape failures and faux pas of yesteryear, barely hanging on to life. What can you do differently this year to avoid the pitfalls of last year?

It is not necessary to be adept at garden design in a class with the garden artists at Sissinghurst Castle. What you do need, however, is some basic knowledge of plant needs, soils, and watering patterns in your yard. The best way to start is by drawing some plans of your yard.

What does your yard really look like? Is it a square, an oval, perhaps an L-shape?

Once you have your basic garden shape, decide on one or more focal points. Yes, focal points are very important in garden design! A focal point will draw the visitor's eyes and allows it to highlight a particularly striking feature of the garden. You want to keep in mind that the focal point needs to be proportionate to the overall size of the garden itself.

If you wish to entertain in your garden, decide where a good spot for a barbecue will be. Will you simply have a portable barbecue, or will you want to build a permanent fixture?

Once you have decided on how to utilize your space effectively it is time to take a look at your soil. Is it acidic? Is it dead? Is it hard? Is it soft and lush? Probably the best step, before planting or constructing anything, is the step of making your soil a welcoming habitat for plants and shrubs. You will need to cultivate it by breaking up hard areas, and adding compost, manure, or other substances to your soil to make it fit for growing plants. This is also a good time to fix any leaking or broken sprinklers to make sure all your plants will get adequate watering.

Now that your soil is prepared, it is time to sketch out the focal points. In truth, garden design is all about focal points! There are a large variety of items that could become focal points in your landscape:

Perhaps the soft gurgling sound of a fountain is a focal point you desire in your landscape. Several different sizes, shapes and models are available. You may have a free standing fountain or one that is mounted to a wall. The latter will look stunning with discreet garden lights trained on it in the evenings, and with assorted flowers surrounding it. Since the sizes are so varied, a fountain is an excellent focal point for any size garden.

If you have a larger yard to work with, and don't mind the occasional maintenance associated with it, then a garden pond may be a wonderful addition to your landscape. Because of the different shapes and sizes, these ponds lend themselves to become their own gardens altogether, since there are a large number of plants that love living in a pond. If you are truly ambitious, then the addition of koi fish is a possibility as well.

Garden sculptures are another kind of focal point that usually works extremely well with the addition of plants.

Since plants are a surefire way of completing a focal point, it is important to think through the different plants you are going to cultivate in your garden. You want taller plants in the background, while smaller plants are in front.

Beware of plants that send out suckers or spread widely! Instead, focus on plants that bloom, preferably at different times of the year to ensure that you will always have something in bloom in your yard. The staff of nurseries will be a wellspring of information on the subject, and they will be able to match up your landscape conditions with plants that will thrive in them, not just survive.

Building a Rock Garden Pebble by Pebble

Building a rock garden can be one of the most enjoyable outdoor experiences you've ever had. It is the perfect landscaping project for you to engage in by yourself or with another. You may want a rock garden for any number of reasons. To begin with, they can be very beautiful features for your area. Second, they provide great drainage in problem spots. You may also want a rock garden because it is simply the best idea for that tough to landscape spot on your property. There are several things to consider when you get ready to build your rock garden.

One of the first things to think about as you begin to build your rock garden is the site you intend to build on. There may be a variety of plants in the area where you intend to add rock. If this is the case, you have to decide which plants will be an excellent addition to your landscaping project and which will simply harm the look of your new rock garden. Trees can be an especially nice addition to your garden.

Try to keep trees with deep roots (like oak trees), and they can provide a nice bit of shade when you want to enjoy the peace of your rock garden on a bright day. However, anything that causes your rock garden area to look too crowded or just generally scrappy should be taken out of the area. Some of the plants may transplant to other areas quite well, but others should simply be thrown away.

The best way to get rid of all of the unwanted plants in the area you intend to place your rocks in is to dig the area out completely. This will help you to eliminate the root systems of the plants, preventing them from making any kind of a comeback in the area. Once you've eliminated the undesirables, focus your attention on the plants you intend to keep. Carefully prune them to keep them from looking overly scrappy. If the plant is too thick, thin it out. If the plant contains dead material or sick wood, get rid of it.

