

HOMEGARDEN

Spring Is At Gardeners' Desks, On Their Minds

BY MARTY ROSS

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On a gardener's desk in mid-winter, you'll find a bumper crop of inspiration for the season ahead. There in the dog-eared pages of seed catalogs, reference books and gardening magazines, in well-worn notebooks stuffed with plant labels and pressed flowers, the garden is already springing to life.

"This is an exciting time," says Pat Friesen, a Johnson County, Kan., Extension master gardener who is planning a big vegetable garden this year.

Friesen and her husband, Chuck Jasper, were inspired last year by the style and scope of the Heartland Harvest Garden at Powell Gardens in Kingsville, Mo. Jasper built 15 new raised beds for vegetables in their backyard in Leawood, Kan. It's too soon to plant, but it is never too early to make plans.

IN THE WORKS

Helen Thompson, a garden designer in Leawood whose pretty spring garden fills six pages of the latest issue of Country Gardens magazine, is growing amaryllis on her desk and weeding through folders full of ideas.

She is planning to expand her vegetable garden and make a new nursery area in her backyard. She's also choosing plants for a new perennial border and a butterfly garden.

There's not much to do outside, she admits, but in her sunny office, surrounded by books and papers and dreams, you can almost feel the kiss of May.

Curling up by the fire and dozing through the cold days just doesn't seem to suit local gardeners. Many have been busy planning garden tours, workshops and plant sales. Designers are networking, building relationships with collaborators and clients.

As the days grow longer, so do seed and plant lists. And in the thaws between snowstorms, spring is just starting to show — the green tips of daffodil foliage are poking up through the mulch around town.

"Things are going on all over," says Janese Reed, a garden designer in North Kansas City who is president of the Garden Center Association and a member of the board of the Friends of Powell Gardens. Lately, she has been reading books by speakers who will be in town next week for the biennial gardening symposium organized by the association and



Tools of a garden designer's trade adorn the desktop of Janese Reed, of Kansas City, Missouri, January 28, 2010. Items include her garden journal, left, compass, garden photographs, her digital camera, a sedum plant and a Caladium bulb sprouting just a single leaf.

the Friends of Powell Gardens. "It's one of the things that keeps me going," says Reed, who is a Missouri Extension master gardener and a supporter of the Heartland Tree Alliance.

She also is researching easy-care hydrangeas and roses, plus reviewing pictures of her clients' gardens from last summer, working on ways to make them more beautiful.

SEEING THE POSSIBILITIES

Andy Wright, a landscape architect at Landworks, launched a blog (alwright.wordpress.com) and a Web site (andrewwright.com) this winter. His computer claims the largest plot of space on his desk, and it holds an extensive archive of projects and possibilities. Front yards deserve more attention, Wright says, flipping through designs that

show welcoming gardens designed around pretty porches and front walks. He's studying outdoor lighting and working on patio designs.

"Patio give a garden a sense of stability," he says. Before the season arrives in a rush of planting and deadlines, Wright is polishing his portfolio and taking the time to remind himself and his clients about the beauty of a well-designed garden in winter. A recent blog post shows his garden at Lake Winnebago, with summer and winter views side by side.

"I bundle up and walk around my own garden every day," says Beth Houlihan, the city gardener of Gladstone.

Houlihan is also a garden designer, a master gardener and a new Missouri master naturalist. The naturalist program, a partnership between the Missouri

Department of Conservation and the extension office, works like the master gardener program: Participants receive training and certification in exchange for volunteer work in the community.

Right now, Houlihan is setting up a seed-starting station and "daydreaming about new hard-landscape I want to put in."

During a thaw just a few weeks ago, she planted two grocery bags full of spring-flowering bulbs — end-of-season leftovers from Planters Seed & Spice Co. in the River Market area.

VEGGIES AND BEES

Matt Bunch, horticulturist in charge of Powell's Heartland Harvest Garden, is up to his elbows in projects for the garden's second summer.

"We've been waffling," he says — making 4-foot-tall woven fences

for the kitchen garden near the Harvest Garden's barn. "It really works your elbows and shoulders."

The gardeners are making the fences with whips of gray dogwood pruned from the woods around Powell Gardens.

Bunch is also placing plant orders, including one for knobby fingerling potatoes, which will be planted in March and featured on the menu this summer in the garden's Cafe Thyme.

Vegetable gardens need bees to pollinate the crops, and Liberty, Mo., gardener Chris Veach has become a bee expert this winter, working with fellow Missouri master naturalist Linda Williams.

"Bees have a place in nature, and humans, in our great expertise in solving every problem, have hurt the bee population," Veach says.

Solitary mason bees are among the most efficient pollinators, she says, hard at work in early spring.

"Never use a pesticide when anything is flowering," Veach says. "Pesticides kill bees."

Meredith Klamm, another Liberty gardener who made a bee house in a workshop taught by Veach and Williams, is busy scattering poppy seeds outside and propagating colous inside. She's feeding the birds, chasing squirrels away from her birdfeeders and working on plans for the master gardener plant sale in May. It all helps make the winter seem a little shorter, she says.

The cardinals are already beginning to sing a springy song in the trees, she has observed, and they echo her own sentiments.

"I'm sick of this weather," she says. "I'm ready for winter to be over."

TIPS, PLANTS AND IDEAS FOR THE SEASON AHEAD

Gardeners at Powell Gardens will plant 40 different tomatoes this year in the Heartland Harvest Garden. Among them: heirlooms "Flame," "Cherokee purple," "Japanese Trifele black" and "Brandywine." They're also planting the fingerling potatoes "Rose Finn apple" and "Peanut" (sometimes called "Swedish peanut").

Take a winter tree walk, Chris Veach says. She is a member of TreeLiberty (www.treeliberty.org), a group that helps take care of trees in the Liberty, Mo., area.

