

April 2024

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Root Concerns

Notes from the underground

When The Desert Blooms



Desert Primrose

California's largest state park is located on the eastern side of the Peninsular Ranges, which block most storms coming in off the Pacific. Only 2 hours east of San Diego's beaches, you'll find Anza-Borrego Desert State Park.

The 600,000 acres of desert terrain includes dramatic badlands, cool palm oases, twisting slot canyons, and cactus-studded slopes, as well as fields of desert wildflowers in the Spring.

The name derives from Spanish explorer Juan Bautista de Anza, who crossed the desert in 1774, and the Spanish word for sheep, "borrego", referring to the region's native bighorn sheep.



Scorpionweed

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Sand Primrose

Cornell Cooperative Extension
Rensselaer County



While visiting our son and grandsons in San Diego in February, I requested spending my birthday (February 27th) exploring wildflower fields in the desert.

A quick check of the Anza-Borrego Wildflowers Facebook group verified that a bloom was taking place.

I hope you'll enjoy the beauty we found in the desert, so different from our lush Northeast gardens, and follow the evolving bloom on their Facebook group.



California Desert Cactus



Desert Lily



Desert Sunflower



Desert Palms

The Pros and Cons of MULCH

Mulch has been called the gardener's friend—and for good reason. In winter, mulch protects bare soil, prevents erosion, and protects plants. In spring, mulch locks in moisture, suppresses weeds, and feeds the soil.

At its simplest, mulch is any material that covers the soil's surface. In nature, mulch is simply fallen leaves and plant debris. In the garden, mulch can also include compost, wood chips or rotted manure mixed with ground wood. Mulching feeds our soil's living microorganisms with nutrients and the waste from these tiny microbes creates healthier soil structure for plants, limiting compaction.

The benefits of mulching include but not limited to:

Reduces weed growth by keeping light from reaching the soil surface.

Reduces water loss from the soil surface, which helps maintain soil moisture.

Moderates soil temperatures, keeping it warmer on cold nights and cooler on hot days.

Protects bare soil, reducing erosion and soil compaction.

Protects plants from the harsh conditions of winter freezes, thaws, and winds.

Makes gardens “spiffed up” and attractive, giving a uniform appearance and rhythm to garden design.

Although using mulch has many benefits, in some cases, its use can be detrimental to the garden. Too much mulch (a layer more than 3 inches deep) can bury and suffocate plants; water and oxygen can't reach the roots. A layer of 2 to 3 inches of mulch is ample. Do not over mulch.

Mulch can contribute to rotting bark if piled up around the trunks of trees and shrubs. Keep mulch 3 to 6 inches away from the base of woody plants. Keeping mulch away from the trunk discourages wood-boring insects, gnawing rodents, and decay. Sprinkle wood ashes or diatomaceous earth around the base of precious plants to keep the slugs and snails at bay.

Mulch can bake your plants with excess heat in midsummer if not done properly. With most organic mulches, a layer of 2 to 3 inches is plenty. The finer the material, the thinner the layer needed.



<https://www.aces.edu/blog/topics/landscaping/mulches-for-the-home-landscape/>

Text by Rachel Patterson, Becker's Farm, East Greenbush, NY

All About *Miscanthus* Grass

Miscanthus grasses are natives of Southeast Asia. They are a common sight throughout Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. Other species are native to southern Africa. Many varieties are found in gardens across the United States. The Demonstration Garden of the Rensselaer County Master Gardeners had an extensive display of grasses including *Miscanthus* in the centrally located Grass Garden. The Grass Garden was removed in autumn of 2023. It had matured over the years to a condition where grasses had surreptitiously spread amongst each other. In addition, the large specimens like *Miscanthus* had grown to the point where major division was necessary. Lastly, the invasive nature of *Miscanthus* was a factor in the decision to remove it. The magnitude of the task led to the decision to remove the garden and start anew. The size of the root systems required the use of an excavator to clear the site. Plans are underway to design a replacement garden for the site.



The original ornamental grass garden at the Demonstration Garden

Miscanthus is being studied extensively for use as a source of biomass fuel. Research is being done at the University of Illinois, Cornell University and North Carolina State University. Europe and England have also conducted research. The primary object of the research is *Miscanthus* \times *giganteus*, a natural hybrid of *Miscanthus sinensis* and *Miscanthus sacchariflorus*. This seems to be the best biomass fuel or fiber source. It has even been crossed with sugar cane, a relative.



Miscanthus in winter

Miscanthus giganteus produces high yields at cool temperatures, thrives on marginal, wet soils and requires little fertilization. It could become more profitable than corn and soy in the Midwest for fuel production such as ethanol.