The next step in creating the perfect rock garden is to pay attention to the quality of the soil in the area. The chances are quite good that you will want some carefully chosen vegetation for your rock garden, and because you will want plants that grow well, paying attention to the type of soil you have will enhance the look of your new plants. Make sure that your soil texture is perfect, and that the soil depth is appropriate where you wish to plant. Remember that the two major planting seasons are spring and early fall, so plan your project on that time line. Furthermore, if you have had to dig up the area where you are creating your landscaping paradise, give it an entire season to rest. Your plants will grow much better.

Choosing a placement area for your plants is the next step in creating your rock garden. Remember that the aim of most rock gardens is to mimic nature. As a result, you will want to choose areas for your plant that have a natural look and feel.

Look through nature pictures on the Internet to understand how those plants grow in native areas. Think about where you might want to create cliff like areas for plants to congregate, and crevice areas for single plants to stand out. Remember to create areas that not only look good but that will also support the plant life of your choice.

Your final step to the perfect rock garden is to find the rocks you want to use and place them carefully according to your plan. Your choice of rocks will, naturally, depend upon the area in which you live. If you have several options available to you, choose porous rock surfaces. Hard rocks like granite take much longer to weather, and simply don't offer the area the appearance you may be looking for. Try to get a good mix of rock shapes, and as you place them, be sure to go for that natural look.

Rock gardens can be a great addition to any landscaping area. Make careful choices, and you are sure to get the perfect scene for relaxation.

Get Kids Digging: Fun Ways to Incorporate Kids and Gardening

What is more wonderful than spending some time in the yard, digging, planting, pruning, and then sitting back and enjoying the fruits of your labor – be that the edible rewards that fruit and vegetable bearing plants have to offer, or the reward of seeing a lush landscape grow and thrive before your very own eyes! Quite possibly the only thing more enjoyable than doing all this with your own two hands is to get your kids digging alongside you.

Here are five fun and easy ways to incorporate kids and gardening:

Even if you do not have an extensive yard, your children can still enjoy some hands on gardening. Allow them to start with some easy to grow seeds, such as sunflower or avocado seeds, which may be done in your own kitchen. A flowerpot may be used to hold one to three sunflower seeds, which need to be tended until the little seedlings sprout and are strong enough to be planted in a larger container.

An avocado seed may be suspended on a triangle made from three toothpicks over a water glass, with the bottom inch of the seed sitting in water. Your children will need to make sure that they replace the evaporated water in the glass consistently. Within about four to six weeks they will be able to see some roots sprouting from the bottom and a stem from the top. When the stem measures roughly six inches, it should be cut back to three inches.

Since this may involve the use of a knife, younger children need to be assisted in this endeavor by a parent! Once the stem has once again grown and the roots have thickened, the seedling may now be planted into a large flowerpot or planter with a compost rich soil. Explain to your children that the top of the seed should remain exposed. It will now be their job to water the little tree consistently.

If you do have a yard, set aside an area for your children to call their own. In this little patch they may grow anything they like. Make sure you do not relegate them to the forgotten spot in the corner with the hard soil that is sitting in the midst of the unforgiving sun and is furthest away from the life-giving watering house.

Instead, please give them a prime location, full of rich, deep soil that holds moisture well, in an area that is easily watered. Nothing will discourage a child quicker is a lack of success, and a garden where nothing – not even cacti- will grow most certainly does not offer any kind of success.

Consider planting a vegetable garden together. It does not matter if you will actually eat everything you are growing. As a matter of fact, neighbors will love zucchinis, tomatoes, eggplants, and pumpkins, and your children will not only learn how to garden, but they will also learn how to share what they grow!

For older kids who simply love art, a blooming flowerbed is a great way to get digging. Whether you start the plants from seeds or buy seedlings at your local nursery, children will love to see their efforts rewarded by fragrant blooms. This is also a great way to introduce your children to the different kinds of soils there are, and what can be done to enrich the soil.

Since soil treatments sometimes require the use of gardening chemicals, the latter should only be applied with strict adult supervision and copious hand washing afterwards. It might not be a bad idea to use disposable gloves when handling chemical substances.

