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Greetings to all,

As we transition from winter to spring, as always I have some observations to share about the weather and how it has affected plants in our region. Much to my surprise in spite of more cold temperatures than normal, damage to most plants has been less than I thought that it would. Some notable exceptions have been Camellias, Gardenias, Loropetalum (Chinese Witch Hazel) and a few others. Our Rose Garden fared the winter well, and it seems that most of the Hydrangeas look pretty good too. If you have shrubs or trees that have obvious winter damage, don't be in a big hurry to remove them. If you can't tell if branches are dead, wait until they have pushed some leaf buds, then simply cut off whatever stems have not leafed out. Some plants that are evergreen may have "Winter Burn" where portions of leaves or whole leaves have turned brown but the stems are still alive. As they grow new foliage the damaged leaves should drop or at least be covered up by new growth.

The overabundance of rain has been another issue. Depending on the elevation of where the plants are located this may or may not be a problem. In low areas that flood, most woody plants can tolerate standing water for a while if they are dormant. Once they leaf out, the period they can stand in water becomes shorter and damage can occur after several day if the water doesn't recede. The other problem we are seeing this year is that some flowering trees and shrubs are blooming a little later in the season than normal and other that are affected by day length more than temperature are blooming on time. The result is a lot are blooming right now, but because of the constant rain the flowers are not lasting as long as usual. Our Yoshino Cherries are in bloom right now and I believe will peak close to the 20th of March. They are always as sight to behold as they line both sides of Cherry Road. Tulips, Hyacinths and other spring flowering bulbs are in boom now as well.

Most perennials are breaking dormancy, so if you haven't removed last year's dead stems or still have fallen leaves covering them that need to be raked try to get this done quickly so no damage is done in the process. This is also a good time to plant trees and shrubs. The sooner you can get this done while the soil is still cool, the better they will be established when summer arrives.

Our **Spring Plant Sale** is promising to be the best ever! Jim Crowder, Sam Ward and the volunteers have been potting and grooming a huge selection of perennials, hostas and herbs. I would venture to say we will have the biggest selection of species available in the area. Of course, we will also have trees, shrubs and tropical plants as well. Our Horticulture staff and volunteers will all be here to answer your questions and help you make good decisions about what to plant where. The preview party is Thursday, April 12 from 5:30 to 7:30 pm. The sale is Friday, April 13 from 9 am to 7 pm and Saturday, April 14 from 9 am to 5 pm. Hope to see you there.

In this issue of Vine Line, Sherri McCalla has a recipe for an herbal drink to warm you up after doing some gardening on a chilly da ! Blair Combest will talk you through a project that will be happening in his area this summer, which will be our new Urban Garden. Chickens have been a part of life since I was a kid and I am looking forward to us having some here at MBG.

Wishing all of you a wonderful Spring!

Rick

Backyard Chickens

We are bringing chickens to the Memphis Botanic Garden and there is a lot to think about! Even though I have raised chickens for years, it was not long into my research that I realized I needed help. This is when I turned to our Director of Horticulture, Rick Pudwell, life-time bird enthusiast, for help. So, after talking with him at length—we are in the middle of planning and designing a large-scale ‘back-yard’ coop, you see—and reading an essay he wrote some years back concerning backyard chickens, this is what I have come up with. Maybe with a little bit of my experiences thrown in.

There are many reasons for raising your own chickens. You can keep them for eggs or, if you want, meat, and that is usually enough for most folks—I enjoy watching them diligently scratching about, personally. These birds also make great pets and can help rid your yard or garden of pest insects—when free-ranged or during supervised garden bed visits. In terms of composting, nothing can heat up a slow compost pile like a few heaping shovels of chicken manure.

