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When one sees the tree in leaf, one thinks the beauty of the tree is in its leaves. And then one sees the bare tree. Sarah Brana Barak


Photo by J Blazek

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www.lsuagcenter.com

Creating a Pollinator Garden

Why more pollinator gardens

The traditional rural habitat of pollinators continues to decrease as urbanization and suburbanization encroaches upon natural nesting sites. Host plants have been reduced by pesticides, urbanization and changes in weather patterns. This has resulted in a reduction of the overall diversity of pollinating species. An estimated 35% of worldwide food production benefits from pollinators. Just as pollinators are disappearing, the need to increase pollinator dependent food crops is expanding. Some home gardeners and urban landscape professionals have begun to make changes to yards, public plantings, and derelict spaces to provide a more diverse and stratified habitat of host plants to attract pollinators. As a home gardener you can convert part of a yard or meadow into a healthy ecosystem that will support pollinators and contribute to food security. It only takes a little thought and planning.


Photo by K Burt

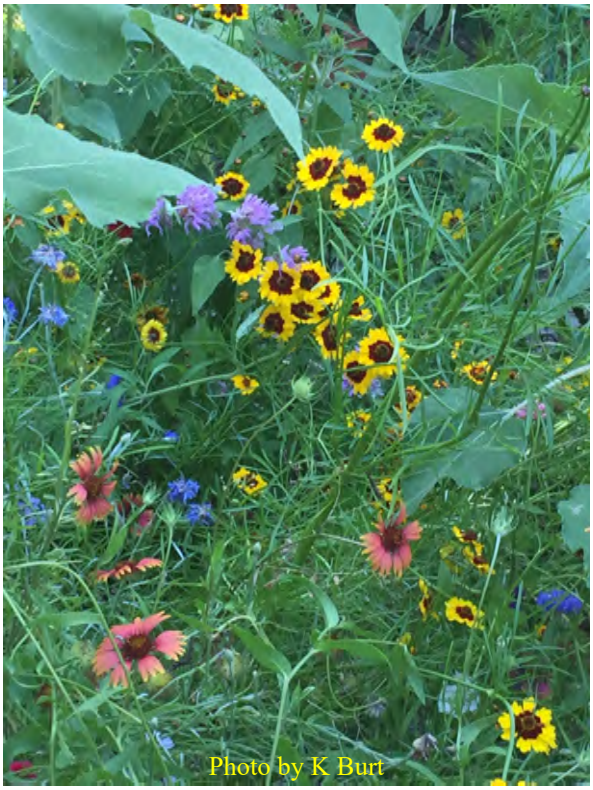
Where to begin

Determine the size and area you can dedicate to a pollinator garden. You may choose to convert what is currently lawn into a raised bed or decide to tackle a large area to create a wildflower meadow. The first two things to consider are the amount of sunlight and the soil.


Photo by K Burt

An area that has full sun from mid-morning to mid-afternoon is ideal. You can combine sunny and shady areas and still find host plants to suit the shadier locations. If your soil is not perfect, do not worry. You can still find plants, particularly natives and heirlooms, that will thrive. Containers can be an easy way to grow plants in a small space or when the soil is too poor to support plants growing close together. The key is to have plants that not only attract pollinators for feeding, but to also create an environment that hosts their entire life cycle. A good place to begin is with plants indigenous to Louisiana and the Southeast. There are lists of “tried and true” popular choices.

Creating a Pollinator Garden, continued



Include some tall plants, particularly ones with yellow blossoms, to attract the passing pollinators to the area.

If you follow the criteria below there is an enormous number of suitable plants from which to choose. Ideally you want varied plants that provide a continuous succession of flowering throughout the seasons. Use annuals, biennials, perennials, shrubs, bushes, grasses and even flowering trees. And do not forget herbs and edibles! Trees, shrubs and bushes are foundation plants. They do not have to be in the same planting area as the others but should be nearby.

