



North Lake Tahoe DEMONSTRATION GARDEN



The North Lake Tahoe Demonstration Garden is an educational community garden which promotes lake-friendly landscaping to help preserve our unique and fragile alpine environment

SPRING TIPS FOR UNPREDICTABLE WEATHER: *Have Hope but Accept Reality*

by Jan Steinmann



In 2011, we had no Spring, and Winter snow and freezes continued well into June. By March 2012, we are finally having snow but still long periods of warm weather. Who knows when or whether we can expect a “real” Spring?

Make sure stressed plants get early irrigation:

Some plants, even well established ones, may not have survived the schizophrenic autumn season. I doubt my late-summer planted shrubs were established enough to make it. Freezing temps and snow in early October caused us to shut down irrigation on not-yet dormant plants. Then a warm winter with very little precipitation caused some still growing roots and branches to dry out, possibly die. This “Spring”, stressed out, dried out plants may need hand watering after long periods with no precipitation, even in cold weather. Container plants dry out very quickly.

Try to restrain from an early “clean up”:

Keep from scooping up the grungy winter stuff as long as you can stand it. Dirty grey iris leaves and sludgy perennials drive all Tahoe gardeners nuts, especially since we see new greenery pushing its way through the detritus. Think of the yucky stuff on the ground as “mulch”, which can protect new growth from the inevitable freezes and snowstorms still to come. No one pays attention to this rule when daffodils bloom and the days are warm, but this season protection from more stress is most important.

(continued on page 2)

From the President's Plot

by Margaret Solomon

Greetings, Tahoe-ites and visitors. Once again we are having a strange winter. This may be the new normal. However, we are all looking forward to new shoots and buds and in our case new plants.



Snow in the Garden

The Demonstration Garden has plans for a new demonstration. This will be a display of ground cover plants. We do have some ground cover plants in other demonstration spots. The new planting will be similar to the grass display but smaller. There will be a number of ground covers close together so that visitors can make comparisons. We hope that this display along with individual plant signs will help you to choose an appropriate ground cover for your garden.

As to other spring events, we will have to wait for good weather to begin garden clean up days. Work days will hopefully begin in May. Notices for that and for Green Thumb Thursday classes will be on our website, www.demogarden.org, along with other information. You can sign up to become a member or a volunteer or see photos of the garden. Please check out the website and then when the snow is gone come and look at the garden. See you there.

Margaret





(Spring Tips cont.)

Weed as soon as possible:

Weeds may also be weakened this spring, so why not take advantage of their less-resilient condition? Mountain gardens have fewer weeds than most, but those we do have are a pain and this is the time to yank them when they are young and unaware. The definition of a "weed" is "a plant growing where you don't want it to be", so this includes some stuff that you have foolishly planted yourself.

Nourish your soil carefully:

Just as the Realtor's Mantra is "Location, location, location," the Gardener's bottom line is "Soil, soil, soil". We have severely malnourished soil in Tahoe and some fertilizer "fixes" only give our soil a temporary high. In addition, those plants with weak roots, which have been dried out, may succumb to very strong chemicals. Unlike chicken soup, chicken manure may be too much for an ailing plant to handle. On the other hand, good balanced compost added to soil could strengthen the plant.

Watch the weather when pruning:

Don't prune spring-flowering trees and shrubs such as lilac, flowering plum, forsythia, crabapple, and fruit trees. These blossom on last year's growth and you will cut off the flowers, so wait until after they bloom. You can prune summer flowering plants in the spring, especially if you want more compact growth (spirea, butterfly bush), but since pruning encourages new growth, put this off until you are reasonably sure we'll have no more freezes.



EARLY SEASON SEEDS: GETTING AHEAD OF THE GAME

by Mimi Komito

Raise your hand if you, like me, have tried to start seedlings on the window sill (or under shop lights) to get a "head start" with annuals and perennials in our short season Tahoe climate! Only to be discouraged by the spindly growth and rapid die off when trying to acclimate the seedlings to the chilly Tahoe spring. Or worse, forgot to water the one day the sun baked through the window and finding most, if not all, seedlings wilted.