"Winter is an absolutely wonderful time to look at trees," Veach says. "It is also a good time to prune, because you can see the structural defects."

Single-color flower beds have a lot of pop, says Beth Houlihan, city gardener of Gladstone and a garden designer (her business is called Belles of Ireland). She is working on an orange-hued garden. "If you try all one color, it can be awesome," she says.

Plant a vegetable garden with a friend, says Pat Friesen, a Johnson County Extension master gardener. "Go beyond one pot of tomato plants," she says. She and her husband will plant indeterminate tomatoes, which should produce all season long. She ordered seeds of "Fourth of July," "Napa grape" and "Orange Wellington," among others.

Feed the birds. When it's too cold to be outdoors, you can enjoy watching the birds at a feeder, says Meredith Klamm, a Missouri master gardener. She is also in a garden book club, which is reading "Mrs. Whaley and her Charleston Garden" by Emily Whaley.

Containers Simplify Vegetable Gardening

BY SUSAN REIMER

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Containers are the answer for the vegetable gardener short on space or sunlight, or one caught in a tug of war with hungry critters.

"You can grow everything but corn in a container," said Kerry Michaels, who writes about container gardening online at About.com.

Michaels has grown tomatoes in recyclable grocery bags and old laundry baskets and lettuces in yard-sale colanders. But she says the introduction of self-watering containers has made all the difference.

These containers have a reservoir at the base and the soil wicks the water — and fertilizers — up to the roots in a slow, deliberate fashion, eliminating the drought-wet cycles that can stress any plant and cause disease.

"Self-watering changed my life," said Michaels. That's because a consistent source of moisture might be the toughest part of container gardening. A downpour can flood your container, and pots can dry out quickly on a hot summer day.

Michaels doesn't have many of those warm days where she lives in Maine. But gardening in containers allows her to "chase the sun."

She loads up the wagons her friends and neighbors have learned to give her and drags her "gardens" in and out of the protection of

the garage during early summer and in and out of the sunshine later.

I plant lettuces and spinach in containers on my deck because they are semi-protected from the early spring cold and I can move them into the shade when the weather gets hot. Michaels is an organic gardener and prefers organic soil mixes as well as kelp and seaweed and fish emulsion fertilizers that she applies every other week.

"You really do need to feed them like crazy," she said. Fresh soil and containers cleaned with a mixture of water and vinegar or water and bleach are key, too. Diseases can winter-over in your containers. I plant my tomatoes in containers on my deck, where they are safe from a blight fungus that seems to be in my garden.

Gardener's Supply Co., as well as many local lawn and garden centers, will have the self-watering containers you need to get started on your vegetable container garden. But Michaels uses anything she sees. The larger the better, to maintain soil temperature and retain moisture.

Michaels' biggest surprise in container gardening? "How amazing the potatoes taste when you grow them yourself."

Which she did. In a bag.

"Containers allow you to control the variables more," she said. "And that includes the critters."

Sweet Potato: The Ultimate Spiller Plant?

BY NORMAN WINTER

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Whether it is the front porch patio or deck colorful designer-like containers make it a pleasure to entertain outdoors. No matter what container it is today it seems that the ornamental sweet potato has claimed its rightful place at the ultimate spiller plant causing everyone to cast an admiring look.

New for the 2010 series will be the two colors under the Illusion series. These have swept trial awards all across the country and I can testify from my personal experience as well.

It wasn't long ago I told you about the electrifying Illusion Emerald Lace with the bright chartreuse leaves. It seems the whole world thrives on lime green and I have to concur.

But I don't want you to overlook the incredible opportunity you have by using the deep dark purple from the Illusion Midnight Lace. The color that is almost black makes everything else in the container really pop. Have you ever shopped for a loose diamond? Invariably the jeweler shines it up with a cloth and then places it on black cloth perhaps velvet. The diamond then seems to almost glow.

That is similar to what happens when you use what we consider black foliage. Whether your partners are blue salvias, yellow zinnias or something pristine white they will all be accentuated by the Illusion Midnight Lace leaves.

Don't underestimate the attractiveness of these leaves however as they are deeply toothed adding great texture and creating a shad-

owy mystery not only about them but about the container too.

The Illusion series brings a new tidiness to ornamental sweet potatoes in that while they are still vigorous that are not the rampant running kudzu-like sweet potatoes we are using to loosing. Their habit is such that you could actually use them in hanging baskets as a stand-alone plant. The result will be as pretty as a fern.

Keeping that in mind you will also love their performance in the landscape where you can really use them with combinations that will sizzle all summer long.

When spring arrives and it is time for planting select a site plenty of sun although these can tolerate some shade. They like fertile, well-drained soil. This usually means you must amend your bed with 3 to 4 inches of organic matter. Incorporate 2 pounds of a slow-release, 12-6-6-fertilizer per 100 square feet of bed space while preparing the bed.

Plant nursery-grown transplants at the same depth they are growing in the container. While most sweet potatoes are spaced 24 to 48 inches apart, you can use 12 inch spacing with the Illusion series.

For use in mixed containers select a soil that is well drained, light and airy. Bargain potting soil sold by the pound is not your best choice. You'll find containers full of this soil harder to move around and drainage probably becoming an issue.

The ornamental sweet potato is the best annual groundcover available today. If you think about the cost for a 4- or 6-inch container and then consider the amount of growth or spread it gives, you quickly realize no other plant can give you as much bang for your gardening buck.



Illusion Midnight Lace ornamental sweet potato provides a dark purple backdrop for this mixed container featuring salvia, begonias and zinnias

Let this long winter serve as a great time to plan both your landscape and mixed containers and remember to give the new Illusion

Emerald Lace and Illusion Midnight Lace sweet potatoes a prominent role.

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