

Henderson County Master Gardener

“The Inside Dirt”

Henderson County Master Gardener Spring Conference For 2006

Wayne Stafford

If you missed the Spring Conference for 2006 at the Cain Center in Athens on April 6th you missed a golden opportunity to enjoy good information, good plants, good food, and have a good time with Neil Sperry, well known radio gardening expert. This year nearly 300 people did take advantage of this annual Master Gardener event. This was indeed a record attendance.

Under the experienced and energetic leadership of Yvonne Perano all the elements of the conference came together. Seventeen vendors purchased booths; the plant sale was well supplied; and special plant materials were offered for sale through a silent auction.

Gutter Helmet agreed to sponsor Dr. Sperry's presentation titled, “Timely Tips and Busted Myths.” The conference was a technical and financial success.

As guests entered the auditorium there was a continuing slide show of East Texas wildflowers being displayed above the stage. People had the opportunity to visit with the seventeen vendors and to examine their wares. The plant sale went briskly as guests quickly bought up plant treasures available from local gardens and nurseries. There were many questions about the plants being offered and how to take care of them. Nina Ellis led a contingent of Master Gardeners who deftly handled these questions and dispensed valuable information especially about native Texas plants.

Sharon Barrett began to introduce the main speaker, Dr. Neil Sperry. The introduction was interrupted by “Violet

Green,” a puppet with a message. Yvonne Perano and Cecilia Bowles did a humorous skit featuring Violet Green and her witty explanation of vermicomposting. The program then went on to Neil Sperry's informative talk.

He cleverly varied his presentation with incisive commentary on choices in landscaping, mind challenging trivia on gardening, and dispelling the numerous myths which he has come to understand through years of gardening and radio commentary. Those who successfully answered the trivia questions received a subscription to Neil Sperry's “*Gardening Magazine*.” For more information on Neil Sperry's wisdom visit his web page at: <http://www.neilsperry.com/index.cfm> and go to the section Most Asked Questions at: <http://www.neilsperry.com/maqindex.cfm>.

The visit to Athens afforded Dr. Sperry a personal pleasure that he shared with all. He introduced Henry Pearson, an Athens' resident. They met years ago when Dr. Pearson was a graduate student under Neil Sperry's father at Texas A&M. Dr. Sperry fondly recalled his experiences on summer projects with Dr. Pearson when he, Neil, was just a high school student.

The program concluded with Rick Hirsch, Henderson County Extension Agent, auctioning the annual “4 x 4,” a promise of four master gardeners for 4 hours of gardening work. A brisk auction ended with a winning bid of \$250. Mr. Hirsch completed the evening by drawing for several prizes that had been donated by local business. The evening proved not only entertaining but provided funds for future Master Gardner projects.

A Potted Plant

Elmer Belssner

Medical authorities have touted the benefits of moderate alcohol consumption for reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease by elevating HDL and lowering LDL. Recent studies have even shown an increased in bone density in humans that consume beer. Now a new study has shown that alcohol may be beneficial to your plants.



Plants can have flower heads that are so large they weigh too much for their stem to support. The solution to prevent your plant from tipping over may be to get it a little tipsy. According to a horticultural researcher at Cornell University giving some plants diluted alcohol stunts the growth of their leaves and stems without damaging the blossoms. The practical application of this is to reduce the stem size of top-heavy plants such as daffodils so they don't tip over.

The idea of sharing alcohol with plants started last year when a New York Times reader wrote to the garden editor claiming that gin had prevented some paperwhite narcissi from growing too tall and floppy. The editor was asked if it was because of some "essential oil" in the gin. The newspaper forwarded the question to William Miller, director of Cornell's Flower Bulb Research Program.

Intrigued that diluted alcohol might act as a growth retardant Miller began conducting experiments with ethanol. Because hard liquor is easier for consumers to obtain, he began trying different kinds including dry gin, unflavored vodka, whiskey, white rum, gold tequila, mint schnapps, red and white wine, and pale lager beer on paperwhites. The beer and wine did not work, probably because of their sugar content. "While solutions greater than 10 percent alcohol were toxic, solutions between 4 and 6 percent alcohol stunted the paperwhites effectively." Miller said. Gardeners should wait until their daffodil shoots are several inches long, and then pour the diluted alcohol into the soil. (To get a 5% solution from 80-proof liquor, which is 40% alcohol, add one part liquor to seven parts water.)