Creating a Pollinator Garden, continued

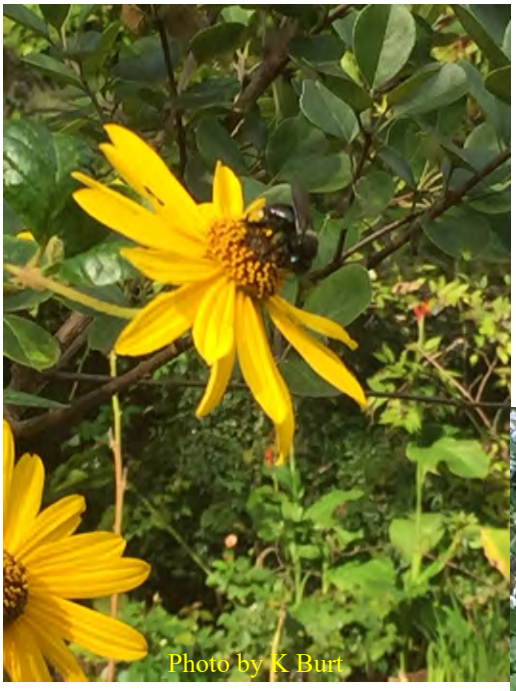


Photo by K Burt

The pollinators

The Pollinator Partnership (www.pollinator.org/guides) identifies a dozen different pollinators, but most home gardeners concentrate on three types: bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds. They are also the most satisfying because they are such a pleasure to watch.


Photo by K Burt

Each has their own flower preferences as well as feeding and nesting requirements. There are four ways to distinguish the flowers that attract each pollinator:

- flower color
- shape of the petals
- exposure of the stigma and anther
- the flowering season

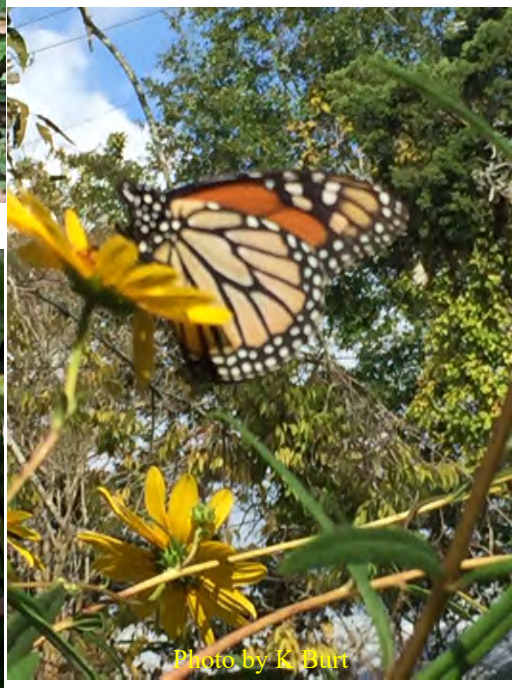


Photo by K Burt

Bees are one of the most significant pollinator. Honey bees specifically having been under threat. North America has over 4,000 native species of bees and Louisiana alone has over 200 species.

Bees are looking for pollen, so access to the stamen and anther is key. Bees are attracted initially by bright white, yellow, and blue/violet colored flowers.

Butterflies are after the nectar. In order to feed they need a landing pad, such as flat petals or flowers in clusters. They are initially drawn to the colors yellow, orange, pink and red.


