With so much going on in the world, the feeling of isolation, and all of us home-bound, this has been a great time to turn to our gardens. People have been spending more time in their yards and those who run garden centers are inundated with orders for vegetable seedlings and plants. There has even been television shows explaining the historical importance of the Victory Garden with the encouragement of a new movement. It seems that there have never been a better time to grow your own food.

For those of us who do grow our own vegetables, we have been busy this past month with our leafy and root ones such as lettuce, kale, spinach, carrots, chives, and onions. We are in great anticipation for the end of April and May to get our other crops in the ground such as potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, squash, beans, and okra. Most of Blount County is in a hardiness zone of 7a so please consider that when choosing your plants, although some in higher elevations or remote areas may find themselves closer to hardiness zone 6.

With all this family free time, is a great opportunity to get the children and grandchildren involved in the garden while they are out of school. Teach them about the soil, seeds, germination, parts of the plants, responsibility of watering and weeding, harvesting, and great recipes. Children are more likely to eat vegetables that they grow. The Blount County Library even offers free seeds (vegetables, herbs, and flowers) to everyone with a library card over in their reference department. Maybe even try to grow something new this year. We would love to hear from you or see some pictures.

If you would like to contribute to our Summer issue (June—August), please submit your articles and pictures by June 1 to bcmggazette@gmail.com. We would love to hear from you!
Every Tennessee winter is different. Some are short and mild, others brutal and cold. In the end we finally see warm weather and sunshine return, with birds chirping and spring peepers chorusing in every pond. We gardeners finally can head out, checking for what is blooming and what needs tending.

We find pretty spring bulb blooms trying to push their way through things left behind in the fall. Recommendations once were to clean up and cut back everything in the garden at the end of the growing season which was mostly for disease prevention. Now we are encouraged to leave seed heads for the winter to feed birds and to provide homes over the winter for beneficial insects and for many of the native pollinators. However, at some point this needs to be cleaned away before new growth emerges to prevent diseases such as powdery mildew and fungi from the previous season infecting plants as they grow.

Very early in spring is a good time to begin removing layers of leaves that have accumulated. In case overnight temperatures dip well below freezing, I often will remove only some ground covering material and come back later to remove the rest a week or two later. The first warm weather is also the best time to trim back dried stalks to the ground and begin the arduous task of getting rid of the winter weeds. They seem to thrive in winter cold and wet like no other plant!

Once the garden has been cleared, inspect existing perennials for new growth, especially those that have the tendency to form dead centers and need dividing every few years like Shasta Daisies. This is the best time to plan where those divisions can go if you are trying to enlarge a garden or replace plants that have not survived the winter. It’s also a great time to share your plants with other gardeners.

Bare ground inspections also will reveal where voles and moles have been busy, and remove plants that have been damaged by winter weather or burrowing critters. Mole and vole repellents will help deter them when you can apply it to their many paths before they are hidden by mulches and full grown plants.

Once you have cleaned up all of the winter leftovers and determined where there are empty spots you can begin to make a plant wish list plan according what has thrived there most. Look into buying plants that are natives or nativars that support local beneficial insects, birds and native pollinators.

Before you plant new plants make sure to get a soil test done, and then add mulch to the clean beds. Some people only soil test every other year in well established gardens. If you are skipping the soil test this is the best time to also add a light application of organic fertilizer. Over fertilizing is not beneficial to plants or to the environment so always apply with a light hand!
No-Till Gardening – Step Two – The Following Spring

To recap from my last article in The Blount County Master Gardener Gazette, last Fall I laid the groundwork (pun intended) for my new meadow garden by stripping off the Bermuda grass, top dressing with compost and planting a cover crop of winter rye, crimson clover and turnips.

Here in Blount County we had a mild winter with little snow and moderate temperatures. The winter rye came up as did the crimson clover but no turnips. If I had it to do over I would sow beets instead of turnips. So here are photos of the garden taken at the end of March. As you can see there must have been rape seeds mixed in with something but it worked out well. The bees enjoyed the early flowers and the rape has a tuberous root that helped expand the clay soil.

I then contacted Dr. Julie Konkel, my mentor at Blount County Soil Conservation district, to ask her advice. Here is what she told me to do:

“1) Kill the cover crop and leave all residue in place. This provides nutrients to the soil and will help with weed suppression.

*Options for cover crop kill are to crimp, cut/mow (this will be one of very few times I suggest mow as low as possible), or spray kill with an herbicide.

2) Do not till or hoe. To seed, either broadcast or use a no-till drill seeder. If you disturb the soil, even by hand-tilling with a hoe, you will lose the benefits of the cover crop.

