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Vine
LINE



Spring 2022

Sow your own seeds. Try some medicinal herbs. Take your tropicals outside.



Spring Greetings to All

This has been an interesting winter. December was one of the warmest on record. There were flowering Quince, Winter Jasmine, and Sasanqua Camellias in full bloom at Christmas. Unfortunately, their blooming was cut short by a series of hard freezes starting the first week in January and then getting worse with an Ice storm the first week of February. We have been alternating between warm and cold for the past couple of months which is just as hard on plants as it is for people.

While the date on the calendar is not officially spring (March 20; meteorological spring is actually March 1) signs of nature awakening are quite evident wherever you look. The past few nights the frogs have been croaking loudly, and during the day we have seen turtles sunning on the banks of my pond. I even have five goslings following the parents that hatched about ten days ago. Daffodils have been flowering for weeks as have been Crocus, Grape Hyacinths, and even a few early varieties of Tulips. Spring flowering bulbs are very resilient; only a very deep freeze will affect them. A few Forsythia are starting to show color and the Saucer and Star Magnolias are in full bloom. The magnolias are keyed into temperature, and as soon as we have enough warm days



they come into bloom. Some years this is followed by a frost which ends their show for that season. The Japanese Cherries are more attuned to the increasing length of the days at this time of year and usually, their bloom date can be predicted within a week with some accuracy. Other species that are endemic to an area are usually not as bothered by the weather changes. Most of these such as Redbuds, Oaks, Tulip Poplar, and our native Dogwoods do not leaf out or flower until later in the season when the threat of frost is substantially less.

In this issue of "Vine Line," Sherri McCalla, our Herbalist, will talk about the edible uses for chickweed. One of those plants that most gardeners discard without a second thought. Sherri has the rare ability to look for the "good" in almost anything. Owen Smith, who manages our Urban Home Garden, will discuss starting seeds of edible crops and what conditions are needed to ensure a bountiful harvest. Tyler Taylor, our Greenhouse Manager, will tell you what steps to take with certain tropical species that you may have overwintered in preparation for moving them back into the garden. All great information for gardeners to think about as spring approaches.

Hoping all of you take the time to enjoy the wonders of nature as they unfold in this most beautiful season of the year!

Happy Gardening,

Rick

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rick Powell". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

MBG Director of Horticulture



Seed Starting: How to Sow Your Own Seeds This Spring

By Owen Smith, Horticulturist - Urban Home Garden & Arboretum

If you are a vegetable gardener, you're likely thinking about starting your own seeds this spring. The cool weather crops like brassicas, most salad greens, root vegetables, onions, and peas can be started in late February and March, and some of the warm weather crops such as tomatoes, melons, peppers, beans, and cucumbers can be started in March and April. When planning my garden, I like to consult my refrigerator before I start looking at a seed catalog. What produce do I buy from the grocery store that I could be growing in my backyard? This is where I like to focus my time and energy when growing vegetables. You may prefer to use your garden space to grow unique vegetables or varieties that cannot be found at the grocery store. If you can come up with a goal for your vegetable garden, it will be easier to decide what to grow. A little bit of late winter planning will go a long way in your garden in the springtime.

One of the tricky parts of getting started in the springtime is the timing of your seed sowing. To get started, you will need to look up the last spring frost date in your area. In Memphis, the average last frost of the spring is March 30. Using this date, you can work backwards to determine when you should start seeds indoors. Most seed packets have information about the timing and method of starting your seeds, and many seed companies put out a calendar or chart of sowing dates for everything they sell.* If you're interested in extending your season earlier into the spring, you can go earlier than these dates and plan to use frost blankets, low tunnel, or a cold frame to protect the seedlings.

Most crops can be either direct sown in your garden or started indoors and later transplanted to your garden. Depending on the time of year, the indoor space you have available, and your personal preferences, you may decide to try one way or the other for different crops. However, there are several benefits to sowing your seeds indoors. You will have earlier harvests, a higher success rate, and more crops throughout the year. New seeds can be started indoors while the garden is occupied by mature plants. Adopt a hybrid approach, starting some indoors and direct sowing others. Most root vegetables, many flowers, and some herbs will grow



better when direct sown.