Photo by JBlazek

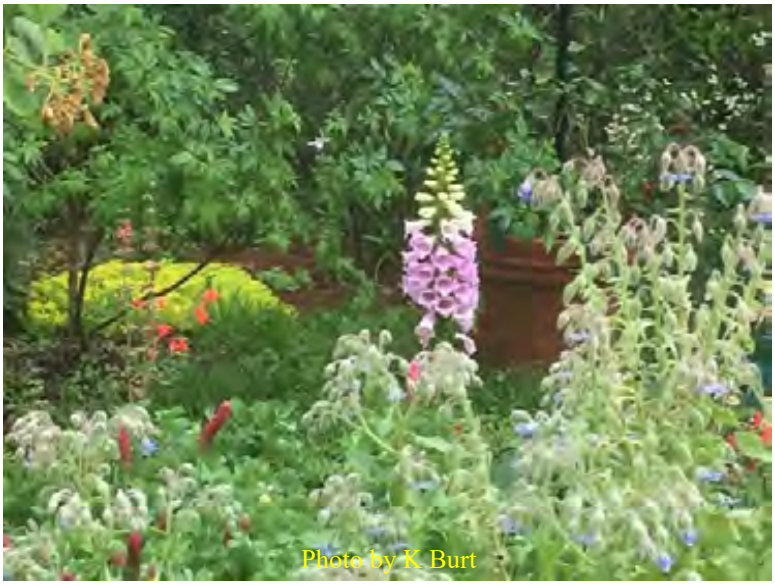
Creating a Pollinator Garden, continued

Hummingbirds are attracted to red, but because they hover and have long beaks, they go for any of the tubular shaped flowers that have lot of nectar. Surprisingly, they are exceptional pollinators. The pollen sticks to their feathers as well as their bills. Rarely resting, they cover a lot of territory in a day.

The habitat

Creating the right environment requires nesting sites and materials. Shallow pools attract butterflies. Mud puddles provide home building materials for native bees. Honey bees travel miles away from their nest to find pollen to bring back to feed their young. In contrast, 70% of native bees nest in the ground and never travel more than a few hundred yards from their food source. Leaving cut plant stems exposed, turning a few empty flowerpots upside down, and having small piles of twigs and brush provides a natural habitat for pollinators.

Each species of butterfly has a preferred larval plant where they lay their eggs. Your garden should have not only plants that attract butterflies, but also plants needed to feed their hatched caterpillars.



For more information on larval plants visit: www.lsuagcenter.com/portals/our_offices/parishes/east%20baton%20rouge/features/lawn_garden/butterfly-gardens

What and When to Plant

You can find packets of wildflower seeds from most of your favorite distributors. For best results look for ones for the Southeast region that have a list of the varieties on the packet. Some packets will be all annuals, some a mixture of annuals, biennials, and perennials. Sow in the spring after danger of frost or four to six weeks before first frost in the fall.

Annual wildflowers are self-seeding and some prefer chilling hours, which suits a fall sowing. A mixed packet is great because the non-flowering biennials and perennials will not be as noticeable the first year when they do not flower.

When you sow biennial seeds bear in mind that they will flower the second year.

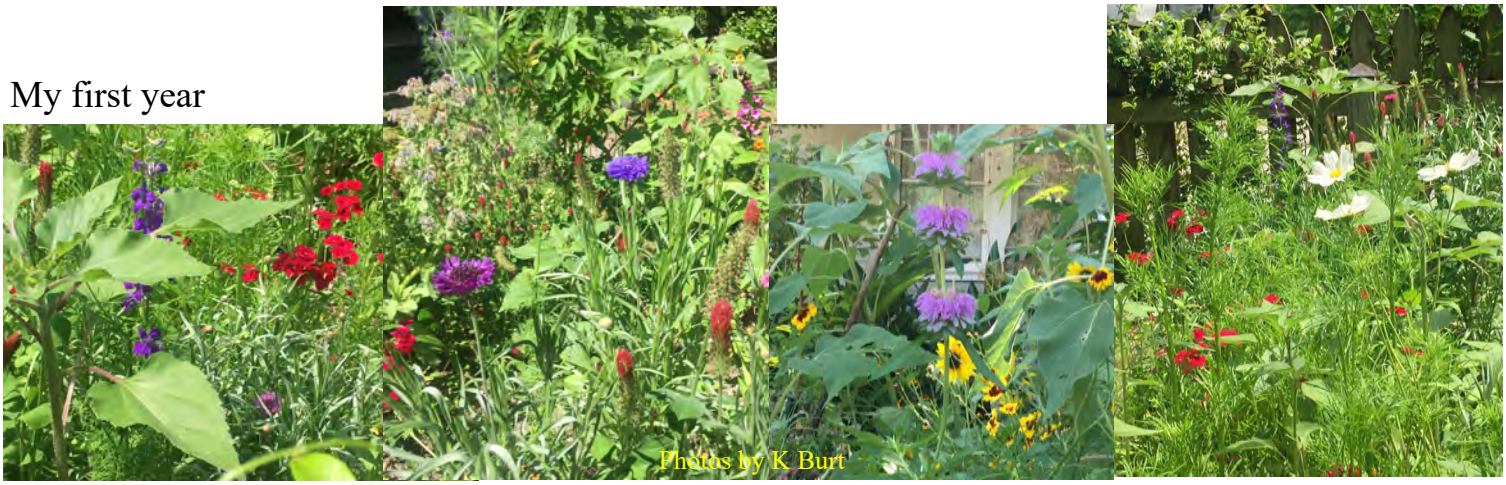
Likewise, perennials also may need some time to get established. Mulch them in the winter to protect the roots. Some self-seeding perennials can be aggressive because, as well as self-seeding, they come back from the roots and propagate by sending out runners from which the new plants arise.

