

A Bit of Dirt



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The Newsletter of the Gwinnett Master Gardeners



A Bit of Dirt is published quarterly. The Editor is Gail Martin. If you have news, or an article you would like to have published, please call me at 770-381-2513 or email me at GailTMartin@compuserve.com



Coming Events

I love the smells of Christmas that abound this time of year: the smell of cookies baking as mulled cider scents the air; the smell of turkey roasting and of chestnuts on the fire, the sound of churchbells tolling as snowflakes frost the spire.

I love the smells of Christmas—the fragrance of the tree, the scent of fir and pinecones bringing memories back to me: of Christmas past and present, of a childhood long since passed, of gifts received and given and of Christmas joys amassed.

Rebecca McPheters

Southern Gardening Symposium

Pine Mountain, GA.
January 21st thru the 23rd
Callaway Gardens
Fee: \$175 per person
Contact: Jan Mathis, Callaway Gdns
education@callawaygardens.com

Southeastern Flower Show

February 23rd thru the 27th
Atlanta Expo Center
3650 Jonesboro Rd., SE
Atlanta
Admission: \$15.00
email: doug@flowershow.org
Web URL:
http://www.flowershow.org

Southern Living Gardening School

March 24th,
Callaway Gardens

A Message from our President

The mums are blooming, my Mexican sage is vibrant in color and a friend just gave me some stems of purple beauty berry. It must be fall, even though most afternoons are sunny and warm.

This will be my last article as your President. The past two years have been great fun. I have enjoyed getting to know most of you a little better. Being President is made so much easier by having great officers working with you. I have been very fortunate for my two years to have had great officers who do above and beyond the call of duty.

I look forward to a continued involvement in the Gwinnett Master Gardeners. This is a great group of garden loving people that I am proud to be a part of.

Fondly,

Shelia

There are many in this old world of ours who hold that things break about even for all of us. I have observed for example that we all get about the same amount of ice. The rich get it in the summertime and the poor get it in the winter.

Bat Masterson

Notes from the Extension Office

Large vs. Small Trees: Transplanting Shock

When you are advising someone about tree selection many topics must be addressed. That is, things like species, ultimate size, growth rate, flowers, fall color, etc. Somewhere along the line cost may enter the conversation. But what size tree to start with????

Based on research by plant physiologists, the desire for instant shade may be only a short term satisfaction, with the long term growth between a 4 inch caliper transplanted tree and a 10 inch caliper tree similar. The basis for this surprising fact lies in root loss during harvesting and root growth patterns in subsequent years after planting. Large shade trees transplanted from one site to another may lose as much as 98% of its root system, including the vast majority of feeder roots. Root regeneration takes place just behind the root stubs and the growth rate of the regenerated roots on an annual basis is similar for both size trees, about 18 inches per year.

Because tops and roots must be in balance for optimum growth, it takes years for the original balance to re-occur. For the 4 inch tree, this balance is regained in about 5 years; for the 10 inch tree, 13 years.

At the 5 year period the 4 inch tree can resume optimum growth, the 10 inch tree is still held back by root loss. At the 13 year period, both trees have very similar root system diameters.

Although it is certainly true that the owner of the larger tree enjoyed "quicker" shade, it is also true it was well paid for. As an example, a 4

inch caliper Bradford Pear (yes, they are over-planted) costs about \$240 and a 10 inch about \$1,400. You decide which is best in your situation.

Steve Brady

Timely Topics

Cooperative Extension Service, UGA

Trim hollies and other evergreens such as magnolia, aucuba, boxwood and pyracantha to furnish material for holiday decorations.

Lusterleaf holly, *Ilex latifolia*, becomes a beautiful, pyramidal, specimen tree. It has thick, glossy, evergreen leaves and small clusters of deep red fruits. Plants exhibit drought tolerance and can be grown in the Piedmont.

Dried, crushed shells from shrimp, crabs and lobsters can be sprinkled on the soil to enrich it with calcium. A fertilizer made from crab shell wastes is already on the market.

If you are spreading ashes from your woodburning stove in your garden, be aware that over time you are raising the pH of your soil. Have your soil tested before applying any more wood ashes.

Seeds stored under warm, moist conditions deteriorate rapidly. Unless you are sure your seeds were stored under cool, dry conditions, it is safer to buy new packets each season.

Don't wait until late in the winter to order seed. Many varieties sell out early.

Save plastic mesh bags in which oranges usually come; they make

Come Little Leaves

"Come little leaves" said the wind one day,

"Come over the meadows with me and play:

Put on your dresses of red and gold;
Summer is gone, and the days grow cold."