Purchase kid-sized gardening tools. Nothing makes a job more frustrating than having the wrong tool for the work! Do not expect your children to enthusiastically dig into the dirt if the shovel is too heavy, the rake too unwieldy for little hands, or the broom too tall for a proper clean up. Instead, visit your local big box store and purchase kid sized gardening tools and gloves, which may be had rather inexpensively.

As you can see, getting your kids to start digging alongside you can be easily and quickly done. Just make it a fun endeavor, allow them the success any gardener craves, and get some tools that are sized for their little hands. Above all, adult supervision is a must whenever chemicals of any kind are involved!

Bringing Up Bamboo: Tips to Growing This Renewable Resource

Bamboo has a simple elegance that is unmatched anywhere in the world. The strong lines and clean look make for a beautiful plant anywhere in or around your home.

One of the first steps in deciding to grow bamboo is to decide whether to grow it indoors or out. Bamboo is a fairly delicate plant. As a result, you can only grow it if you live in a certain climate. If you choose to grow it outside the climate it grows best in, you will either need to plant it indoors or you will need to work much harder to maintain your plant than you might in a more traditional growth zone.

If you do choose to plant bamboo outdoors there are a number of things you should consider. One of the first things you should think about is the spacing of your bamboo plants. Ensure that you don't allow any air pockets to exist when you place the plant within the soil. This will make sure that the roots have the cover they needs. If your soil is filled with clay, you must make sure that it is well aerated and very loose.

If your soil tends to be filled with clay, regular compost and mulch routines will take care of that. When you get ready to plant the bamboo, spacing is critical. Your idea of how they should be spaced will factor into the success of your plants. If you want to create the look of a wall, place them four feet apart from each other. If you go with a dwarf style bamboo plant, this will give you the dense look you are looking for.

Deciding when to plant your bamboo is another important factor in success. Depending on your climate, bamboo can grow from April to October. During the course of the rest of the year, the bamboo roots are forming underground. Plant as soon as you possibly can, but be sure the soil in your area is above forty degrees before you introduce the bamboo to your environment. The water factor is essential to a strong bamboo plant.

If you live in a relatively dry environment, and you intend to plant your bamboo outdoors, and irrigation system will be necessary to a good looking bamboo plant. While it is certainly possible for a bamboo plant to survive on something less than forty inches of rain per year, they simply don't look good when they are forced to live with less water than they like. Organic fertilizer should be applied every four to six weeks with a bamboo plant.

If growing bamboo outdoors simply doesn't work out for you, yet you would really like to keep a bamboo plant, consider growing a single plant indoors in a pot. While this may sound like quite a challenge, it is really an easier task than you may have first considered.

One of the first things you must do when you get ready to grow bamboo on an indoor scale is to consider the best place in your home for your new bamboo plant. Like any other plant, lighting is critical to the success of your new bamboo plant. Different types of bamboo require different types of light; so reading up on your variety before you make your big purchase is essential.

On the most basic level, plants with larger leaves require less light. The smaller the bamboo leaves, the closer to the window the entire plant will need to be to get enough light to help it survive. If you need a bit of help choosing the right bamboo variety for your indoor growth needs, there are several good choices.

One great choice to grow bamboo indoors is the Arrow variety. Scientifically called *Pseudosasa japonica*, this plant will do quite well in an environment with very little light and humidity. The Alphonse Kerr variety requires quite a bit of light, but it is also an excellent bamboo choice for your indoor nursery. Be sure to keep your plant from becoming waterlogged. The easiest way to do this on an indoor scale is to put a bowl of gravel under the plant. This will greatly improve the drainage.

Bamboo is a wonderful plant to own indoors or out. Follow these tips for bamboo success, no matter where you live.

Mulling over Mulberry Trees: An Overview of Several Different Species

The family tree of this garden favorite is open to discussion and at times reads like a who's who of the plant world, while at other times it appears a bit more convoluted like a royal bloodline in any cloak and dagger mystery novel. While there are some definite species associated with the mulberry, there are also a number of impostors that claim association with this tree in name only.

