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The Vine Line

Greetings to all,

As I am writing this it is a gray spring day with the high temperature in the low 60's . Not what you would expect for mid-May. This has been an odd spring to say the least. We have had abundant rainfall, way above average ! It is a mixed blessing, because it saves us from using irrigation, but at the same times slows us down and limits what work we can get work accomplished. Some of our early flowering trees, especially deciduous magnolias suffered from several late freezes in early March. I think that the flowers on many of the hollies were effected as well. Some may have few or no berries this fall. On the positive side this has been one of the best years for Japanese cherries. The weather was just right when they were in bud and bloom, in fact the flowering lasted over two weekends instead of only one. Most of the spring flowering bulbs were also really good this year .

Right now the Rose Garden is at its' peak, and many flowering shrubs are still in bloom. The Horticulture staff is busy cleaning up beds, removing winter annuals and spring flowering bulbs and then planting summer flowering annuals and tropicals for the long summer ahead. One bed that we planted about a week ago is at the end of the Four Seasons Garden, next to the arbor. Since it is the Bi-centennial year for the City of Memphis, we planted a "Blues Bed." It is centered by a simulation of the Mississippi River, made of river rock, beach pebbles and brown pea gravel to depict the Muddy Mississippi. All the plants have blue foliage or blue flowers, such as Blue Hydrangeas, African Plumbago, 'Blue Point' Junipers, Blue Scabiosa and 'Blue Hawaii' Ageratum. Several other "Blues Species" are in the planting. We even have a blue metal guitar hanging on chains from the arbor behind the bed. When you are walking through the garden stop by and let us know what you think!

In your home gardens, do your best to finish all planting by the end of May, before really hot weather sets it. We still have good selection of plants for sale in the Nursery at the Garden. We are open Monday thru Saturday 9 am to 1 pm until the 25th of May.

In this issue David Vaughn, who has worked in My Big Back Yard for many years (He does the innovative plantings around the Guest House, the Idea Garden and Home Sweet Home.) will discuss in detail, how to plant a great herb garden taking advantage of elevation and shade provided by some of the plants in this unique planting. Blair Combest will tell about the joys and frustrations in managing the Urban Home Garden. Finally, Bo Kelly, our Arborist, will discuss how nature progresses through the seasons sometimes quickly and sometimes without our even noticing what has changed!

Wishing each of a great garden full of beautiful blooms and no weeds!

Rick

The Herb Spiral Design and its Benefits



Unlike the many formal gardens featured in the 96 acres of the Memphis Botanic Garden, the children's garden- My Big Backyard- is geared towards whimsy. Walking through the nearly five acre space, one encounters creative design in many forms. From the 'flower beds'- literally bed frames planted with flowers each season- to the boxwood couch and rocking chair planted with sedum that greet visitors in Home Sweet Home, My Big Backyard encourages guests to think creatively. Even the herb and vegetable beds that sit in front of the Guest house provide an alternative approach to garden layout and design. With a wink and a nod to home gardeners who may be pressed for space, one particular bed in the children's garden provides the perfect blend of creativity and sensibility: the herb spiral.

Known widely in the permaculture community as a space-saving technique and micro-climate provider, the herb spiral is a unique way to grow a wide variety of herbs in one place. As we all have experienced first-hand, not all herbs require or desire the same conditions. Some-- like rosemary, thyme, sage, and lavender-- thrive in hot and dry conditions. Sharp drainage is crucial for these herbs to survive and thrive, as is plentiful sunshine. On the other hand, herbs like parsley, mint, and lemon balm desire more moist areas,

As the bed spirals downward, the conditions of the bed- from the amount of direct sunlight to the soil moisture level- slowly change, creating new planting opportunities. Thyme, sage and oregano are good choices to follow the lavender or rosemary, as they share the need for drainage and sunlight but aren't big enough to reign at the very top. At this point, the micro-climates become crucial. Herbs like parsley and cilantro will appreciate being on the north side of the bed, shaded from the intense summer sun by the taller herbs at the top of the spiral and gifted cooler temperatures as a result. At the bottom of the spiral, herbs like mint, lemon balm and chives will thrive, soaking up the moister soil. If planted on the bottom-east side of the spiral, they will benefit even more from some afternoon shade, provided again by the rosemary or lavender. Thus, a home gardener can maximize production and create a beautiful, eye-catching bed in a space that traditionally would only be big enough for one or two herbs requiring the same conditions.

In My Big Backyard, we have taken the herb spiral to a new level. Instead of focusing specifically on the more common herbs, we have expanded the palate, hoping to inspire home gardeners to think even more outside of the box. This year, the spiral is topped with 'Silver Drop' Eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus gunnii*). Its silvery blue foliage and unique growth habit makes it a fun centerpiece. The spiral features other fun herbs such as the toothache plant (*Acemella oleracea*), roselle hibiscus (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*), feverfew (*Tanacetum parthenium* L.), and lamb's ear (*Stachys byzantina* 'Helen Von Stein'). Following the theme that runs through the entire garden, the spiral encourages and inspires creativity and is a technique that any gardener can try at home!

By David Vaughan, MBG horticulturist

with a little shade in our brutal summer heat. For a home gardener, meeting the conditions of all of these can be tricky, especially if space is limited. The herb spiral provides the perfect, beautiful solution. In a space as small as eight to ten square feet, one can create the microclimates necessary for each of these herbs to thrive.

At the top of the spiral, or the 'high and dry' space that typically sits as high as three to four feet off of the ground, the conditions are ideal for those herbs loving sharp drainage and full sun. Rosemary and even lavender, which tends to hate Memphis' summer humidity and winter rain, are perfect choices for the top of the spiral.