Before you begin sowing your seeds indoors, consider the spot where you'll be putting the seed trays. It should be a warm room with plenty of sunlight. Your seeds will germinate better in the warmth, and the young plants will require lots of light so that they don't become leggy. Any general potting mix or seed starting mix will work well. Water the seedlings whenever the soil starts to dry out. After 3-4 weeks, most of the cool season crops will be ready to plant out in your garden. Lettuce, spinach, cabbage, parsley, cilantro, and peas can survive a frost; however, it would be beneficial to cover them with frost cloth for protection if a frost is still likely in your area. Keep an eye on larger warm season crops, such as tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants, and pot up to larger sizes indoors as needed, so that the plants do not become root-bound.

If you do not have a good space indoors to start seeds, consider building a cold frame. It can be used to start seeds and grow seedlings, and the lid can be removed in the warmer months to turn it into a raised bed. In the fall, the lid can be reattached for fall and winter crops. To start seeds in the spring, section off a small area inside and add a layer of potting mix. Sow seeds into the potting mix, just as you would in a plastic seed tray. After the seeds germinate, transplant them to another area in the cold frame to give them more space. After they grow for a couple of weeks, you can cut squares around each seedling with a knife, and use a trowel to lift plants out, as if you were cutting up a tray of brownies. Transplant into your garden.** If you are working with a small space, consider multisowing some of your crops. Beet, broccoli, cabbage, leeks, onion, scallions, spinach, among several others, can be planted in a plastic flat with 3-6 plants per cell to grow more food in less space. As your seedlings germinate, leave multiple plants in each cell to grow together. Each plant will turn out smaller than it would have if grown by itself, but the amount of food that grows in that space will be greater than if one plant had grown there by itself. For more information on multisowing, consult the website listed in the endnotes.***

Like in most areas of gardening, there are many approaches to seed starting. In the springtime, it can be difficult to figure out the correct timing due to the unpredictable weather. You will find that the best method is to try a variety of methods. Since plants, soil, weather, climate, and growing spaces are always changing, gardeners must be willing to adapt to those changes. You will find success if you experiment with different methods. Create room for failure. Sow more seeds than you need so that you have the chance to try new ideas and give extra plants to your friends! One of the wonderful things about gardening is the opportunity for generosity, and an abundant harvest that you will get to share with others.

* Try to consult a seed company in your region for these dates. Southern Exposure Seed

Exchange has a great chart with dates that are very close to what works in Memphis. Ira Wallace, an employee at SESE, has published a book called *Grow Great Vegetables in Tennessee*, which contains advice that applies specifically to Memphis.

** Eliot Coleman's book, *Four-Season Harvest*, is mainly focused on extending the fall growing season into winter, but its principles apply to the springtime as well. It also features extensive advice on building a cold frame and selecting cold-hardy crops to grow.

*** Charles Dowding, a market gardener in the UK, starts almost all of his crops indoors, including some root vegetables. His YouTube channel is very popular, and has several helpful videos on seed starting and multi sowing, which he explains in a very down-to-earth, approachable manner. For more information about multisowing, go to his website: <https://charlesdowding.co.uk/multisowing/>.



Pollinator-Friendly, Medicinal Edible Wildflower Weed

By Sherri McCalla, Curator of the Herb and Iris Gardens

Chickweed, *Stellaria media*, is native to Europe but has naturalized in pretty much all areas of the United States. Chickweed really likes sunny to partially sunny spots where the ground is rich and moist in the cooler months of the year. It usually emerges in the Herb and Iris Gardens sometime in October, and it is a battle/joy (depending on the garden) until it gets hot around June where it will just seem to melt away. Chickweed is shallow rooted and easily removed by hand; it forms a rosette shaped clump that will root at its stem joints. Once it dies, it composts quickly and disappears. As its name implies, it has small, white, star shaped

flowers that bloom all winter here at the Garden. These flowers are much visited by honeybees that will venture out of their hives on warmer days of winter. Much of the United States considers this a broadleaf winter annual turfgrass weed; however, there are other aspects of this cool season plant that you, as a savvy supporter of the Garden, may already know. It is nutritionally dense including vitamin C, vitamin A, B vitamins, magnesium, iron, calcium, zinc, protein, fiber, and antioxidants. It is anti-inflammatory, a natural diuretic, prebiotic (helps balance gut flora), is astringent, and is a demulcent and expectorant (helps clear the crud out of your respiratory tract so you can cough out the nastiness). Chickweed is a very tasty edible, lovely in salads, on sandwiches, cooked like spinach, or thrown into pots of soup or beans.