We all know mulberry trees to be relatively short, at least for trees, quickly growing when young, yet much more slowly growing when mature. Its fruits grow in clusters and turn from red to deep purple. They are not evergreen trees, but instead shed their leaves during the cooler seasons. Preferring warm weather, these trees are said to be native to climactically warmer regions of Africa, Asia, and also the North American continent.

As you are mulling over the mulberry trees you may see in the nursery, or which you may actually have in your backyard, here is a quick overview of several different species that most certainly fall under the umbrella of mulberry.

A true-blue mulberry tree falls under the genus "Morus", which is a distinction all mulberry trees share. Some horticulturists would have you believe that there are more than one hundred forty-five different species that fall under that genus, while purists amongst that group estimate this number to be much closer to fifteen, partially because of the successful creation of hybrids amongst the species. The purists among the purists will only acknowledge about six species and refuse to count in the hybrids altogether. Discussions amongst these groups are often quite heated, and so far no permanent resolution has been reached.

At this point in time the only species that all of the arborists can agree on sharing the genus "Morus" are:

The North American red mulberry which is taller than average height and has a large trunk; it lends itself as an addition to any yard as a shade tree. The fruit is certain to attract your local wildlife, even though clean up is usually necessary to dispose of uneaten fruit to prevent insect infestations.

The North American Texas mulberry with its beautiful leaves, which are rough on both sides. It is extremely well adapted to poor soil conditions, and can survive droughts and heat. Its blooms are yellow and lend a beautiful look to your springtime landscape.

The Asian white mulberry, which has dark white blooms in March and April, and produces white fruits, is used extensively to support and feed the silkworms, which are an important part of the Asian economy. In North America this small tree is successfully grown in full sun to part shade. Because of its fickle moisture needs, as well as the extensive clean up necessitated by falling fruit; it is considered a high maintenance tree by many hobby gardeners.

The Asian Chinese mulberry with its big leaves.

The Asian black mulberry with its dark fruit, bark and reputation for surviving in colder and shadier climates. As a matter of fact, this tree prefers to grow in full to partial shade, and can

handle differing watering conditions. Many hobby gardeners see the black mulberry as the hardiest of the bunch and love to add it to problem spots in their landscape.

The African mulberry with its shorter leaves.

The Himalayan mulberry, which sometimes shows up at specialty nurseries, is a hot topic amongst arborists, since many believe it to be a simple subspecies of the white mulberry, while others cite its striking similarity to the black mulberry as being proof of hybridization.

A close relative of the "Morus" mulberry, a first cousin, perhaps, is the genus "Broussonetia." Under this genus there are about four species. You may be able to find a member of this latter genus in your local nursery. A quite famous representative is the paper mulberry, which has been used commercially to manufacture paper from its bark – hence the name.

As you can easily determine, there is much discussion and disagreement exactly onto which trees the honor of being considered a species of the genus "Morus" should be bestowed. One thing, however, arborists, horticulturists, and hobby gardeners can agree on: the mulberry is a wonderful addition to any landscape!

Rosemary Rush: An Herb or Ornamental Plant?

Every year in November there appears to be a rush on health food stores in search for some sprigs of the famous rosemary plants. This rosemary rush is usually the precursor to the Thanksgiving meal, and any and all cooks will enthusiastically agree that Rosemary will add a seasoning to turkey meat that is second to none. Thus, cooks are contented with leaving Rosemary in the realm of herbs.

Yet gardeners beg to differ. While they grudgingly do acknowledge that this woody plant with its fragrant leaves is considered an herb, they see much more than just the culinary potential of this beautiful plant. To a gardener, rosemary is an ornamental plant.

So what is it about this rosemary rush that may threaten the peace and harmony betwixt gardening folk and cooking mavens? Here are some light-hearted facts that will help you take your place in this debate:

Rosemary is considered a woody perennial, since its stems are made up primarily of woody tissues.

Rosemary is an evergreen, which means that it will not shed its spiky leaves and remain bare during the cold winter months. In addition to the foregoing, it is considered polycarpic, which is a fancy word that numbers the rosemary amongst those plants to will flower copiously a number of times.