Continued
Continued

3) If you are using a native plant mix, you do not 'need' to apply compost or fertilizer. If anything, you can topdress with compost (1-3 inches) if you want to and that will give the site a little boost. That's one of the benefits of cover cropping and following up with a native plant mix. The cover crop provides soil nitrogen and other nutrients, provided you leave the residue in place after the kill. And a native plant group is going to be adapted to local soil conditions. Also no need to adjust for soil pH.

*NOTE: The above recommendation assumes a moderately disturbed soil. However, if the site is very compacted, very low organic, and high clay (e.g. an old construction site), then other measures would need to be taken. But it doesn't appear that this is the case on your plot.

You will battle some weeds in the first year or two. Cover crop residue does provide some weed suppression and you can use mulch or top-dressed compost to help keep the weeds down. But don't be dismayed when you see a mixed community that includes some weeds and/or invasives along with your pollinator mix. You will likely need to seed again next year (not as much) to bolster the native pollinator plant community. This is a longer term process than traditional 'instant gardening' so I always tell folks hang in there and the results will come! It will also be lower maintenance over the long-term. “ Dr. Julie Konkel

So following her advice, I cut down the cover crop (I did not use an herbicide) and left all residue in place. I left some of the crimson clover that was in full bloom along the perimeter for the bees. I then broadcast my wildflower seeds. I had a combination of wildflower mixes and some of my own seeds left over from last year's black eye Susans and Mexican sunflowers. I dampened the soil with the garden hose and topped with a small amount of wheat straw. Finally I laid pine straw paths. Now I wait and hope that something grows!

Seeded April 9, 2020

Crimson Clover

Louminda Roberts Torbett, BCMG
When James Hutchison mentioned the volunteer opportunities for my class of new Master Gardener interns, I was enchanted with the idea of the seed library. The Blount County library is one of my favorite places on Earth, so being able to support the library and the master gardener program was a perfect match.

One of my first tasks for the seed library was to review Bevin Cohen's new book *Saving Our Seed: The Practice & Philosophy* for the library's Facebook page.

As a beginning seed-saver, Cohen's book instantly enchanted me with the beautiful photos and easy-to-follow guides. But veterans appreciate it too. Director of the seed library Sheila Pennycuff told me, "What I loved about that book was the color photos and the practical hands-on advice that he gives. He's very easy to understand."

Cohen provides a variety of information - detailed guides for pollination, harvesting seed, and storage. He includes specific instructions on how to save the seeds of 34 heirloom plants. Alongside, he provides stories from his seed-saving and says, "A handful of seeds is a handful of stories."

Each featured plant has detailed information on how they are pollinated, how much they need to be isolated from other varieties, and how to harvest viable seeds for future crops. To my beginner's eye, it appears that there are only a few techniques I need to master since we can collect plant families' seeds in similar ways.

But my favorite parts were the stories of seed savers. How they were inspired to get started preserving seeds and why it is so important. Each seed-saver Cohen features seems to have a specialty, like the fellow who saves bean varieties or the woman who loves saving heritage pumpkin seeds.

I turned to my next resource, Bill Best's *Saving Seeds, Preserving Taste: Heirloom Seed Savers in Appalachia*. Best created the Sustainable Mountain Agriculture Center near Berea, Kentucky, to develop a seed bank and make heirloom seeds available.

This book is an homage to the history of seed-saving in Appalachia. So, while there are fewer seed-saving techniques than in Cohen's book, Best includes lovely stories, many shared with him by ancestors of the original savers. Learn the story behind Radiator Charlie's Mortgage Lifter tomato. Which color tomato is the most prized? Best lets us know.

Appalachian people were scientists when it came to finding the most viable varieties. They had to make sure they had enough food. Excellent varieties of plants evolve through natural selection, and gardeners over the years have seized on that approach to cultivate and save varieties that taste yummy and perform well. They watched for 'sports,' or mutations that arose and carefully saved and tested them in the laboratory (garden) to see how they performed. After generations of this careful approach to preserving seeds, it would be a shame to see the varieties die out because people rely on just a few commercially available varieties.

(Continued)
In some communities, seed legacies are passed along to grandchildren. One story is about a grandfather that had to sell all his material valuables to survive. So, his legacy was the family's carefully-preserved seeds. Other stores are about how seed-saving and swapping help families stay in touch and honor their shared heritage.

I'm excited to learn how to be a seed saver, help to preserve these varieties, and give back to the seed library. My packet of Taz yard-long beans has a note that says, "handed down since the 1800s." How cool is that? Seed-saving is fun, useful and as Cohen says, "...no other work on this Earth is as important".