Soon as the leaves heard the wind's loud call,

Down they came fluttering, one and all;

Over the brown fields they danced and flew,

Singing the glad little songs they knew.

Dancing and whirling, the little leaves went;

Winter had called them, and they were content.

Soon fast asleep in their earthy beds
The snow laid a coverlet over their heads.

George Cooper

With thanks to Dolores Wyland and her grandmother

ideal storage bags for air drying gourds, bulbs and herbs.

Remove dead, diseased and storm-damaged branches from your shade trees. If left on the tree, these weakened limbs can cause damage by falling on buildings or passers-by.

Don't delay planting a live Christmas tree, especially if it has already been in the house three days or more.

While going about your business, keep an eye out for plants with interesting winter form or color. Consider planting similar varieties in your yard so you can enjoy them at home next year.

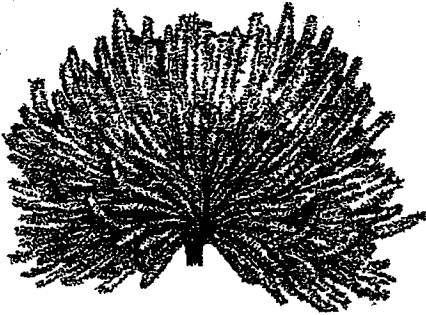
Water shrubs in your landscape throughout the winter if the soil is dry. Evergreen plants transpire water from their leaves whenever temp is 40F +.

(Continued on Page 8)

Heaths for Winter Flowers

Easy evergreen shrublets that bloom in the depths of winter, that require little care and blend in beautifully with broad-leaved evergreens in your landscape are the heaths, *Erica* species. Foliage comes in shades and hues from gray to dark green, and the flowers unfurl in shades of pink and white.

The heaths, first cousin to the heathers, come from Europe and South Africa. The heathers from the romantic Scottish highlands do not grow well in our Southern heat, but the heaths do quite well here. They have naturalized in acid soils in mild regions producing sweeps of color during peak bloom. Heaths are fairly drought tolerant, an added incentive to adding them to our homes.



The very fact that heaths bloom in January and February for us should be enough reason to add them to our gardens. They are perfectly suited to rock gardens as well as a use as front row foundation plants, or placed anywhere their winter bloom would be appreciated.

Heaths grow about 12 inches tall, and 24 or more inches in spread. They produce whorls of needlelike mid- to dark green leaves. The flowers are tubular to bell-shaped. They will tolerate some shade, but do need sun.

There are a number of species in the group. *Erica carnea* is fully hardy in

zone 7. A few of the better cultivars are 'Altadena', with gold foliage and pink flowers; 'December Red' with deep rose-pink flowers and a spreading habit; 'Springwood White' is the most vigorous white cultivar and makes an excellent ground cover, bearing large white flowers; and 'Vivellii', with dark bronze-green foliage and deep purple flowers.

Erica x darleyensis grows a little taller, usually topping out at about 18 inches, with a spread of 3 ft. The *darleyensis* hybrids have the same whorled green needlelike leaves and cream, pink, or red young growth in late spring. The flowers are bell shaped, in white, pink or purple, and are borne in racemes from early winter to late spring. These hybrids tolerate lime better than *Erica carnea* hybrids.

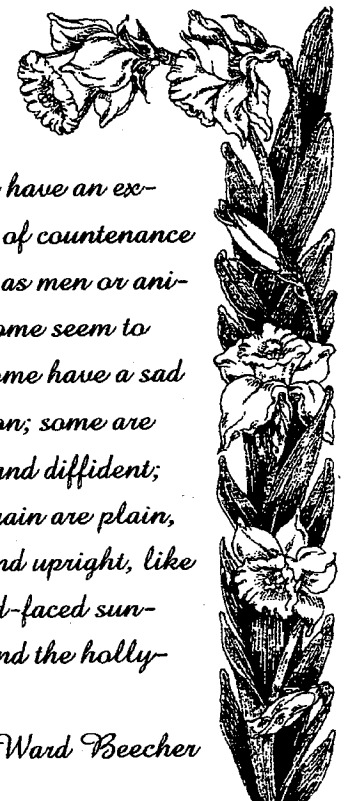
'Arthur Johnson' has young foliage with cream and pink tips in spring and long racemes of mauve-pink flowers from mid-winter to spring; 'George Rendall' carries deep pink flowers; 'Ghost Hills' has cream-tipped foliage in spring and a profusion of pink flowers; 'White Glow' has white flowers and is a little shorter at 12 inches.