If you are not already familiar with the growing habits of the seeds in your wildflower/native seed packet, look them up. It will pay dividends in planning a seasonal succession of flowering.

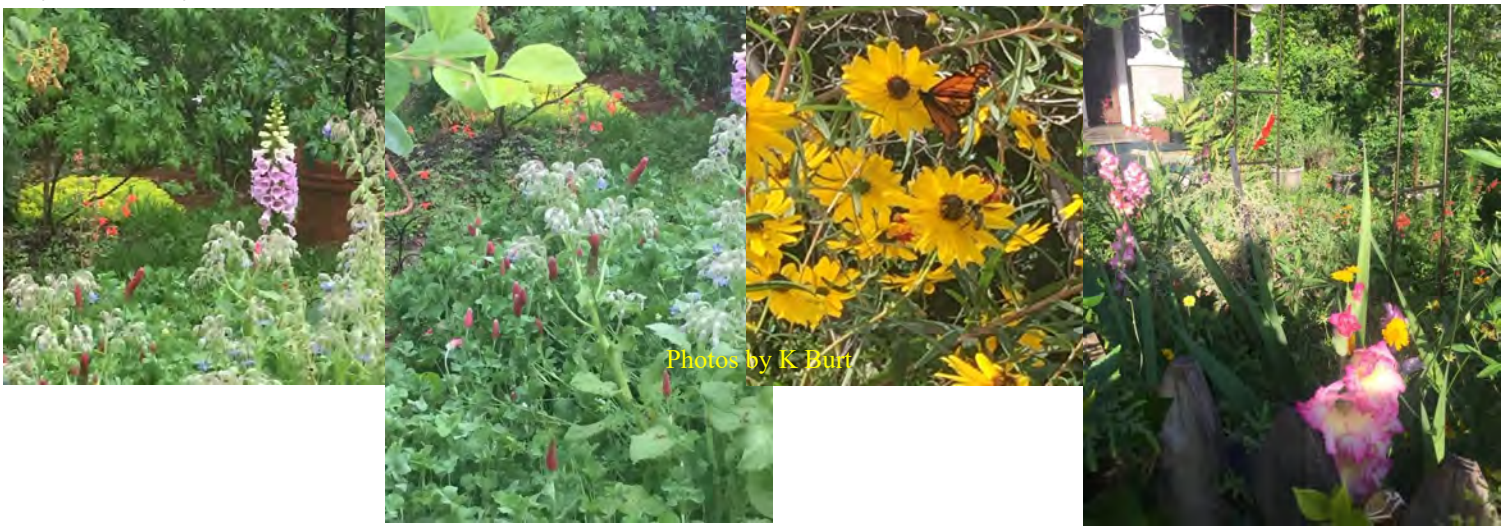
Creating a Pollinator Garden, continued

If you do not have suitable foundation plants already established, it may take a couple of years to do a front yard conversion as I did. Start with identifying and classifying your existing plants, prepare the soil and then sow the wildflowers accordingly. When the wildflowers emerge if there are any flowering seasonal gaps, you can fill in with appropriate plants to balance out your pollinator garden. The following year see what grows from self-seeding. Do not be afraid to pull up some of the more aggressive plants if they become invasive. Your garden will evolve each year.

My first year



My second year



Detailed instructions and examples of different types of pollinator gardens can be found at www.xerces.org/pollinator-conservation

Pollinator Gardening in Louisiana is an excellent resource found at www.LSUAgCenter.com URBAN POLLINATOR CONSERVATION It has a seasonal chart of plants to help you get started.