Miller's study focused on paperwhite narcissus and other daffodils, but he's also had promising results with tulips. "I think with a little jiggering - no pun intended - the method will work for tulips, though I think it will not be as simple as with paperwhites," he said. "When the liquor is properly used, the paperwhites we tested were stunted by 30 to 50 per cent, but their flowers were as large, fragrant and long-lasting as usual."

Miller isn't sure why the alcohol stunts plant growth, but he has three theories that he is exploring: (1) Growth is caused when plant cells absorb water and expand. The alcohol could be injuring the plant roots, preventing the

roots from absorbing the water as efficiently. (2) When alcohol is mixed with the water the plant has to use more of its growing energy to extract the water from the solution. (3) The plant uses its growing energy to rid itself of the alcohol it has absorbed. Miller will be working this spring to see if a little booze works for amaryllis and such vegetables as tomatoes and peppers.

Any economic benefits, at least directly, are slight Miller said. Commercial horticulturists already have other growth-control methods for large-scale production, such as employing unusual temperature cycles. For home gardeners the gain is in terms of product quality. Imagine, Miller joked; someday you may be able to grow your own Bloody Mary. Miller reported his findings in the April 2006 issue of HortTechnology, a peer-reviewed journal of horticulture.

"I've heard of using alcohol for lots of things ... but never for dwarfing plants," said Charlie Nardoizzi, a senior horticulturist with the National Gardening Association, a Vermont-based organization that promotes plant-based education. "It sounded weird when I first heard about it, but our members say it works. I'm going to try it next year, just for curiosity," Nardoizzi added.

When contacted Dr. G.S.R. Murti, Head of Department of Plant Physiology at the Indian Institute of Horticultural Research (IIHR), Bangalore, said, "Alcohol is known to be toxic to plants. It may not have affected the flowers for a few plant species, but it may not be possible to generalize the results." Dr. K.K.Upreti, another senior scientist at the IIHR said that to his knowledge he had never heard of alcohol being used in plant growth.

As Master Gardeners we strive to utilize IPM programs to reduce our plants exposure to toxic chemicals. Alcohol is a potentially toxic chemical. Use it carefully and only when and where it is recommended.

This study offers an additional advantage to those of us who already talk to our plants, because now we can share a drink with them as well. Be careful not to over indulge, or you could end up with a potted plant. Remember chemical dependency can lead to a vegetative state.

The President's Corner

Sharon Barrett

Success is a small word with very large meaning. Thanks is a small word with a very large meaning. I can't begin to adequately say Thanks for the effort given by our membership to make our 6th Annual Spring Conference the wonderful Success that it was.

It was with a leap of faith, a lump in my throat, and confidence in our members that we undertook the challenge given to us by our county agent, Rick Hirsch, in asking that we become a more visible presence in our community. The most obvious and immediate opportunity to do that was to enlarge the scope of our spring conference even more, and to invite a speaker who is well known, not just to gardening enthusiasts but to the general public. Much to our delight Neil Sperry quickly accepted our invitation and the work began as early as December.

If it were in my power I would name Yvonne Perrano Queen for a Day, or perhaps a month, for her exceptional organizational skills and energy in coordinating the event. However, even a talent such as hers could not have put together such a well-oiled program except for the amazing willingness and hard work of the whole membership. It was truly one of the best team efforts I have seen by our group. You are all to be commended for your effort, your attitude and your talent.

We especially thank our co-sponsor, Gutter Helmet, and appreciate their support. I encourage you all to give them a call and let them know we value their partnership.

The evening began as usual with the popular plant sale and silent auction bidding. We had some lovely plants this year, and they were beautifully arranged. Some had been purchased, some donated and some home grown. By the end of the evening all had been taken to new homes.

Danny's BBQ had no problem accommodating our larger crowd with his usual Texas fare and we always appreciate his generous service at our events. We also owe a special thanks to the Boy Scouts who very capably managed the traffic flow in the parking lot. We could not have had a more perfect venue for the occasion. The Cain Center was most hospitable in accommodating all of our needs.

Then the evening began in earnest, or rather, in Violet,

Violet Green that is. Violet was unknown to us until she burst into the program and proclaimed herself the true speaker of the evening. She claimed to be the sister of our old friend, Rosemary Green, and was speaking for Rosemary who couldn't attend. Never mind that Neil Sperry was waiting in the wings to come on stage. It takes a pretty big ego to bump Neil Sperry. Violet presented a most entertaining program about raising, or not raising, worms. Her worm salad didn't look too bad.