It is a challenge to cut back miscanthus at season end. Due to its size, it is difficult to fit in a compost bin, and it decomposes slowly. I prefer to leave it for winter interest to see it waving in the winter breezes. It can be flattened by heavy snow but then pops back up with the next thaw.



Miscanthus sinensis, on the other hand, is considered a problem plant in the home garden throughout the eastern and mid-Atlantic United States. It can spread by seed and according to a variety of research studies, should only be planted in managed landscapes where it can be watched for self-seeding.

Miscanthus sinensis is also known as Japanese silvergrass, Chinese silvergrass, miscanthus and pampas grass. It is susuki in Japan. Over 50 ornamental forms are sold in the nursery trade including those with green

and yellow foliage and various flower colors. They have been popular landscape plants for over 100 years.

Ornamental plantings should be watched for self-seeding into nearby gardens, woodlands or natural areas. October is a good time to look for self-seeded plants.

I've had two plantings for several years that came from plant divisions at Berkshire Botanical Garden. The specific variety is unknown. There is no evidence of seed propagation on this property. There are two groups of three plantings in wet soil along a small stream. I cannot imagine dividing or moving these plants from that soil. A small John Deere bulldozer had to be lifted out of that location at one time by a neighbor's backhoe as stream water rose over the dozer tracks.

Many states are watching *Miscanthus sinensis* because it propagates by seed. *Miscanthus* \times *giganteus* is a sterile hybrid that can only be propagated vegetatively by rhizomes and is not considered an invasive risk. *Miscanthus sinensis* is considered highly ecologically important as a potential invasive and is a regulated plant in New York State. It can be sold but must bear a warning in 14-point font, "Invasive Species – Harmful to the Environment."



EVERYTHING'S GOOD WITH EPIMEDIUMS

Some plants that are beloved must also be excused, like a favorite uncle who acts out at every wedding. It goes something like, “It has great flowers, but boy it gets plenty ugly with powdery mildew by September!” Other plants seem to have no faults, only assets, and that’s how I feel about epimediums. If you’ve never heard of them, you aren’t alone, because epimediums aren’t particularly flashy or common, like your cousin Hyacinth after a few beers. They are, instead, very nice to get to know.

Called by such common names as barrenworts, bishop’s caps and fairywings, epimediums are ground huggers, with most growing just several inches tall, although some range over two feet.

Most flower in May and have a bloom composed of four inner sepals, a cup, and four spurs, somewhat like a columbine. Colors range from white and yellow through purple, orange, and red. Their foliage can be showy, especially in spring, when some have leaves with red edges, a purplish blush, or completely vivid hue. Some have good fall color, too. They’ll tolerate partial sun, but once established will grow in dry shade, the kind of environment that is anathema to many plants and feature which is one of their foremost virtues. In my garden, any plant even willing to give it a try in the parched, nutrient depleted zone beneath the oak or the maple gets a gold star.



Above: *Epimedium* ‘Pink Champagne.’ Below: *Epimedium* \times *youngianum*. All photos courtesy of Garden Visions Epimediums/Karen Perkins



Epimediums come in two persuasions: spreaders and clumpers. The spreaders move slowly by underground rhizomes and don’t become invasive, so you’ll never see a mug shot of one hanging in the post office. If anything, you might want them to move a bit faster to spread the joy. They make perfect companions for hostas and other shade lovers. If your new epimedium decides your garden is too its liking, it will most likely remain for years, like a trusty peony or daylily and longer than the family dog or a Subaru.

TEXT BY DAVID CHINERY



Epimedium 'Flame Thrower'

My epimediums are of the readily-available sorts, such as *Epimedium x rubrum*, with crimson-red sepals and pale yellow petals, and *Epimedium pinnatum*, with bright yellow flowers. If you get hooked on epimediums – and I can feel myself heading down this garden path – you’ll want more. Recently I met nursery owner Karen Perkins, whose enterprise, Garden Vision Epimediums in Phillipston, Massachusetts, offers everything one could hope for and more. Primarily a mail-order business, Karen sells at a few plant sales and during two open-nursery days in the spring.

Garden Vision offers the choice of the choicest, many being descendants of plants collected by plant explorer Darrell Probst in China, Japan and Korea that are absolute horticultural gems. I’d make room for *Epimedium* 'Flame Thrower,' with cherry red and creamy yellow blooms, 'Grape Fizz,' with grape-purple buds opening to blue-lavender flowers or 'Milk Chocolate,' with brown-purple leaves in spring and white flowers, and day. I’m intrigued by 'Mottled Madness,' with burgundy and green camouflage large leaves and the showy, red-bloomer 'Mars' in rosy-red. Epimediums make a welcome addition to any garden family.