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**Book Review - Epic Tomatoes: How to Select & Grow the best Varieties of All Time**

*By Teri Brushaber, Blount County Master Gardener*

*Epic Tomatoes* by Craig LeHoullier is truly an epic book. The book is epic in its scope and range. It ranges through the many facets of tomatoes from the history of tomatoes, to problems and pests incurred when raising them. The book includes recipes, tips and instructions on storing tomatoes, and seed saving.

The scope of *Epic Tomatoes* focuses on all aspects of the tomato. It includes lists of hundreds of recommended tomato varieties by their color, taste (sweet or sour), size, season, growth, and whether the tomato is an F1 hybrid or and open pollinated, or not considered a hybrid. The book has information for any type of gardener from a beginner with basic planting and care to an expert gardener on how to breed your own tomatoes.

The book answers the age old question of whether the tomato is a vegetable or a fruit. It is a fruit. The full color pictures work beautifully and enhance the text. I wanted to take the tomatoes off the page and eat them.

Since I was in the middle of planting seeds for transplants, I found the section on “Planning and Plants” very helpful. It cover everything from how to time your seed starting to when to move out doors.

*Epic Tomatoes* is a book that cannot be read in just one sitting but it must be read in nibbles and small bites like cherry tomatoes. It is a book to go back to again and again. I would add *Epic Tomatoes* to my library.
A Helping Hand
by Rosemarie Cirina, Blount County Master Gardener

I have had shoulder surgery, limited physically for months and I am 73 years old “senior” who usually does her own landscaping. I have not been able to get my garden in or do any projects. Last week I had two neighborhood boys ask me if I needed any help with my lawn. With spring comes lots of items on my outdoor to-do-list no way to get it done by myself.

Tad Zappa (17) and Connor Tabott (13) who live on my street, they were looking to fill in some of their spare time since being home and earn a little money. They offered to help. Tad was first on the scene and pressure washed my driveway, walkway, and back patio. Tad recruited Connor and they spent 3 hours picking up debris from the past two storms.

When the boys approached, I said yes but explained that we will make this a learning classroom outside. There are certain ways to do the maintenance on outside landscaping and lawn preparation. Talbott mowed my lawn with a grass catcher since it was 14 inches high then came back the next day to spread moss x after I explained to him what the purpose of it was for my lawn.

I was very impressed with their work ethics, finishing and learning about lawn and landscape treatment. I am hoping they might entice other kids to do the same or similar work, to help seniors. I wore a mask and they kept their safe distance. They worked about everyday of the week of March 30th , between 3 to 5 hours a day, for 4 days. They not only power washed and mowed, but pulled weeds from my gardens, took out all the dead debris and I showed them how to trim bushes and cut some trees. I feel they had fun, worked hard, and learned a lot. I certainly did.
Now is the time to enjoy planning kid-friendly Spring gardening activities and projects to keep your children engaged in creative and imaginative learning.

- Create a Garden Scavenger Hunt have your child search for colors, shapes, types of plants, or insects.
- In the garden, go on a color hunt. What colors can you find? What color did you find the most of? Where there any colors you did not see? If you are in a vegetable garden talk about the colors of certain vegetables, what do they have in common? Why do you think they are certain colors? What is your favorite color? What is your favorite color to taste?
- For a counting activity, pick a flower and have them count the leaves or a vegetable and count the seeds. Strawberries are the only fruit with the seeds on the outside. You can have them predict how many seeds are on each strawberry. Did you know on average a strawberry has approximately 200 seeds?
Aah Spring! The time of year that all gardeners look forward to. I could not wait to get my hands into the soil. Every year I feel like a scientist because of the new things I would like to try. This year I started a few seeds indoors, two kinds of tomatoes Big Mama, a sauce tomato and Supper Beef Master, for eating. I started cucumbers, Burpless and red peppers. Last year my cucumbers did not do very well. I planted the seeds right in the ground and I had to replant. So this year I started my own seeds inside to see if that would make a difference. I'll let you know if it does.

I have stared a whole new flower bed but the only flower I started inside was Cosmos. I will show more flowers later. Right now the bed is a few spent jonquils and nothing else. We also added an asparagus bed; Mary Washington asparagus was planted. I look forward to harvesting it in a couple of years.

I managed to find some mushroom compost. Fred, my husband, worked it into all the beds along with my home made compost. This year is the first time for me to use the mushroom compost. I hope it is as good as everyone says it is.

March 12th the early garden was planted with dragon carrots, sugar peas, Baker Creek lettuce, and American spinach. They are all up and doing just fine.