Culinary fiends are quick to point out that Italian and Greek and Spanish cuisines have long since viewed rosemary as a staple of their cooking herbage.

Landscapers, on the other hand, are delighted to point to the fact because of their drought-resistance; rosemary plants are a wonderful addition to any garden that may be located in the hotter climates. Additionally, since worms, flies, and aphids find this plant to be rather distasteful to their discerning palates, these plants are also relatively pest-free.

Some gardening enthusiasts have succeeded in creating astonishing topiaries from rosemary shrubs.

Quite possibly the death knell for those who wish to look to rosemary as only the occasional herb that will assist them in their cooking is the fact that gardeners specializing in ornamental gardening have long since known of the various hybrids of rosemary bushes available. While some of these hybrids are distinguished by their leaves, others are host to spectacular flowers.

For example, the "Aureus" variety, as they name would indicate, is differentiated by its splendid yellow leaves while the "Golden Rain" boasts green leaves that have yellow streaks. The "Majorica Pink" sports bright, pink flowers, while the "Pyramidalis" shows off its light blue blossoms.

Also adding to the mix of herb versus ornamental shrub debate are the homeopaths who know that rosemary is not only a useful disinfectant but a great cure for headaches.

So who is right in this apparently endless? As much as folks would like to point fingers to one side or another, it should be mentioned that all sides are correct. Rosemary is indeed an herb as well as an ornamental plant. Its culinary contributions cannot possibly be denied, nor can its medicinal properties be downplayed. Yet it is important to note that simply because a plant is tasty and healthful, it does not mean that it should be planted in rows for functional use.

As a matter of fact, there is no reason why a tasty herb should not also be beautifully displayed. Considering the wide array of flowers and leaf sizes and shapes, as well the possibility of having this plant shaped as a stunning topiary, there is no reason why you can't have your ornamental shrub and eat it, too!

If you feel you are ready to add this wonderful plant to your garden, go ahead and visit your local garden supply center and purchase some healthy looking specimens there. While it is a hardy plant that will do well in almost any soil, it does have a distinct preference for light and dry soil. It does not appreciate standing in water, and most certainly would prefer not to be whipped around by the wind.

If you are planning to cut some portions off for cooking, be certain not to use any herbicides or pesticides near the or even on the plant. Since it is considered unpalatable by the majority of garden pests, you should not have many problems in that department. At the time of harvest, be certain to use a very sharp knife to minimize the injury to the plant. Enjoy!

The Best Heat Tolerant Flowers and Plants for Your Garden in the Sultry South

The sultry South, which is an apt description of the southern part of the United States, is not only made famous by its love of jazz and blues, its folklore and literature, as well as its cultural luminaries, but also its humid and hot climate and its dazzling display of flourishing flora. Who does not know the breath-taking beauty of streets lined with flowering Magnolias? Who is immune to the intoxicating scent of the bougainvillea?

Yet not all gardeners love to garden in this green spot. As a matter of fact, many bemoan the plants that appear to be healthy and thriving one day only to succumb to the heat the very next. For those of you who are ready to take the plunge and are determined to make your garden lush and thriving, here are the best heat tolerant flowers and plants for your sultry southern garden:

Jade plants fall under the heading of succulents, which are plants that live on very little water in the summer, and almost none in the winter. Extremely drought resistant, these plants love the heat and sun, and will bloom pink, or sometimes white, in the spring. While they love the heat, they do not want to be exposed to a merciless beating of the sun. It is important not to over-water these plants.

Rosemary is a well-known herb, famous for its medicinal properties, but also widely renowned for its use as an ornamental plant. A large number of different specimens are available, some of which differentiate themselves by virtue of their differently colored flowers or varying leaf colors. Sometimes able to be made into beautiful topiaries, the rosemary is certain to add a fragrance and beauty to your garden while weathering even the toughest heat. Simply plant it in well-drained soil, and if at all possible protect it against strong winds.

Celestial Blue, a member of the sage family, is a well-known drought and also heat tolerant plant that is not only hardy but also very attractive. Its blooms are large and pink, violet or purple and are known to attract hummingbirds and butterflies that eagerly drink up the flowers' nectar.