Kim Burt
Master Gardener
Vegucator

Overwintering Your Potted Plants


Photo by C Foster

Plant lovers know the wonderful feeling of having pots containing beautiful plants and flowers spread throughout one's deck and patio area. But when Old Man Winter arrives, how do we keep them alive until spring? Where do we store them? If you love buying pots and plants, your collection might contain a large quantity of pots including large-sized containers made of ceramic, wood, cement, or plastic. And the larger the container, the heavier it is to move.

I live close to Lake Pontchartrain in a raised house twelve feet above ground. The deck area, a 600 square-foot extension of our indoor living space, is filled with beautiful potted plants. My ceramic pot collection goes back twenty years, having picked them up at local nurseries. Ranging from small to exceptionally large-sized pots containing hibiscus trees, they can weigh upwards of 150 pounds.


Photo by C Foster


Photo by C Foster

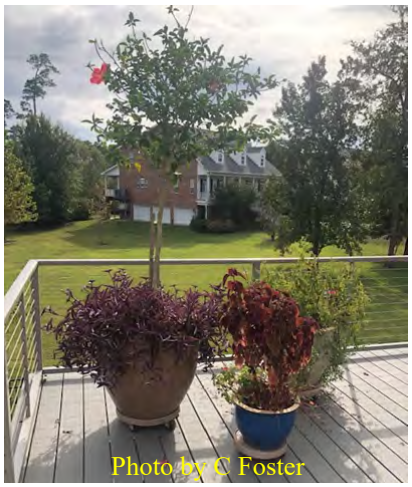


Photo by C Foster

The first December in this house brought with it the challenge of where and how to overwinter these plants, which I had kept in the garage in our previous home. But a twelve-foot-high deck and a lot of very heavy pots eliminated that option.

Overwintering Your Potted Plants, continued

The solution was to create a greenhouse on the deck where the plants could safely overwinter, but to do so I needed to solve several problems. The greenhouse needed protection from the elements. It needed to be stable and not blow away with the winds off the lake. It needed good light exposure that also would help to maintain warmth within the space. These conditions eliminated stand-alone housing units that could be purchased on-line. The solution was a protective covering attached to the deck.

If you have pets, consider choosing a location that they will not go tearing through in search of the elusive squirrel. Think about timing of sunlight exposure. I chose a space for the homemade greenhouse off the master bedroom. It was a covered deck space that was smaller than the main covered deck off the kitchen. Roof, floor, and two of the four sides were already available. My chosen location happened to be a southern exposure, thus ensuring daily sunlight and warmth within the greenhouse. Finally, there was a water source near the chosen zone.


Photo by C Foster


20 MIL vinyl tarp

So how did I tackle the two open sides of the space? My solution was to utilize clear heavy weight tarps one might see at outdoor cafes or on a boat. Researching my options led me to the on-line company My Tarp (www.mytarp.com). These clear vinyl tarps can also be used as curtains for deck or patio enclosures. They are 20 MIL thick, have webbing reinforced hems, and grommets on all four sides.

When choosing tarp sizes to purchase, measure your height, roof to floor. For tarp width, you want extra width to ensure they cross over each other. This limits plant exposure to the colder air that can blow into the enclosed space through gaps. In my case, I bought three 10 by 10 foot tarps.

Overwintering Your Potted Plants, continued


Photo by C Foster

Attaching the tarps to the roof and side walls was accomplished by installing eye screws to the hardy board of the house with the spacing determined by the tarp's grommet spacing. Attaching the tarp to the eye screws was accomplished using six-inch bungee cords.


Photo by C Foster


Photo by C Foster

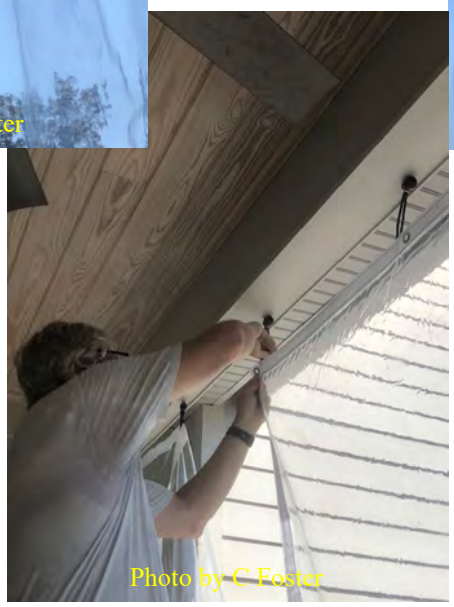


Photo by C Foster


Photo by C Foster

Overwintering Your Potted Plants, continued

How did we move the pots from their deck position into the greenhouse? I used plant dollies from DeVault Enterprises. These heavy-duty dollies can be purchased on-line in multiple colors and diameters. They are perfect under all my pots and allow me to turn the pots periodically for balanced light exposure, to move pots to a more protected area before a hurricane, and to move them into the newly constructed porch greenhouse.