Perennials, especially, are hard to start indoors, unless you're blessed with a self-ventilating, climate

controlled greenhouse. I have had some (emphasis on some) success with starting perennials and annuals in a greenhouse (the not so automated variety) in Tahoe, but it's more work than I'm willing to put in with the less than reliable results I've had. Part of the problem with perennials is that the seeds often need special treatments to sprout well. In nature, seeds get scraped and frozen and soaked during the fall and winter seasons. This harsh treatment by mother nature helps the seeds get ready for germination. It's not always easy to duplicate this

(continued on page 3)

SPECIAL EVENTS IN THE GARDEN FOR 2012

**Best Management Practices (BMP) Contractors Workshop
"How to install BMPs for single-family residences"**

April 20

This all day workshop teaches contractors, landscapers, and do-it-yourselfers how to install BMPs to control erosion and sediment runoff from private properties at Lake Tahoe. The BMP demonstrations in the garden will be center stage for the outdoor segment of this educational event. Topics will include: infiltration systems, driveways, soil restoration, re-vegetation, and defensible space/BMP integration. Log on to www.unce.unr.edu/adhoc/bmpworkshop/ for more information.

Landscaping for Fire Safety and Wildlife

June 2, 4:00-5:00

Tahoe Wildfire Awareness Week is May 26-June 3 this year. We will be teaching a class about reducing potential fire hazards in your yard while maintaining wildlife habitat, how to identify and prune high fire risk shrubs, and good plant choices for Tahoe. We will also have a pruning demonstration for those do-it-yourselfers (it's not that hard!). For other WAW events, log on to <http://ucanr.org/wildfireawarenessweek/>.



(Seeds cont.)

process in a greenhouse.

To my delight I recently read an article in the Garden Gate magazine that discussed a “no-fail” method to start perennials early. The author is a master gardener in Minnesota (Michelle Mero Riedel) and I figured if it works in Minnesota it should work in Tahoe. The secret to Michelle’s success is milk jugs as mini greenhouses. Essentially all Michelle does is plant the seeds in milk jugs, put them outside (in February/March in Minnesota which probably means March/April in Tahoe) and lets mother nature do the rest. This method takes the guesswork out of how to prepare perennial seeds, no more stringy seedlings and hardening off in the spring.

Here’s how to do it in your Tahoe garden:

Prepare the milk jugs by cutting (use scissors or a utility knife) off the bottom about 4-5 inches up from the bottom (leave the handle attached between the bottom and top halves for a hinge). Poke 6-10 holes in the bottom for drainage, using a hammer and an awl or screwdriver. Fill the bottom with pre-moistened (moist not wet) potting soil to within 1 inch of the rim. Make holes for the seeds using a pencil tip or a chop stick. Check the seed packet for soil depth. Anywhere from 5 to 10 seeds per jug should be good. The more seeds per jug the more teasing apart of plants you’ll have to do later which some plants aren’t too happy about. Be sure to put a label in each jug to take the guess work out of which plant is which later. Since the soil is pre-moistened there’s no need to water before you close up the jug. Now you’re ready to tape the top and bottom of the jug together. Use either clear duct tape or packing tape. One important note; do not leave the cap on the jug! The cap needs to be off to allow moisture (rain and snow)



Columbine ©2007 Peter Rühr

to enter the jug and allow the seeds and, later, seedlings to breathe.

When you’ve taped up the jugs, take them outside and place them in a bright location (not north

facing) where they’ll get rain and snow but are sheltered from strong winds. Place the jugs shoulder to shoulder to provide stability and make it easy to tend to the seedlings come spring. In case of a mild winter keep an eye on the jugs and make sure the soil does not dry out completely.

When the temperatures begins to stay consistently warmer, remove the tape and flip back the lids during the day but remember to close them up at night. When night time temperatures are staying above freezing you can leave the tops off at night as well. Keep an eye on the soil and water when it feels dry. When the jugs start to look crowded it’s time to separate them out and plant in their permanent home in the garden. You will probably even have some extras to share with friends. Best of all, you can grow enough plants for a large perennial bed for the price of a couple of seeds packets. Now that’s a bargain!