The most common housing for chickens is a coop. This is a dry, well-ventilated structure with an attached run or wire pen—allowing them space to roam whilst still being protected from predators. (I have allowed my chickens to graze freely in the open yard, but usually during the times that young, delicious shoots are not present in the garden beds, as the hens can/will decimate such tender plants while they scratch for insects.) Chickens need light to help regulate their internal clocks, so another must for the coop is a light source. This should be provided by a collection of hatches or windows that are easily opened and closed—wire mesh should be installed behind all windows or vents for safety. Within the coop, nesting boxes should be offered for egg laying and setting, and roosts—the bull-nosed edge of a 2x4 works great for this—provided for roosting. As per Rick, any dust-free, biodegradable stuff, such as straw or wood shavings, can be used as litter. Remember, do not use anything you would not want to put into your compost pile.

Use commercial layer feed pellets or mash. These are available at farm feed stores and some pet stores. Scratch grains are also available but use sparingly. I used to mix grains in with my feed but now I only ever use pellet form chicken feed to nourish my hens. Adding scratch grains to your feed adds carbs and thus dilutes the protein-to-fat ratio of your feed. I have seen hens peck out only the grains and leave the pellets—like children with sugary cereal.

March Food Jars



Now, I use scratch grains only to entice them to shred some leaves for my compost. I will do so by sprinkling just a little bit on a pile of leaves and watch my girls scratch through the pile for hours, looking for every little grain. You can, and probably should, treat your birds to vegetables, greens and the occasional bread items. Rick suggests that this should consist of no more than 20% of their diet, and goes on to warn against feeding them any meat scraps, for fear of disease. As far as water for the birds goes, I have used several different methods, and settled on commercially bought waterers.

When you buy chickens from a commercial hatchery they will have been tested and disease free. This is not to say they will always be. Just like us, chickens need clean surroundings to keep from getting sick. Start with a clean coop, fresh shavings, and clean water. During routine cleaning, take the time to disinfect all surfaces before adding fresh litter. Remove wet litter when you spot it or cover it with fresh, dry material. Rick recommends cleaning a “not-too-crowded coop” 2-3 times a year. He also states that he deworms his chickens twice a year with Ivermectin or Cydectin, the only difference being its application—orally or topically, respectively.

These are the essentials to backyard chicken keeping. Remember your coop must be a clean, strong structure to prevent predation and protect against the elements and disease. I hope this article has helped you with some particulars of this wonderful hobby. Once the Chicken House at MBG is finished, and the birds are here, I will write more on such topics as breeding and finding the right breed for you!

By Blair Combest, horticulturist at MBG



Well, the calendar might say we are still in winter, but nature itself is telling us that spring is on it's way. The days are getting longer and the plants (the ones that long stretch of very cold temperatures we had didn't damage!) are beginning their growth overdrive. This is the time for pruning and grooming. It is so very nice to cut back last year's dead growth from the herbaceous perennials and see the new green growth hiding below. The time for relaxation is gone. The long lazy days and evenings of reading and making our new plant choices and purchases are history. Buds are swelling and the spring weeds (although most of these spring weeds are actually herbs/food in disguise-ask me about that) are getting a good toehold. 'Ware, Spring! On rainy days, I have been making up some food mixes and placing them in jars with a goodly supply of dried herbs from last year. On those busy days, all I have

needed, and I have a quick meal ready and easy.

Hot Xocolatl Mix : 1 cup powdered sugar, ½ cup unsweetened cocoa powder, ½ cup coconut milk powder or milk powder, 1 teaspoon arrowroot powder, a handful of chocolate chips (the higher the cocoa content, the healthier) or a handful of pieces from a smashed chocolate bar, 1 ½ teaspoon Vietnamese Cinnamon powder (or whatever cinnamon you like or have on hand), 1 teaspoon dried Chipotle (or another chile pepper such as ancho, or Cayenne) powder, ¼ teaspoon Himalayan salt (sea salt will work). Combine all ingredients. Add 3 Tablespoons of the mixture with hot water, almond milk, coconut milk, milk or cream. Stir until dissolved. Drink!

By Sherri McCalla, curator of the Herb Garden at MBG

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