Growing heaths is about as easy as any plant can be. All they ask for is acid soil, excellent drainage and at least a half day of sun. If your soil is heavy clay, add plenty of compost and sand. If planting on a flat area, try raised beds, or better yet try to plant on a slope for better drainage. They should be mulched with leaf mold, composted bark, or pine straw. Feed annually with a granular acid fertilizer for evergreens in the spring. Do not apply liquid acid fertilizers.

Prune plants in spring, when flowers

have faded. Use hand pruners for small plantings, and cut back any wood that may have suffered winter damage. Look underneath the plant, and prune out the dead older branches. Each place that you cut will promote a flush of new growth. If your plant has grown taller than you really wanted, don't be afraid to cut plants back hard. If you wait until mid summer or fall to prune, you will cut off all of next year's blossoms. In spring, they haven't formed yet.

Two excellent nurseries specializing in heaths and heathers can be reached on the World Wide Web at www.heathsandheathers.com and www.rockspray.com. Both nurseries have online catalogs, with pictures of their many *Erica* cultivars. If you do not have a computer to use, you may go to any library, sign on to the internet, and look at the catalogs.



Flowers have an expression of countenance as much as men or animals. Some seem to smile; some have a sad expression; some are pensive and diffident; others again are plain, honest and upright, like the broad-faced sunflower and the hollyhock.

Henry Ward Beecher

Great Backyard Birdcount 2006

Once again, Cornell University and the National Audubon Society are asking help from people of all ages to count birds this winter. By participating in the bird count February 18-21, bird watchers will help scientists document the status and health of our winter bird populations at the millennium.

Taking part is very easy. Cornell and the Audubon Society ask everyone simply to count the birds they see at their backyard bird feeders, local parks, and other areas. Participants then enter their reports online at BirdSource (www.birdsource.org). This website was developed for this purpose by the Cornell Lab and Audubon. Remember, if you do not have a computer with internet access, you may enter your sightings at any Gwinnett Library.

This year, BirdSource especially asks for sightings of Bald Eagles, in light of the removal of these birds from the list of Endangered and Threatened species.



Frank Gill, Senior Vice President for Science at National Audubon, said "By helping us count birds, people from subtropical Florida to Arctic Canada and Alaska will help us to understand better the effects of changing weather and landscape on our birds' health and movement patterns. Last year, some 42,000 re-

ports — triple the number of reports from the previous year — tallied more than three million birds of 350 species.

Each year, the count is vital to establish an accurate picture of our bird population. The very scope of this count helps to ensure that our common birds remain common and tells when to take protective measures of species in decline.

Both Cornell and Audubon stress that amateurs contribute essential information to this bird census. Said Audubon's Gill, "With the cutting-edge Internet technology of BirdSource, the real time, continent-wide compilation of citizen-science reports fulfills that need."

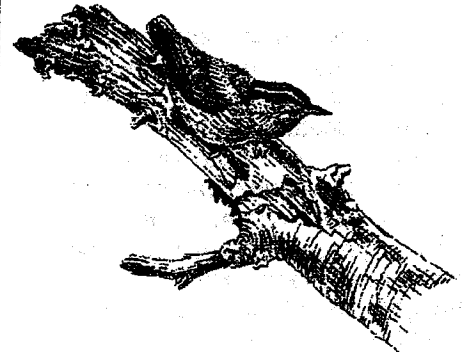
In order for the GBBC to be a success, the 60-million North Americans who feed or watch birds are invited to take part in this count. They need people to help by spending as little as 15 minutes - on any or all days of the count - recording the numbers and kinds of birds they see during their morning coffee break, while driving to work, taking a walk, or purposefully birdwatching.

Participants tally the highest number of each species seen at one time (so as not to count the same birds more than once). They then go to BirdSource to report their sightings by clicking on their state. Within hours, they will see how their reports combine with others across the continent, creating a snapshot of North American birds. The count also helps BirdSource assess the value of backyard habitats, and to evaluate the species of birds dependent upon them.

It is estimated that 75% of North American households now own personal computers. Those without In-

ternet access can enter their results at libraries.

Cornell and Audubon need every US zip code and Canadian Postal Code to be represented this year. The GBBC is a perfect family or youth group project.



Classrooms all across the US logged on and reported their sightings last year. The site also offers several features for school-aged children, which suggests reference books, field guides, and novels for educators and students. Also included in the website are a geography lesson, colorful bird images, and sound bites of bird vocalizations.