My homemade greenhouse is used from early December to late February. Over the course of three winters very few plants have died. So I save money because there is no need to replace dead plants that have been left out in the cold of winter. In the spring I have a jump start on a beautiful porch again. The pots already contain established plants that only require a little pruning to get them in shape. The only negative situation I have observed each winter are whiteflies that take up residence on the plants during winter months. Fortunately, they have not negatively impacted plant health when the pots are moved in spring.


Photo by C Foster

Christine Foster
Master Gardener

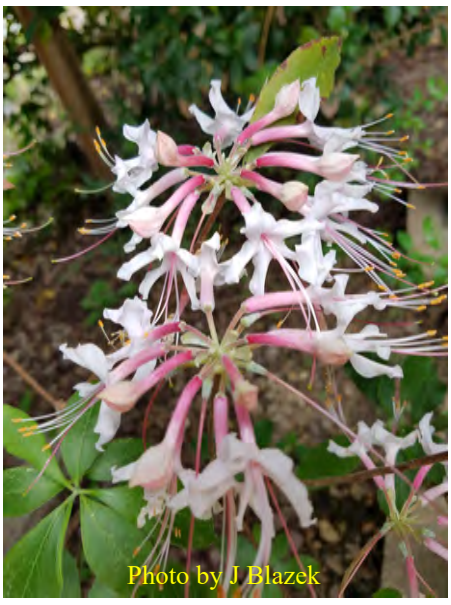
Miss Polly's Daffodils

My next-door neighbor insists that stolen plants grow the best and just to prove it, she has a beautiful crape myrtle growing in her front yard that came from an offshoot taken from my tree. I remember trying to give it to her one day. "No, no ... I'll take it when you aren't looking" she informed me. And she did.

Now we can debate whether or not pinching off a crape myrtle shoot from a neighbor's plant is actually an act of theft. And we would certainly discourage anyone helping themselves to a bit of this or that from a nursery, but I think it's entirely possible that my neighbor is on to something.

I have a confession: the daffodils in my yard were stolen. I call them "Miss Polly's Daffodils." And, yes, I took them from private property. And yes, they are flourishing. Allow me to explain. Growing up in suburbia, I lived in a sterile rectangle of St. Augustine grass with a single oak tree, a few azaleas, and one rose bed. My dad cut the grass every Friday during the spring and summer while my mom tended to the roses as little as possible so as not to mess up her hair. My parents preferred their hobbies to take place indoors where it was clean, bug free and always 72 degrees.

I cherished the days when Mom would announce that we were going to visit her friend, Polly. We would drive down the highway out of town and eventually pull into a long driveway which led to a modest house set back from the road. Mom and Miss Polly, as I called her, would drink endless mugs of percolated coffee and after a few moments of sitting politely on the couch, I would be excused to wander outside.



Miss Polly's yard was a magical and enchanting place. There were azaleas and camellias and dogwoods. A plethora of Southern plants to behold. The magic was that, instead of the typical rectangular suburban lot like we had, Miss Polly's yard was somehow more natural and peaceful and less constrained. The property was a little hilly and dropped off in the back into the woods. There was a patio terrace off to the side with a small fishpond and a swing. I can remember a few times when the weather was cool enough, Mom and Miss Polly would have their coffee on the terrace, sitting in chairs around an ornate metal table. There were bird feeders and birdbaths and bright blooms of this and that. I loved to explore, imagining what it would be like to live in that garden and never go inside.

Miss Polly's Daffodils, continued

Like good gardeners everywhere, Miss Polly loved to share. I would leave our visit with a little cutting of something in a cup. I would take that cutting home and nurture it in a pot on my own back patio. Eventually I convinced my father to improvise a winter nursery in a corner of our garage to protect my charges. My plants looked lovely in front of the car.