Magnolia trees are one of the very plants that have made the southern portion of the United States famous worldwide. They are long-living trees that display large, delicate flowers, which emit a heady scent. If grown from a seed, these plants may take up to twenty years to mature enough to display even one bloom, while asexually propagated plants will quite possibly bloom within three to five years.

If planting a Magnolia, pick a well-lit spot with little or no shade and be sure to use a well-drained soil and water very often. Fertilize frequently, and be sure to resist the urge to prune the plant.

The Madagascar Dragon Tree is a small shrub that is well known to anyone who works in office buildings, since it is the office plant of choice. Extended light exposure, heat, and little water are perfect for this plant and therefore make it a perfect staple of the southern garden.

The California Juniper is a shrub that may also grow into a small tree. Heat as well as drought resistant, it grows quickly and beautifully and has a pleasant scent. Once word of caution: if left unchecked, this shrub soon becomes a virtual haven for spiders!

Pansies may not be known for being extremely heat tolerant, but if planted in the shade and watered well, they make for a stunning array of flowers in the winter months!

Blackfoot is a plant that is actually native to Florida. Greatly varying in sizes and shapes, these flowering plants are very closely related to the sunflower family. Like many heat resistant plants, they enjoy well-drained soil, but will also make do with less than perfect soil conditions.

As you can see, there is a large variety of plants, shrubs and trees that will do extremely well in a sultry southern garden, adding colorful displays, variety of texture, as well as wonderful scents that have to be smelled to be believed!

The Southern Charm of Magnolias: How to Keep Them Attractive in the Non-Blooming Months

What is it about the Magnolia that has fascinated the North American continent to such an extent? After all, the humble Magnolia flower has been elevated to the official state flower of not only Louisiana but also Mississippi! Named after a French botanist, Magnolias spread through seeds or through grafts that may be used to clone an individual plant.

While they do not require a lot of extensive care once they are firmly established, they do have some up front requirements, especially if you are just planting one today:

Magnolias appreciate well-drained soil and do not appreciate standing in water.

They need sunlight and lots of it. While they will grow in shady spots, they will most likely not bloom often, if at all.

New trees should be fertilized frequently.

If you are growing your tree from a seed, be patient. These trees may take ten to twenty-five years to produce their first blooms.

Of course, Magnolias add a lot of southern charm to any landscape, yet like any other plant they do experience some downtime when they are not blooming. Usually during the autumn months they will ripen their seeds, which are located in seedpods. These pods will begin to drop to the ground and those who have magnolia trees with trimmed limbs that allow them to walk underneath the trees will do well to beware being hit by one of these pods. They are known to put dents in cars!

Similarly, in some climate zones during the spring and early summer months, they will drop many dried brown leaves, which leave big messes in the yards below. While the tree is never fully devoid of leaves, it does look a little plucked at that time.

Of course, if you have a younger Magnolia, you will want to work extra hard at keeping it looking attractive in the non-blooming months. A full-grown Magnolia will remain attractive no matter what, but the younger specimens may not fare so well. Here are some tips and tricks to keep that tree looking and feeling healthy during the non-blooming months:

Counteract dry spells. A regular watering schedule is a must for a new tree, and while it is easy to assume that the tree with its roots has plenty of access to underground water pockets and sources, nothing could be further from the truth! Young trees rely on the surface water for much of their watering needs.

The same is true for nutrients. Do not let the soil be the only source of nutrition for your tree! As a matter of fact, some nurseries will suggest that you fertilize your new Magnolia every month! In case of a doubt, go ahead and speak to your local nursery, and bring leaf samples if you are concerned that perhaps your tree is not getting enough nutrients.

Depending on the age of your tree, the non-blooming months may extend to non-blooming years. Some trees take two to four years to establish themselves in the soil and to channel their energy to producing blooms. Do not give up your watering and fertilizing regimen and continue to ensure that your tree has all its needs met.