To participate, go to BirdSource (www.birdsource.org), and click on Great Backyard Bird Count. Directions are provided at the site. All participation is free, and no registration is necessary.

Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders.

Henry David Thoreau

Favorite Houseplants

Bromeliads

Bromeliads are durable, colorful and exotic, and something to think about if you're tired of growing the same old house plants.

Bromeliads come in a huge assortment of sizes and colors, from minis of 1 inch to giants of 35 feet. The tiny ones are members of the Tillandsia genus, and are often found tucked into seashells, or refrigerator magnets.



Other Bromeliads include Spanish Moss, Earth Stars, and Queen's Tears. Some Bromeliads are terrestrial and grow in soil, but many are epiphytic and grow perched on trees, although they all adapt well to being pot grown.

Light requirements vary, but most can be grown successfully in any exposure as long as they are protected from the mid-day sun. The root ball should be thoroughly saturated when watering, then allowed to become almost dry. The kinds that form a vase in the middle of the leaves should have their centers filled with water at all times.

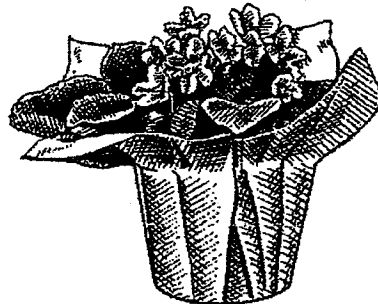
In the summer they may be placed outside under trees to benefit from rain and fresh air.

Not many plants can compete with Bromeliads for ease of culture and exotic appeal.

African Violets

African violets are not really as difficult as many think. While they are somewhat temperamental, and sulk if not happy, they don't require more than proper siting and watering.

The plants flower best in bright light, but hate extreme heat and humidity. East or west windows, or fluorescent lights provide enough light, and temps should ideally range between 62 to 72 F.



These plants are extremely sensitive to dryness, so soil moisture should be checked daily. Water when the soil feels dry, but before it gets hard. Water should be lukewarm, or room temperature as cold water causes white spots on the foliage. You can water from either the top or bottom, but try to avoid wetting the leaves. Using the wick method of watering is helpful with these plants.

African violets need a regular supply of nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, iron, manganese and zinc. It is best to use a fertilizer formulated for African violets, and should be applied every two to four weeks according to the manufacturer's direction.

There are so many lovely colors, shapes and varied leaf colors in African violets that no one should shy away from them thinking they are too difficult.

Christmas Cactus

Bright flowers of pink, white, red or violet on long, flattened stems cheer us all during the winter months. These plants are easy to take care of, and can grow into large plants providing masses of blooms.

Water and fertilize regularly in the spring and summer, and in the fall keep the plant cooler and provide 12 hours of darkness from October 1 until flowering, while watering only moderately.

Christmas cactus needs full sun in a south window. Keep the soil evenly moist but not saturated. Normal household temperatures are fine for these plants.

If flowering is poor, move to a brighter location.

Jade Plant

Succulent, dark green leaves sometimes edged with red are thumb shaped and attach directly to the stem.

Jade plants need full sun, as in a south facing window. Water thoroughly, but let soil dry to the touch to a soil depth of 1" before watering again.

They like it cool, so don't place them near a heat duct in the winter. They prefer temperatures from 45 to 60 F, difficult but not impossible in our centrally heated homes.

Select sturdy, shapely, healthy plants free from insect and disease damage. New leaf growth is desirable. You should avoid those with yellow or brown leaf margins, or wilted or water soaked leaves.

These are easy plants for beginners, and tolerate a wide range of conditions. Older plants may flower in the winter, and cuttings may be used in desert dish gardens.

Adventures in Oz

When I stepped off the plane in Australia, I knew I wasn't in Kansas anymore! The Aussies call their island continent Oz, and I can understand why. It is a beautiful country, full of incredible wildflowers and amazing animals.

As we drove through Melbourne from the airport on the way to my son's home, I was surprised to see the streets lined with sycamore trees, and maples, and sweet gums. Seems they make better street trees than the native eucalypts, and to the Australians they are the exotic ones.

Australia is a huge country, bigger than our 48 contiguous states. We spent all our time in the state of Victoria, so all we were able to see was an area approximately like South Georgia and the Florida panhandle. Although we wanted to visit the Great Barrier Reef, it would be like going from Panama City to Nova Scotia. Not possible.