A visit to Miss Polly's was always a science lesson and it was fun to me. When I grew older, it was Miss Polly who helped to coach our 4-H horticulture team. I have very fond memories of strolling around with her as she taught us to identify the common plants in a Mississippi landscape. She was truly my earliest and most influential inspiration for becoming a Louisiana Master Gardener.

Miss Polly is gone now, sadly, as is her house. A few years ago I drove by the seemingly abandoned property. I noticed bright yellow daffodils blooming, near the highway. I knew that they were not there by accident. They had been planted decades ago by Miss Polly. There were hundreds of daffodils. I felt certain Miss Polly would be thrilled to share a few with me.

A few months later I stealthily returned with a shovel and a plastic grocery bag. My dad drove the getaway car.

Green shoots came up the first spring but did not bloom. The second year I had just a single bloom but since then they have flourished and multiplied. This past February I had about a dozen blooms. Each one has me smiling and remembering Miss Polly, a sweet lady who loved plants and especially loved sharing them…even with a thief.

Billie Stanga
Master Gardener

Gypsum

Walking down the soil amendments aisle at a big box store can be a scary experience. Long forgotten memories of high school chemistry classes seep into current thoughts as the words nitrogen (N), phosphorous (P), and potassium (K) appear on different colored bags along with pictures of the most perfect looking plants. There is a lot of mystery down these aisles and I would like to shine some light on a product that most might overlook and some use for the wrong reasons. Let's take a look at gypsum and learn to use it properly in a garden or landscape setting.

Gypsum is a naturally occurring mineral found within Earth's crust. When talking with folks outside of agriculture, they will tell you that gypsum is the main component in sheet rock or gypsum board. To those working in the agriculture industry, gypsum is much more than that. Gypsum, calcium sulphate dihydrate ($CaSO_4$ x $2H_2O$), is a naturally occurring mineral made up of 19% calcium and 15% sulfur, essential nutrients to all plants.

Calcium plays several important roles inside of a plant. It is known as the major constituent of the cell wall, a distinguishing feature separating plants cells from animal cells. The cell wall provides a structure to hold plants upright. It would be like the skeletal system found in animals. Calcium also plays a role in cellular growth and development and in the translocation of photosynthates and nutrients. It is normally added to soil in the form of lime ($CaCO_3$). Lime is mainly added to soils to increase the soil pH, but it also supplies calcium to the soil solution. Gypsum supplies calcium with minimal effects on soil pH.

Like calcium, sulfur performs many functions inside of a plant too. The main function of sulfur is in the formation of sulfur-containing amino acids. However, sulfur is also is used in joining polypeptide chains through the formation of disulfide bonds which allow the polypeptide chains to fold onto themselves. Sulfur is also found in volatile compounds that are responsible for the distinguishable odor of mustard and allium plants.

Gypsum, continued

Gypsum can also improve the structure of sodium (Na) affected soils, which can be very problematic for growers closer to the coast that have experienced surges from tropical storms and hurricanes. Sodium by itself is a cation, meaning it has a positive charge (Na+). When sodium occupies most cation exchange sites with its one positive charge, the soil colloids tend to disperse and easily compact because of poor soil structure. The addition of gypsum provides calcium, a stronger cation with two positive charges (Ca++). Calcium, with its stronger bond, knocks sodium off the exchange site. Sodium is eventually leached out as sodium sulfate (Na_2SO_4). The soil then flocculates (soil particles clump or aggregate together) with more calcium on the exchange sites, thus improving the soil structure over time.

Some retailers and salespeople have taken the claim of gypsum improving soil structure a little too far. One manufacturer of gypsum makes the claim that gypsum works like "10,000 little hoes in the soil". Remember, gypsum is used to improve the structure of soils that have been compacted due to an overabundance of sodium. This process will not work on soils compacted through physical means like surface pooling of water and construction stress.

Gypsum is most useful to growers as a supplemental form of calcium that does not affect soil pH. Secondly, it also provides sulfur to the soil. And lastly, it can help improve structure on soils contaminated with excess sodium.