Epimedium 'Milk Chocolate'

That dragonfly hovering above the pines
has ancestors reaching back over
300 million years.
300,000,000!

And, in that time, they’ve changed very little.

Their flying skills—unequaled

Their field of vision—almost 360 degrees—

Oh, once, when the atmosphere was oxygen
rich,

their wings span reached two feet long—

But now? Two inches will do.

But that’s enough - today’s dragonfly makes
do.

Endurance



Rensselaer County Master Gardener
Don Maurer

Asparagu\$: The Dream Investment

For most folks, investing these days is a sad joke - interest rates below 1% or a roller coaster stock market. If you're discouraged, take heart. An investment in asparagus futures will provide a substantial return on your investment and deliver a delicious and nutritious vegetable just at the time of the year when your body cries out for some truly fresh vegetables.

If you've eaten only asparagus from a supermarket or even a farmers market, then you really haven't tasted asparagus. Of course store bought asparagus drenched with Hollandaise sauce is very tasty, but then again so is crabgrass slathered with Hollandaise sauce. And the crabgrass is free. Asparagus from the market runs \$4 a pound, and once you've cut off the inedible portion of the stalk, you're really looking at \$6 a pound for a very poor substitute for the real stuff.



If I've managed to convince you that asparagus should be part of your garden, read on.

Asparagus is a perennial. It'll be two years from the time of initial planting of roots (3 years if you're foolish enough to start with seed) before you can reap a modest harvest, and a couple of more years until the plants are really in their prime. The good news is that a well tended bed of asparagus will last 15 or more years. For an expenditure of \$25 you'll harvest hundreds of dollars worth of tasty and nutritious asparagus spears, delighting your family and inspiring awe and admiration in your neighbors. Let's see - \$25 invested at 1% for ten years brings in \$2.71 in interest -enough to buy half a pound of tasteless spears at the store. Even Warren Buffet would agree that an asparagus bed wins hands down over your local bank.

Getting Started

Asparagus needs full sun and its ferns grow four to five feet tall by summer's end, so select a sunny spot in your garden where the asparagus won't shade sun-loving plants. Most folks select a spot on the north side of their garden.

Preparing the asparagus bed need not be a tremendous chore. I recommend a raised bed, but then again I'm a fervent believer in raised beds for all vegetables. Especially consider a raised bed if your soil is very clay-like. Add compost and dig into the existing soil. This work is best done in the fall, prior to the spring planting of the asparagus. Asparagus grows best in a soil with a pH of 7, so again, take time the previous fall to get the growing conditions optimized.

Asparagus plants need plenty of room. Keep them 18" apart for best long term results. Resist the temptation to crowd them because you don't want crowns you ordered to "go to waste". Give the extras to a neighbor, or even better, plant a second asparagus bed.

I recommend the "Jersey" varieties of asparagus. They're very heavy producers with good disease resistance. For about \$40 you get 25 roots, more than enough for the average bear.

For each plant dig a hole about 12" by 12" and 6" deep. In the center of the hole pour some soil to create a mini volcano about 4" high. Place the asparagus crown on top of the volcano with the roots running evenly down all sides. Then cover with soil so that just the tip of the crown is exposed. Keep watered and slowly fill in the hole as the asparagus begins to grow.

Varieties

There are several varieties of asparagus to choose from. I suggest that you gravitate toward the cultivars listed below. The older varieties such as Mary Washington are simply not as prolific and offer no advantages in terms of taste or disease resistance.

- *Jersey Supreme' (F1) - all male*
- *'Purple Passion' (F1) - nearly all male*
- *Jersey Knight' (F1) - all male available as seed*
- *'Millenium' is a new Canadian variety which has performed well for some growers*

Harvest

The next spring resist the temptation to take more than 2-3 stalks per plant. The following year you can harvest a substantial number of stalks from each plant. Take only the ones that are 1/4" or more in diameter.

There are two primary ways to harvest the spears. The first involves cutting the spears off at or below the ground line. An alternate is to bend the spear over until it breaks. It will do so at the dividing line between the tender edible portion of the spear and the inedible part. In both cases the spear should be 6" to 8" tall when harvested. Harvest normally starts in early April in the Northeast and goes well into May. When the spears start to come up with a 'open' tip you'll know it's time to cease harvesting.

The normal asparagus harvest runs for about 8 weeks. If you want to extend it, try one of these two techniques:

1. Pull back the heavy layer of mulch in early spring on only half your asparagus. When the spears begin to appear, pull back the mulch in the second half. Production in the second half will be delayed until the soil warms up.
2. Harvest half the asparagus in spring. Let the other half grow unimpeded. Then in late July, cut the plants in the second half down to the ground and wait for the plants to grow new spears which you can then harvest. If you employ this technique, then do it consistently. If you switch the harvest cycle for a group of plants you're very likely to weaken them.