One week later, I rushed the season by transplanting four kinds of tomatoes: Red Beefsteak (Heirloom), Park’s Whopper Improved, Early Girl, and a Bonnie Original Our Favorite Tomato. I know it is early and I have cut the bottom out of milk jugs to cover if there is a frost warning. This just might be the year of the tomato. In the garden, I have five tomato plants and six more I’ve started from seeds.

I’m trying potatoes this year too. I have raised them in a barrel before but this year I felt that my soil was better so in the ground they went: Red Norland, Russet Gold Rush, and Adirondack Blue. They took up about three quarters of one of my raised beds about the same space as tomatoes in another bed. If it is not the year of the tomato it just might be the year of the potato.

Happy gardening to everyone and try a few new things. Go get your hands dirty.
Spring Tasks for the Garden

Tasks for April

- Finish site preparation if not completed. Use proper pre-plant fertilizer. [extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/W346-C.pdf](extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/W346-C.pdf)
- Finish direct seeding and transplanting cool-season crops to prevent them from maturing under hot summer conditions.
- Harvest may begin on the earliest seeded leafy crops or root crops.
- It is common to seed some direct seeded warm-season crops a bit before the frost free date (beans, corn). Be cautious of soil temperatures, though, especially if you are seeding untreated seeds or super sweet corn.
- Transplants of warm-season crops can be planted in Tennessee in April after frost free dates. However, soil temperatures support root growth, and sometimes early transplant dates are not all that helpful due to cool soils.

Tasks for May

- Harvest cool-season crops, and watch for pests/diseases.
- Seed succession plantings of common warm-season direct seeded crops, such as beans and sweet corn. [extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/D61.pdf](extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/D61.pdf)
- Continue transplanting warm-season crops. Peppers and eggplants prefer even warmer soil conditions than tomatoes and are often planted later. Make sure that young transplants are watered in and given a starter fertilizer solution to support early growth.
- Set up stakes, trellises, cages and support systems for your plants. It is best to have these set up at or soon after planting.
- Don’t let weeds get started in the garden. Take control early with mulches and proactive management. [extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/W346-D.pdf](extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/W346-D.pdf)

Tasks for June

- Some of the latest warm-season crops to be planted are often watermelons and pumpkins as well as sweet potatoes.
- You can still be succession planting corn and beans.
- Make sure your irrigation system is functioning well and manage weeds. [extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/W346-D.pdf](extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/W346-D.pdf)
- Scout for any issues with pests or disease at least weekly. [extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/PB595.pdf](extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/PB595.pdf)
What to Do After Bulbs Have Bloomed

by Reena Lieber, Blount County Master Gardener

Every spring the same question is asked about the not so pretty look of bulbs that have finished blooming. The answer doesn’t please many new gardeners. In a nutshell it is leave the ugly stuff alone.

The bulb is a modified root that stores starches and the beginnings of new plants and is usually produced as the flower fades. New side growths that will eventually make for more daughter bulbs are also produced at this time, too. The energy required to create all these plant parts comes from photosynthesis in the leaves and sometimes even the green stems.

If you cut off the floppy tulip leaves right after the plant flowers and fades it is more than likely that it will not have had enough time to store energy and begin to form the beginning cells needed for growth in the fall and blooming next year. Not all tulips do well in southern gardens so cutting back leaves too soon just makes it worse.

Smaller bulbs with grass like leaves like grape hyacinths are a little less effected than their broad leaf cousins like daffodils and tulips. Often their thin leaves and low growth make them easy to hide until it is safe to clean up and they tend to fade sooner.

A popular trend to braid, twist or tie up the floppy leaves (until they turned yellow and brown and could be pulled out) has proven wrong. While it does make the leaves look neater, it also weakens the plant by reducing the amount of photosynthesis each leaf can do and in the end weakened the bulbs. For most bulbs the best thing to do is endure the mess and disguise it by growing bulbs further back in the garden and letting other plants grow around them like a screen. I have bulbs mixed or hidden behind other plants like daylilies which quickly make a great cover.

Many plants like iris (bulb and rhizome plants) and lilies bloom at different times of the spring and early summer. As with the earlier bulbs leave the stalks and leaves until they begin turning yellow but trim away what is left of the bloom to keep up the plant strength and minimize the less nice looking features.