Musings from the Urban Home Garden



Spring has found us again and the Urban Home Garden's "phase one" is completed. On the espaliered Liberty apple tree you can find quarter-sized fruit, and there is an abundance of buds, blooms, and berries on the blackberry canes. The heat and drought tolerant Kentucky bluegrass—laid two weeks ago, now—is lush and green and rooting in nicely. On the Junipers, there are berries. The muscadine vines are flushed. In the coop, all is copacetic. That is, the girls are laying and the males are mating—when allowed to—and no one goes hungry, for sure.

Now, what is going on in my mind? I keep making lists—and the lists change. If I am not careful and check my pockets on laundry day I am sure to wash at least one—I fill all my pockets with them, you see. Sometimes I can discern the resulting, nearly illegible, pulp and sometimes there is no hope. But what does

this matter? The lists are going to change. It is becoming apparent to me that lists are useless—when dealing with time sensitive tasks— if you cannot first prioritize them. I am not speaking about chain-of-command prioritizing; here I am referring to nature. To know when to have a task completed, you first need to understand the nature involved. *When should I plant this? When should I prune that? If I plant this too early it may die if it frosts; too late and it may not fruit in time.* **This is what I am trying to learn—this is what is on my mind.** It is easy to have tunnel-vision in this line of work, and everyone who does this stuff has room to improve their knowledge. What is obvious to a master—and I mean blaringly obvious—may not be to the novice, or even intermediate, one. The master does these things with fluidity; he knows the time limit and knows the species' resilience. **I am nowhere near this point—but I keep trying.** It seems to me that these apparent issues—those that require immediate attention—sometimes get lost when one is overwhelmed with the current mission at hand. **This, I am learning.**

I walk by beds that need some level of attention every day on my way to feed the chickens. Most times I'll make a mental note or add it to my list—sometimes I am too busy and forget and the facts get lost. I have realized that all beds need attention. It is easy to become overwhelmed in any garden. There are so many tasks to perform and without knowing the order of completion required it can be daunting. I will probably always make lists, edit, change, and subsequently ruin them—be it rinse cycle or rain. And this is ok. I

will complete tasks as I can, as well as I can, and whenever I can. I continue to learn from books and masters and by my own mistakes, and that too, is ok.

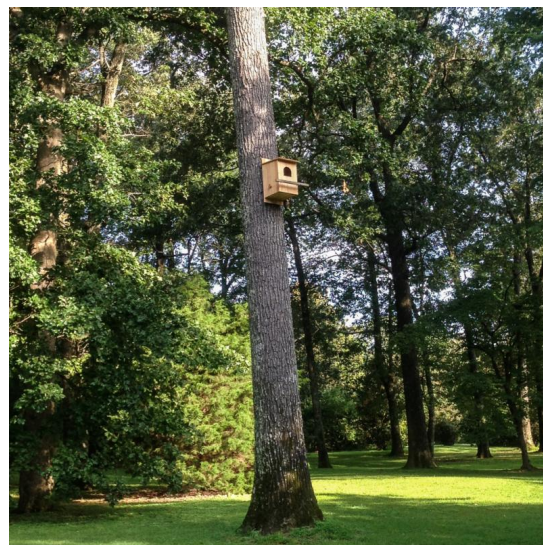
By Blair Combest, MBG horticulturist



Seasonal Change: A tree's perpetual transition throughout the year

We experience seasonal change in its full magnificence in temperate forests, where ephemeral species spring out of dormancy in a flash of brilliance before withering back, awaiting their time in the sun next year. Or deciduous trees prepare for winter by slowing their production of energy; a process evident in the vast array of colors bursting from the leaves. We may think of change occurring most in spring and autumn...and rightly so. The spring blooming of our cherry trees: unexpected and theatrical, yet gone in the blink of an eye. Or the dramatic color shift taking place in autumn, from ubiquitous greenery to marvelous shades of red, orange, yellow, and purple displayed in our deciduous trees. These visual changes signal to us that nature is not static, as we might think, after seeing a forest consistently "greened out" through the summer, unchanged and fading into regularity and monotony. Or the feeling of permanence we may experience walking through winter woodlands, surrounded by quiet sentinels, skeletons of their former selves apparently devoid of life. Even in these times, forests are changing.

As we head into summer, trees are completely foliated and have taken on a green appearance. At this time, even though it may not look like it to the human eye, trees are in a fight for their lives locked in intense competition with their neighbors. The reason for this fight? Sunlight. Plants utilize the chemical reaction of photosynthesis in order to produce sugar from nothing more than carbon dioxide and water. This reaction requires an input of energy; energy that is harvested from the sun and captured in the leaves. Wonderfully convenient, as the sun passively inundates our planet with this energy every single day.



For most trees, the best way to guarantee that this energy is captured is to aim skyward, growing straight and tall, allowing their leaves to bask in sunlight. From this process, sugar is produced and growth takes place. This growth is practically imperceptible day to day, but the majority of the growth that leads to trees towering over all other plants takes place at this time of the year.

Change at this time isn't flashy, it isn't theatrical, and it isn't fleeting. From our perspective, it is consistent, stable, and ironically, unchanging. A tree may live to be centuries old, growing only a foot in height per year. This translates centimeters, or only millimeters, per day (seemingly unchanging and only blatantly obvious if we were to compare two photos of the same tree taken many years apart). Yet from the tree's perspective, change in growth is as dramatic as the short-lived cherry blossom is to us. The tree is pushing upward, growing outward, and driving roots downward into the earth, all during a time we may think of it as merely infrastructure in the landscape. However, this change ensures survival. Without it, an Oak would never breach the canopy to find its place in the sun. Change is often positive and we can learn this lesson from nature, which is constantly changing.

By Bo Kelley, MBG arborist

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