Maintenance

Keep your asparagus bed well weeded, well mulched and give it an occasional deep watering. Remember that the plants need to store up lots of energy for next spring's big push. In the late fall when the foliage has turned nearly all brown, trim the plants to about two inches above ground level. An electric hedge trimmer will make this chore go quickly. Mulch the beds lightly at first, but once the hard frosts appear, add a four to six inch layer of straw or your favorite mulch.

Asparagus has only one pest that is likely to torment you. The asparagus beetle (common and striped) can prove quite persistent. Hand picking of both the beetles and their larvae can be an effective strategy. The beetle will scurry to the other side of the stalk when you approach, and will sometimes drop to the ground when you go to seize the little buggers. Be quick and merciless. Mid afternoon is the best time to play pick-a-beetle. Don't overlook their gray larvae since they do the real chomping. It's also possible to spray for the beetles, but I won't go there. My experience is that even if you leave the beetles to their devices, the damage to plants is not all that devastating and by late June the infestation peters out. For more on asparagus beetle, see:

<http://entomology.cornell.edu/cals/entomology/extension/idl/upload/Asparagus-Beetles.pdf>

Living the Dream

You may not be featured in the Wall Street Journal, but your asparagus bed should provide you with many happy returns for many a year. Warren Buffet is a big believer that investments should be made with the long term in mind. Maybe he just hasn't yet discovered asparagus.

Green Shots: The Gardening World in Pictures



Northern Flicker returns every Spring to eat ants on the brick patio.

Woodchuck out from under the shed looking for a snack.



American Bluebird looking for nesting opportunity. A flock of five has been here all winter.



Chipmunks come out from tunnel in the lawn that originates in hollow apple tree.

Thanks to Rensselaer County Gardener Richard Demick for the text and photos.



What to do in APRIL!



* Clear dead leaves, plants and other debris out of your flower or vegetable beds. Dig well-rotted manure or garden compost into your beds to prepare them for the growing season.

* Feed trees, shrubs, hedges, raspberry canes and fruit bushes with an application of slow-release fertilizer “scratched in” around the base of the plants. After fertilizing, mulch with well-rotted manure or compost.

* Prune fruit trees or bushes as needed, with the exception of stone-fruit trees such as peaches, plums nectarines, etc.

* Start tomato seeds indoors if you haven’t already.

* Start cucumbers, gherkins, sweet pepper and other vegetable plants under cover, toward the end of the month.

* Sow cool-weather vegetables such as spinach and lettuce in the garden.

* Lift and divide such perennials as hosta, beebalm and asters as soon as the soil can be worked. This will improve their vigor and provide new plants for the garden.

* Apply crabgrass preventers about the time the forsythia is blooming. Overseed your lawn in September with perennial ryegrass so you won’t need lawn weed preventer in the future.

* Plant new strawberry beds after enriching the soil with plenty of manure. Fertilize rhubarb and asparagus.



* Plant potato sets around the end of the month.

* Cut ornamental grasses to the ground.

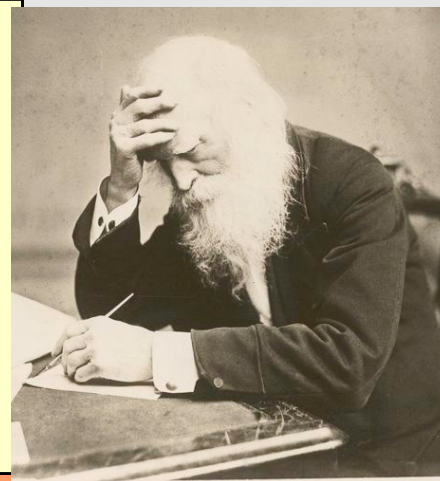
* Turn your compost pile and sharpen your tools.

* Celebrate Arbor Day on April 25th. Plant a tree if the spirit moves you!



***“Though many a flower in the wood is waking,
The daffodil is our doorside queen;
She pushes upward the sword already,
To spot with sunshine the early green.”***

William Cullen Bryant (Poet, journalist, editor, 1794-1878)



<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org>

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In Schenectady County: Call (518) 372-1622 weekdays from 9:00 AM to Noon, follow the prompt to speak to a Master Gardener and press #1. You can also email your questions by visiting their website at <http://counties.cce.cornell.edu/schenectady/>

In Rensselaer County: Call (518) 272-4210 Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9:00 AM to Noon and ask to speak to a Master Gardener. You can also email your questions to Dhc3@cornell.edu

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