Stellaria media is an excellent skin care and wound healer; it can be pureed or pounded into a goopy mush and placed on wounds, irritated skin, dry skin, sore joints, bruises, and more and allowed to do its very green thing -if that is too messy it can be wrapped in a bit of cheesecloth or stuffed into one of those reusable cloth tea bags to contain it a bit. It can also be infused (this is the term for steeping in water – a “tea” denotes that one actually has tea leaves in the mixture) and used as a soak or a wash. It can be infused into oil and used, and the oil can be an ingredient in a salve.

If you would like to learn more about this plant, including how to identify it, attend one of the Herbal Work Studies or volunteer with Sherri. Sherri may be reached at (901) 636-4134.



Peregrina (*Jatropha integerrima*)

Transitioning Sunny Tropicals Outside

By Tyler Taylor, Greenhouse Manager

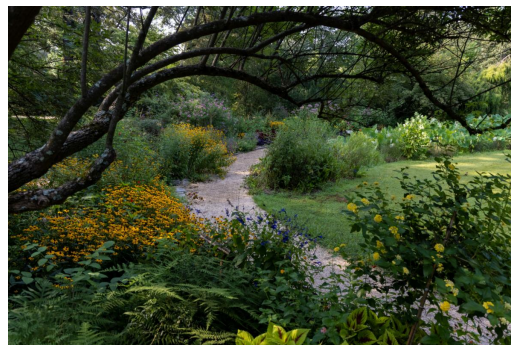
Greetings, Plant People! It is about that time of year for all of our wonderful botanical friends to start waking up outdoors, and the spring blooms are starting to open up in various spots around the Garden. If you're like many southerners I know, you also probably have a fair amount of tropical plants as well, since we teeter on a sub-tropical climate due to the location of our growing zone. This typically makes tropical plants very happy in the summertime due to our heat and humidity, but caring for these plant babies in the winter can be quite challenging.

I commonly get questions or e-mails regarding various tropical plants that people are overwintering in their homes, whether a semi-heated attic, garage, or sunroom. A recurring theme is that the plant, typically a hibiscus [*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*] or Bird of Paradise [*Strelitzia*], is yellowing and/or showing brown spots on the leaves. "It had a bunch of leaves when I brought it in but seems to be steadily losing them!" Usually I will also get a list of the myriad of "things that were done to it" to try to remedy the situation, but nine times out of ten the solution lies in the watering routine. It wasn't hungry or nutrient deficient; it was starting to rot. It's pretty difficult to achieve "full sun" requirements indoors during the winter, and even if you have a really bright, south-facing sunroom or greenhouse like I do, the UV penetration is still much lower during our winter, and the days are much shorter. This all means that the plant is growing much slower, therefore it is using less water and is much more susceptible to overwatering. Let that hibiscus dry out a good bit before you water it again, and when you do water it, don't worry about fully soaking the container, just give it a good drink.

If you've made it this far through the winter, your hibiscus may have just a few teeny leaves shooting out the tips of each branch, and if this is your first overwintering experience then you've been biting your nails waiting for these next few weeks of late winter to pass. Now is the time to start prepping your plant baby to transition outdoors. Every year, at this point, I give my mother a heart attack when I come over to prune her tropicals and prepare them for outside. She sucks air through her teeth as I cut her hibiscus back over two-thirds, dropping those few tiny leaves to the ground and leaving it looking like a bare, woody base of any typical deciduous shrub this time of year. Those leaves were great to hang onto to keep the plant going through winter, but now is the time to cut them back fairly hard so they can start pushing new growth with these longer days and better UV penetration. You don't want to build your plant for this next season off that growth you desperately held onto. Give it a light feed either with some diluted liquid fertilizer or a slow-release granular organic. Place the plant in your sunniest spot, if

you haven't already, and start to slowly increase your watering routine.

Before you know it, it will be the first week of April and you can start rolling the dice with that last frost date. All that new growth will lead to a much fuller plant, and you will be rewarded with many more blooms than you would have if you had left it spindly. When in doubt, if you're giving it an upgrade then it will respond positively. If you're uncertain of how well you've done thus far, cutting on it also will give you a good idea if it's truly dead or not, look for the white pith of the wood to still have some life in it, rather than crispy dead wood. Best of luck in your endeavors this season and keep one eye on your plant babies and another eye on the weather.



Something you want to learn more about?
Email our Director of Horticulture at
rick.pudwell@membg.org

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