If you have a fairly mature tree, you may wish to inspect it regularly for dead branches and trim them back to stimulate more growth. If you do not feel comfortable doing so, a professional arborist should be consulted to send out someone to do the work for you. A large accumulation of dead branches is not only unsightly, but may also be detrimental to the well-being of your tree.

As anyone who has ever beheld the breath-taking beauty and southern charm of a street filled with flowering Magnolia trees will tell you, they are a sight that is not quickly forgotten. Their blooms are perfection, and the trees' natural beauty is second to none. While the more mature trees will hold on to this beauty in the non-blooming months, the immature ones will need your helping hand to remain healthy and attractive looking, and only a few simple steps will ensure that they will receive what they so desperately need. So go ahead and take care of your Magnolia!

Bugs Can Be Good for Your Garden: Your Handbook to Those Beneficial Bugs

Eek! A bug! This scream, or one very similar to it, can be heard throughout homes and gardens in the spring and summer months. Seeing that the garden is the closest many hobby gardeners get to actually spending some time in the great outdoors, it is not surprising that some are revolted if not scared by the little strange looking creatures. Usually a hasty retreat to the poison cabinet follows that scream, and the bugs are then eradicated with the help of household chemicals and pesticides.

Yet, did you know that some bugs are actually good to have around? While it is hard to believe that there are actually bugs out there you would want to have crawling around on your rose bush, there are some species that keep destructive and perhaps even dangerous pests to a

minimum – all without the use of harmful chemicals that can make you, your family, or your family pets sick.

You do not need to be an organic gardener to appreciate these beneficial bugs, and the following is but a small contingent of the bugs you want in your garden - your handbook to beneficial bugs, so to speak.

Starting off with the predators, these bugs will see the annoying pests in your yard as an open invitation buffet and eat heartily:

Did you know that the daddy longlegs you might be scared to have in your house actually are great for the job of pest control in your garden? They love to live around strawberries apples, corn, and even potatoes, and will eat aphids, caterpillars, and even slugs.

Green lacewings are a beautiful insect, but it is their larvae that are the actual killers. Living in the neighborhoods of tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, strawberries, and whatever else in your hard may be host to an aphid infestation; these little insects devour aphids, spider mites, whiteflies, moths, and other harmful insects.

Quite possibly everyone's favorite is the lady bug. Whatever plant or tree in your yard may sport an active aphid population is also where ladybugs can be found. Once aphids are gobbled up, ladybugs will turn to moth eggs, mites, and other small pests.

Another kind of bug, by extension, is the simple roundworm called a nematode. While to humans roundworms have long since spelled trouble, gardeners have taken to separating those troublemakers from what is termed "beneficial nematodes" which actually help in controlling soil-living pests, such as slugs, root weevils, and cutworms.

The third kind of beneficial bug is the one tied to actually controlling weeds rather than other bugs. Many times a specific type of weed or undesirable plant is closely tied to a bug that will eat it or prevent its spread. For example, the melaleuca weevil is directly responsible for keeping melaleuca tree spread under control.

While in 1906 it was thought that this type of tree was a wonderful addition to the North-American continent, merely 100 years later gardeners have begun to add this tree to the invasive weed kind, which chokes out other native plants. While the little weevils do not stop the trees from growing, their systematic destruction of the plants slows down the plants' ability to grow and reproduce, as well as make the trees more susceptible to other diseases. Another example of a bug acting as a beneficial agent to control a weed that is deemed undesirable is the Alligatorweed Flea Beetle, which has actually been used by the agricultural department to successfully combat alligatorweed.

Last but not least are the parasites, which are actually useful in controlling unwanted insects. While wasps are pretty high on the list, not everyone is willing to have wasps in their backyard to deter other species of insects from taking up residence. Probably the biggest problem with parasitic insects is the fact that the process of killing the undesirable insect is rather long, leaving it to do a lot of damage before finally succumbing to the effects of the parasitic intrusion.

As you can see, there are many beneficial bugs out there that many a gardener should be happy to host in her or his garden. While at first it may feel a bit odd to overcome the impulse of heading for the pesticide spray bottle, it is in the long run a wise and healthy choice to let nature's beneficial bugs take care of your nuisance pests.

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