Shasta Daisy ©2009 Captain-tucker

Here are some of the perennials that would do well in our area and are well suited for this head-start method:

- * **Rudbeckia** (Black-eyed Susan)
- * **Aquilegia** (Columbine)
- * **Myosotis** (Forget-me-not)
- * **Digitalis** (Foxglove)
- * **Papaver** (Poppy, many varieties)
- * **Leucanthemum** (Shasta Daisy)
- * **Coreopsis** (Tickseed)
- * **Nepeta** (Catmint)
- * **Echinacea** (Coneflower)

A note on seed starting for annuals; I have used the jug method to start annuals (and tomatoes) indoors (with the top off) in early March. I then left them in the jug (with the top on - no cap) as I put them outside in late April or early May. The jugs serve as mini greenhouses and allow you to put the seedlings outside earlier and eliminates the hardening off process. Since the seedlings spend less time in an indoor environment they get less spindly and you will have a more robust plant once you’re ready to plant them in the ground sometime in mid-June. The jugs are easier to take care of than little peat pots and the like, since it’s a larger container with more soil they don’t dry out as fast. The same rules apply as for the perennials once they are outside: don’t let the soil dry out, flip the tops open on warm days and close the tops at night until the night time temperatures have stabilized above freezing.





DIARY OF COVER CROPS: AN EXPERIMENT IN GROWING GREEN MANURE AT TAHOE

by Jan Steinmann

2011

April, 2011: With new construction forcing us to remove gigantic glacier boulders from our Brockway, California hillside, we have created four large, rock-bolstered terraces. While the terraces control run-off into Lake Tahoe, we also need to re-vegetate the very spare decomposed granite soil (aka..."sand"), which lacks nutrients to feed the microbes necessary for healthy vegetation. The expense and the labor of adding enough good compost to these large areas is intimidating. But it's still snowing in Spring, 2011, so we don't need to act.

May, 2011: Still snowing in Tahoe. On a trip to Oregon wine country, I marvel at the deep green fields and beautiful expanses of crimson clover, soon to be plowed into the soil for enrichment of early summer crops.

Late July, 2011: Snow has ceased. Finally back from traveling, I plant the new terraces with swathes of seeds for three cover crops: Crimson clover, purple vetch, and buckwheat, plus some wild lupine just for beauty, not nutrition. Johnny's Seeds advised dampening the seeds to soften their "shells" for easier germination. I keep the planting beds a bit moist so seedlings won't dry out.

August, 2011: Tiny chartreuse and emerald seedlings begin to emerge everywhere!

Early September, 2011: The purple vetch is lovely, despite its ugly name, with lavender and purple pea flowers, graceful, twining stems and leaves. Clover has vigorously emerged and is holding the soil, although



Purple Vetch © 2008 Walter Siegmund

not many crimson blossoms—perhaps needs more sun or an earlier planting. Buckwheat is a failure, with only a few spindly plants. Lupine is popping up everywhere as small, marijuana-shaped foliage, but it will not have time to mature

this season. A biennial, the plants won't flower until next spring.

October, 2011: Purple vetch, clover and lupine still thriving until late-month freezing temperatures. I don't know whether to till in the crops now or wait until "spring", whenever that might come in Tahoe.



Crimson Clover © 2005 Tigerente

2012

March, 2012: Finally we have a bit of winter weather and snow! I'm excited to turn under my cover crops and also to plant some new seeds on the terraces. But with more freezes and snow expected, this is not yet the time.

So I practice "Sierra Mountain Gardeners' Virtues:"

- 1. Patience
2. Realize I am not in charge
3. Wait for Nature to give me its cues.

This Cover Crop diary will continue in our early summer issue.

Seeds planted plus new ones ordered:

Purple Vetch (vicia atropurpurea), similar to Hairy Vetch: Annual legume, nitrogen enriching. Attracts bees. Turn under before it seeds.

Crimson Clover (trifolium incarnatum): Annual legume, bunches of upright green clover leaves and small, deep crimson flowers. Not invasive like white Dutch clover.

Seeds to try:

Chickling Vetch (lathyrus sativis) Annual drought-tolerant legume, beautiful flowers in shades of blue.

Field Peas (Pisum sativum) Pea tendrils can also be used in salads and peas in soup, plants turned under for green manure.