When Violet finally left the stage on her short little legs we were happy and relieved that Neil Sperry would still speak to us. His program on "Timely Tips and Busted Myths" about Texas gardening was enlightening even to those of us who thought we knew something about gardening. His tips were helpful but his questions were downright humiliating. The things we didn't know! Dr. Sperry graciously answered questions from the audience at the end of his presentation. We are very grateful to him for spending a most enjoyable evening with us.

Still we weren't done yet. There was the traditional raffle, the results of the silent auction as those prized plants went home with the highest bidder and the ever popular 4 x 4 auction. This year's team went to Jennifer Mason, a Master Gardener and herself a member of the team no less! How clever, Jennifer. We wonder how she plans to improve on her already beautiful gardens. Perhaps a tour will be in order soon.

Take a few days to bask in your success for work is moving forward on our home garden at the East Texas Arboretum. I am excited about watching the groundbreaking and the design process begin as we prepare for our Earth Kind Rose trial project. There will soon be plenty of opportunity for more growth of our garden spirits.

Take A Bow Master Gardeners and then, as Rebecca Kolls says, "Get those hands dirty."

Earth Kind Roses

Rich Hirsch

County Extension Agent

Henderson County

Earth Kind is an important designation given to select roses by the Texas A&M University Agriculture program.

Earth Kind Roses have been through rigorous statewide testing and evaluation by a team of horticultural experts and found to possess the high level of landscape performance, coupled with outstanding disease and insect tolerance/resistance required, for this special designation.

Earth Kind Roses are among the most thoroughly tested and environmentally responsible plants for use in Texas landscapes. These roses do very well in almost any soil type, from the well-drained, acid sands of East Texas to the poorly aerated, highly alkaline days of central and Southwest Texas.

Earth Kind roses are certainly not immune to pest problems. However, their tolerance to pests is so great, that as long as you do not mind a few leaflets dropping occasionally they rarely require the use of chemical pesticides.

For these roses to be as carefree as promised, it is crucial that they receive the following basic care:

Planting Site: They should be planted in locations where they receive direct sunlight for eight hours or more each day. Have good air movement over their leaves (i.e., Do not plant in enclosed areas like courtyards or small backyards that are ringed by 8' fences). They should not be sprinkler irrigated during the evening hours or at night. Remember, fungi will walk fifty miles to infect wet leaves at night!

Bed Preparation: Roses really respond to well-drained soils. Thus, here are the bed preparation recommendations for the three major soil types: Sandy and loam soils: incorporate 3 - 6 inches of organic matter such as compost. Clay soils: incorporate 3 inches of organic matter (compost) and 3 inches of expanded shale. Plant on raised beds that are at least 4 - 6 inches above the surrounding soil.

Fertilization: Roses like high levels of fertility, especially nitrogen. Thus they need to be fertilized in March, June and lightly in late August. Base your selection of fertilizer analysis on the results of a soil test. For the March and June feedings use fertilizers in which at least half of the nitrogen is in the slow release or slowly available form. In late August apply fertilizers in which the nitrogen is readily available.

Maintenance: Regardless of soil type, roses need to be

protected year round with a layer of organic mulch (e.g. cypress bark, tree leaves) 3 - 4 inches thick. In areas of the state plagued by salty irrigation water it is very important to drip irrigate roses. Salty water applied to the leaves can burn the foliage badly.

For more information check out the web site ...

<http://earthkind.tamu.edu>

Breaking New Ground

Gwen McGlaun

Breaking new ground - that is a phrase I remember early in my childhood after moving to my grandparents' farm at LaRue. It was used when land previously covered with trees or brush was cleared and planted for the first time with a new crop. Over the years that phrase for me has come to indicate the beginning of a new endeavor.

New ground was broken at the beginning of the new year when The East Texas Arboretum and Botanical Society entrusted a plot of land to the Henderson County Master Gardeners to develop their garden headquarters. Plans currently on the drawing board will soon be submitted for approval to the executive board of the Master Gardeners as well as the East Texas Arboretum and Botanical Society. The primary function of the yet garden will be a test site to participate with the Earthkind™ program at Texas A & M as well as a demonstration garden for educational purposes.

Last spring after hosting Dr. Steve George to speak about Earthkind™ Roses for the Henderson County Master Gardener Association's annual spring conference, the association learned of a need for official field testing sites for other varieties of roses to earn the Earthkind™ designation. Earthkind™ is a program implemented by the horticultural experts at Texas A & M. After extensive testing a special few plants are determined to possess an extremely high level of performance including exceptional disease and insect resistance, and thus they earn the prestigious label. These are environmentally responsible plants for use in Texas landscapes because they thrive without sprays, fertilizers or excessive water.