Melbourne, being on the southernmost tip of mainland Australia, has the most temperate climate in the country, although their winters are mild without freezing temperatures. As far as I could figure, looking at hardiness zones for Australia and the US, most of the state of Victoria is zone 8 or 9, with only a little bit up in the mountains approximating zone 7.

In the private gardens, and in the Royal Melbourne Botanic Garden, there is a great mix of native plants, sub-tropical plants from all over the world, and plants that many of us grow in our own gardens. Because summers are hot during the day, but cool down to the 50's at night, they are able to grow many things that we here in Georgia cannot, such as lupines and delphiniums. I visited one private garden where, in front of

a huge Graham Thomas rose were bright blue delphiniums, Salvia patens, and a bird of paradise in bloom. I could live there.

Healsville Sanctuary, in the hills outside Melbourne, is 75 acres of natural bush, and a wonderful place to see indigenous Australian animals in somewhat relaxed captivity. We saw kangaroos, who mostly lie on their sides in the shade, and koalas, and Tasmanian devils, and the platypus.



We had an up close and personal visit with a young wombat who had been rescued from his mother's pouch after she had been hit by a car. Amazing thing about wombats - since they are burrowing animals their pouch faces back so the babies don't get spattered with soil.

All the animals are herbivores, except for the Tasmanian devil, and the dingo, which was introduced by the Aborigines. And, except for the dingo, all are marsupials.

The birds are absolutely beautiful, all bright colored. Many parrots, cockatoos, parakeets and smaller birds like the azure blue Fairy wren. They are, however, the least musical - the dawn chorus consists of squawks, squeaks, croaks, and, in the case of the kookaburra, riotous laughter. (And yes, the kookaburra does sit in the old gum tree, as well as telephone wires.) It's amazing to see a flock of cockatoos flying overhead.

The Southern Cross is the main con-

stellation in the southern sky, but Orion was there as well. Only problem was, Orion was upside down and in the wrong part of the sky.

We drove to Philip Island, about 80 km southeast of Melbourne, to see the Fairy penguins. They come ashore at dusk, waddling up the beach and into the dunes to their burrows. They are quite small, 12 to 18 inches tall. There's a boardwalk where you can stand to see them wander through the dunes, and see the babies as they greet mom and dad, whistling for their food. It was quite cold on the beach, with wind whipping off the ocean straight from Antarctica, but when the penguins started coming ashore you forgot about how cold it was.

Werribee is a Victorian stately home, or what passes for one in Australia. Very Scottishly opulent. While the house and grounds were lovely, what really grabbed was the adjacent Victoria State Rose Garden. The main part of the garden is planted in the form of a Tudor rose with five petals, each petal containing many beds of various roses. Along the outside were pillars and swags, and along one wall were climbers and old species roses. Since it was springtime, it was the height of rose bloom. I am not generally a fan of Hybrid Tea roses, but if I could grow them like this I'd change my mind in a hurry. They towered over us, and the blooms were huge and perfect. And not a black spot did I see! The fragrance was incredible, and discernible far from the rose beds.

The Great Ocean Road is a highlight of any trip to southern Australia. It runs along the rugged south coast, literally chipped out of the cliffs that descend straight into the sea. It is incredibly impressive, with rocky

Oz, continued

coastlines which have been the site of many shipwrecks in the days of sailing ships. One famous spot on the coast is the Loch Ard Gorge, where the clipper ship Loch Ard foundered on the rocks, all on board lost except two people who were miraculously swept into a tiny opening in the cliffs and rescued.

Along this road also stand the 12 Apostles, giant eroded monoliths standing in the swirling seas just off the coast.

In the summer the southern right whale comes to these waters to give birth. Surfing championships are also held along the southern coast.

The land to the west of Melbourne, above the rugged coast, is very flat and home to thousands of sheep and cattle. More sheep than cattle, however. One section contains a number of apple orchards.

Melbourne itself is a very modern, cosmopolitan city. The Yarra river runs through the center of the city, and there are gardens and walks along both sides of the river. There is a wonderful public transport system of trains and trams, and you can get almost anywhere you want to go easily and cheaply.

Geographically, Melbourne sits at the very top of a huge bay, Port Phillip Bay, which is larger than the San Francisco Bay. On each side of the bay a long peninsula extends for miles, with only a small opening called The Rip leading to the ocean. Hence, the beaches along the bay are quiet and peaceful, and the water is gentle, making wonderful family beaches. Once you pass the headlands on each side, however, you meet massive swells and a surfer's paradise. The water is so cold all year that the surfers wear wet suits. The Australian coast, how-

ever, is about as dangerous as any you could find, with enormous rip tides that have swept many a swimmer out to sea. The most famous beaches are up near Sydney, hundreds of miles north of Melbourne.