Spring flowering bulbs may need a light application of a basic balanced slow release fertilizer (eg 10-10-10) worked into the soil but allowed to touch the bulb to avoid burns. Many bulb fertilizers are also good in small doses but in these days of reduced shopping a basic flower fertilizer works! Research has shown modern Bone Meal is probably not needed. In spring, as soon as the shoots begin to show, repeat with the same balanced fertilizer using a light hand. If you also have other plants in the same bed receiving fertilizer throughout the growing season you may want to skip fertilizer applications altogether. Don't fertilize spring flowering bulbs after they have started flowering! Be aware not to kill your bulbs with kindness since too much fertilizer around bulbs can cause bulb rot and will decrease the number of blooming bulbs that return yearly. With bulbs less fertilizer is a good thing. Just think of all the abandoned old home sites that still have yearly daffodil and tulip blooms without a single application of fertilizer in decades.

Summer and fall flowering bulbs should be fertilized lightly every 4-6 weeks once their shoots emerge until the plants begin to flower. A simple balanced fertilizer is usually plenty. Follow directions that come with the fertilizer for best application strength.
The Blount County Public Library opened their Seed Library on March 1. Shortly after that the library was closed and on March 17 it went to curbside delivery only. At this point, seed checkouts were 598 packs by 138 patrons. On April 6 the library had to temporarily suspend services and it was determined that the seeds would be distributed in four Little Free Libraries, spaced out around Blount County. The locations are:

1) Blount County Library on the side of the building close to the greenway/bridge;
2) Alcoa Middle School close to the driveway that goes to the front of the building;
3) Louisville Mimosa Estates in the median on Oakhurst Drive;
4) Townsend City Building 133 Tiger Drive, next to the Fire Department

During the first week, 65 bags containing 5 packs of seeds, guide, seed saving protocol, and mission statement were distributed. Another 100 packs will be distributed over the next week.

Seeds are in high demand right now, as the general public becomes interested in growing their own vegetables. (See these articles: "Food Supply Anxiety Brings Back Victory Gardens"
"Vegetable Seeds Are The New Toilet Paper"
https://modernfarmer.com/2020/04/vegetable-seeds-are-the-new-toilet-paper/)
Oh! To the Love of My Garden Hoe

By Bruce Koopika, Blount County Master Gardener

The art of gardening with a hoe helps you to live the creative life.
The most important things a gardener can apply to the garden is footprints and the sweat of the hoe.
The hoe is an ancient and versatile tool which is over 5000 years old.
A life well spent; is spent coaxing plants from the soil with your hoe… and bringing forth life from the good earth. The promise of resurrection is in every green leaf sprouting forth in Spring time.

Your head, heart, hands, and feet using your hoe: aerating, agitating, tilling, mixing, raking, digging, cultivating, weeding, hilling, trenching, ditching, harvesting, loosening, chopping, composting, sifting, searching, etc… Also a preferred tool for archeologists, forensics or mixing concrete.

Your skill with the hoe improves with use and as muscle memory becomes established the hoe becomes an extension of your thumbs and index fingers.
Your creative work in your garden becomes a feast for the eyes and body.
A work of love made visible!

Trees

I think that I shall never see a poem as lovely as a tree.
A tree whose hungry mouth is prest against the sweet earth’s flowing breast:
A tree that looks at God all day, and lifts her leafy arms to pray;
A tree that may in Summer wear a nest of robins in her hair;
Upon whose bosom snow has lain; who intimately lives with rain.
Poems are made by fools like me, but only God can make a tree.

Poem by Joyce Kilmer 1886-1918 Poet & Soldier

In WWI with the New York National Guard’s, “The Fighting 69th”, he was killed in action by artillery fire. The Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest is located in the Nantahala National Forest near Robbinsville, NC and was dedicated in Kilmer’s memory on July 10, 1936. The Fighting 69th is now working in New York to fight the Corona virus.

Videos

Dr. Suzanne Simard, How Trees Talk to Each Other

Dr. Doug Tallamy, The Web of Life
Spring Pictures from Diane Cockerham

Dallas Aboretum
Blount County Master Gardeners (BCMG) is a volunteer service organization with the goal of training volunteers who can provide the public with research based information on a variety of horticultural topics. It is built upon solid visions, values, and community support.

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bcmggazette@gmail.com

We’re on the Web at http://bcmgtn.org and Facebook!

April

4/24 National Arbor Day
4/28 National Blueberry Pie Day
4/30 National Adopt a Shelter Pet Day

May

5/10 Mother’s Day
5/16 National Love a Tree Day
5/26 Monthly Master Gardener Meeting at the Blount County Library (Tentative)
5/30 National Water a Flower Day

June

6/4-6 Blount County Public Library Used Book Sale (Tentative)
6/13 National Weed Your Garden Day
6/20 First Day of Summer
6/21 Father’s Day
6/23 Monthly Master Gardener Meeting at the Blount County Library (Tentative)