Soon Master Gardeners and Master Gardener interns will join to break the "new ground", preparing the soil for the demonstration garden phase, which will be 6 varieties of roses that have already received the Earthkind™

designation. In the meantime soil samples will be taken to determine the amendments needed to the soil. The grass will be eliminated and fencing and drip irrigation will be installed. In the early fall the planting of the trial garden will be just in time for the new class of Master Gardeners to join in.

With education being our primary focus signs will be installed so visitors will be guided through the field trial process. Speaking of visitors, we hope there will be many, that they will visit often and one of them will be you as we “break new ground.”

Daylilies, The Gardener's Delight

Jack P. Busby

Want an easy way to punch up your garden and bring beautiful color from mid-spring to late summer? Try daylilies. You'll love their ease of culture; they'll grow almost anywhere. Daylilies will grow in almost any soil though they seem to like one enriched with organic matter. If you have a spot in full sun that's great—they love it! Even light shade is good, but don't put them in deeper shade! They just don't do well there. Keep them watered and fertilize in spring with a granular slow-release fertilizer and that's almost all you need to do! Remove the spent blooms regularly and the dead stalk at the end of the season and your garden is easily “neated up”. Incidentally some varieties stay green all year long and others die back in late fall. Whichever kind you have the good news is that in a couple or three years you'll have plants to share with friends or to place elsewhere in your landscape.

Daylilies can found in almost any color of the rainbow from almost pure white to a deep reddish-black. But if you want to add blue to your garden you won't find it yet in a daylily. You'll have to use another plant and let one of the many yellow varieties accent it. You can choose daylilies with ruffled edges or simple petals; varieties having eyes of yellow, green, or even brown; and what's more, there's a delightful array of doubles on the market. By choosing carefully you can have flowers all season long. Some varieties bloom more than once and some even have a delightful fragrance. Surprisingly some varieties even bloom in the early evening! While most varieties have blossoms that last only a day a few are now available which may last a couple of days. But don't despair—each stalk will have several blooms on it, and the plant will have blooms lasting two or three weeks.

Daylilies combine well with almost any flowering plant in your garden. Try accenting lantana with daylilies and you'll have a winning combination. Roses, coneflowers, rudbeckias, liatris (“gayfeather”), marigolds, zinnias, periwinkles, even crape myrtles are beautifully complimented by this plant from Asia. There people use it for food. (Yes, all parts of the daylily are edible, though I confess I would be hard pressed to pick a few unopened flowers for dipping in a batter and deep frying them!) Need I say it? Large swaths of daylilies in various colors are dazzling in a bed all by themselves! If I had one complaint it is simply that daylilies are not good plants to use as cut flowers, because the single blooms won't last well. But who can complain? They do make your garden a gorgeous bouquet! Plant some soon!

Sempervivums

Tiffany Kidd

Sempervivums, also known as Houseleeks or Hens and Chicks, are succulent plants belonging to the Crassulaceae family. Many sempervivums are native to Europe. People there used to grow them on their roofs in between the thatching, tiles, or timber. The plants were considered sacred to the Roman god, Jupiter. Since he was associated with thunderbolts, they believed planting sempervivums on the roofs protected their homes from being struck by lightning. They also came to believe it would protect them from sorcery and insure their prosperity.

Sempervivum was used medicinally to treat burns, like a weak version of Aloe Vera. It was also thought that you could remove corns, calluses and warts by putting a split leaf of the plant over the area. Sempervivums aren't used medicinally anymore, but they are still being grown on roofs. Their tolerance to heat and drought and their shallow root systems make them the perfect plant to use on eco-roofs. You can also grow them in containers, in the ground, and even in a crack in the sidewalks.

Plant them in well draining soil. Don't overwater them, or the roots may rot. They love the sun but do just fine in the shade as well. There are around fifty species and three thousand named cultivars of sempervivums. So if you decide to use this wonderful plant you're sure to find one that's perfect for your garden.

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<http://agfacts.tamu.edu/D5/Henderso/hc-mg.htm>

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The Henderson County Master Gardener Association is sponsored by the Henderson County Cooperative Extension Service which is a part of the Texas A&M University System. Its objectives are to increase knowledge of gardening to its members and the general public, and to provide the community with information on good gardening practices.

If you have received this newsletter in error, or to provide us with a change of address, please contact the Henderson County Extension Office at (903)-675-6130.