One highlight in the city is the Queen Victoria Market, a vast covered market selling produce, meat and everything else one could think of - sheepskins, Aboriginal art, opals, tee shirts, kangaroo skin wallets and purses, and on and on. It is a great place to spend a day, not to mention spending a great deal of money!

The Royal Melbourne Botanic Garden is world famous for its diversity, and houses one of the finest collections of botanic species in the world. The garden contains a lovely lake full of black swans, natives of Australia. I was lucky enough to be taken back stage by one of the volunteers, and was introduced to many native plants, none of which will grow here.



To the east of the city are gently rounded hills and small beach towns. There is a ferry that crosses The Rip between the peninsulas that takes about 35 minutes to make the trip. On a sunny, bright day Port Phillip Bay is full of sailboats, scuba divers and picnics held on the beaches.

To the north and east of the city are the Dandenong ranges, a group of low mountains similar in size and

shape to the North Georgia mountains. Shape is where the similarity ends...these hills are full of gum forests, great tall eucalypts of one sort or another. The prettiest one, to my eyes, is *Eucalyptus citriodora*, whose leaves smell exactly like lemons, and whose bark is smooth and silver. A close second is the red gum, *Eucalyptus ficifolia*, covered at this time of year with red fluffy flowers. There are many fern gullies, little valleys with a stream down the middle, and tall tree ferns overhead.

In the Dandenongs we visited the National Rhododendron Garden, and although the main bloom had passed there were enough huge rhodies in bloom to create quite an impact. We also saw a group of bright red Waratahs, a gorgeous peony sized flower on an evergreen shrub.

One day we drove to Ballarat, one of the earliest gold mining towns. Gold was mined here from 1855 to 1860, when more gold fields were found in the interior. There is a reconstructed town known as Sovereign Hill where people dress in costume, the blacksmiths smiths, and gold is melted and poured into ingots. One can also pan for gold in the creek, but I suspect that the gold flakes found are planted there each day.

There is also a botanic garden in Ballarat which contains enormous sequoias, and the biggest *Ponderosa* pine I've ever seen. There is a glasshouse containing spectacular displays of seasonal flowers, as well.

At McDonald's they offer McOz, a hamburger with a slice of beet.

Australians are a friendly people, even though they call all Americans "Yanks". The trip to and from Australia was grueling, taking over 30 hours each way counting downtime at Los Angeles and Auckland, New Zealand. Ten airplane meals and six movies are too much for anyone to take! Jet lag is horrible, but I'd go again in a flash if I had the chance.

Timely Topics, continued

Consider using ferns in your home landscape. Maidenhair, sensitive, cinnamon and Christmas ferns are good choices. Ferns like an even supply of water throughout the growing season, so soil with a high humus content is ideal.

If bird feeding has been a favorite activity this winter, order trees and shrubs that provide cover and small fruits for your feathered friends. Consider such species as crabapple, hawthorn, holly, dogwood and pyracantha that can help lure hungry birds from cultivated fruits if planted on the opposite side of the yard.

Remove honeysuckle and other weedy vines from deciduous plants while the plants are still leafless. It's easier then to distinguish between the

weeds and desired plants.

There is still time to condition seeds that require stratification, such as many of the woody ornamentals. Plant them in your cold frame or put them in your freezer for the required amount of time.

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\* *Memory is the best of all* \*

\* *gardens. Therein, winter* \*

\* *and summer, the seeds of* \*

\* *their past lie dormant,* \*

\* *ready to spring into instant* \*

\* *bloom at any moment the* \*

\* *mind wishes to bring them* \*

\* *to life.* \*

Hal Boyle

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Branches of forsythia, pussy willow,

quince, spirea and dogwood can be forced for indoor bloom. Make long, slanted cuts when collecting the branches and place the stems in a vase of water. Change the water every four days. They should bloom in about three weeks.

Start slow-developing flowers such as alyssum, coleus, dusty miller, geranium, impatiens, marigold, petunia, phlox, portulaca, salvia, vinca and verbena in January or February.

Design a flower bed for a shady area. Plan to try impatiens, foxglove, begonia and browallia.

For a full-sun border, try mixing colors of perennial coneflower and Shasta daisy with annual glove amaranth. Place the taller coneflower toward the rear of the bed and Shasta daisy toward the front, with the globe amaranth mixed in between.

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Winter