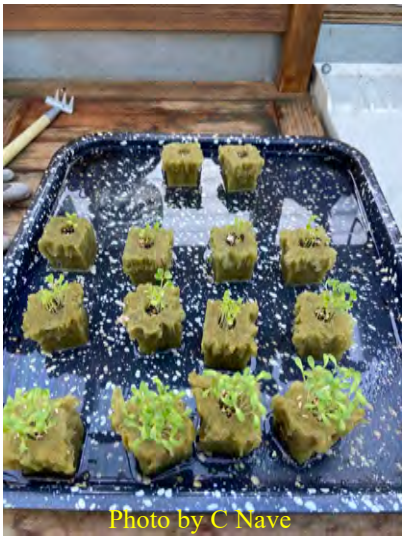
Hopefully, this information can assist you in making an informed decision while shopping the fertilizer aisle at your local garden center. Remember, look past the pretty pictures and alluring advertisements. Know what you are buying and why you are buying it. Just because the label makes an outlandish claim, it does not always mean it is true.

Will Afton
County Agent
LSU AgCenter

A Small Hydroponics Unit for the Home

This is a hydroponics unit I purchased for my home. The set up is simple.

First place seeds into the seeding beds.



Next place the seeding beds in a pan of water. After the seeds start sprouting place the beds in the tower wall pockets.

You could also purchase a small plant, rinse the dirt away and place it into a seeding bed, then immediately into the tower wall.

A Small Hydroponics Unit for the Home, continued

Photo by C Nave

Add water into the bottom well.
Check the pH of the water and adjust to 7.


Photo by C Nave

Add the nutrient solution. Set the timer to rinse the water and nutrients over the plant roots every 15 minutes. Check water level every few days. Place more nutrients in the water tank about once a week, depending on how much water the plants have absorbed. Sit back and watch them grow. It takes about five to six weeks for the greens to be ready to eat.


Photo by C Nave

These plants have been in the tower about 12 days.

Chris Nave
Master Gardener

A Tutorial on Planting Asparagus

I always had an asparagus bed in Illinois but when I moved to Louisiana 30 years ago no one was growing it here. So, I assumed it did not grow well this far south. After 20 years I figured out my assumption was incorrect and I finally put in an asparagus bed. There are more challenges to growing it in our area, the heat, the humidity, the diseases but a properly prepared bed can produce for a decade. However, growing asparagus is not a short-term proposition. It can take two to three years before the first harvest. But if you love fresh asparagus, as I do, it is well worth the wait. Now is the perfect time to prepare the bed if you want to grow asparagus in your garden. After the initial bed preparation and planting, asparagus requires minimal labor.


Photo by L Steffee

Mature asparagus shoots grow into floppy, fern-like fronds that can exceed seven feet in height. The plants can be tamed a bit with a support system of stakes and twine. They will still look rather messy, though. If you are a person who prefers manicured, formal gardens and sheared box hedges, then this may not be the plant for you. A row of asparagus plants can work at the back of a border, along a fence line, on the north or west side of an existing bed. Or they can be in a dedicated asparagus bed that is four to five feet in length and two to four feet wide. In Illinois I had a bed on either side of my driveway. That bed had lots of air circulation and took up only about two feet on each side of the driveway. Here in Folsom, I have a raised, curved bed about three feet wide that creates a living fence around my keyhole garden with a four-foot path separating the two gardens.

Asparagus prefers sandy loam but will grow in any soil except heavy clay. To have a healthy bed that produces for years, it is important to have a site with good drainage and lots of organic matter. Some growers recommend creating the bed in previously uncultivated soil to minimize soil-born disease. Choose a good location and remove all grass and weeds prior to bed preparation. The age-old method of tilling to a depth of 12 inches and incorporating a lot of compost, rotted manure, or other organic matter is an option. However, due to our wet and humid climate and mild winters, asparagus here does much better in a raised bed with good drainage. My asparagus bed was created as a raised garden on top of clay. This significantly improved soil fertility and drainage and made working in it easier on my back. I first put down a thick layer of cardboard to smother the grass and weeds that managed to thrive in the clay. I covered that with a six-foot wide strip of compost that was 18 inches deep.

A Tutorial on Planting Asparagus, continued

It is important to get a soil test whichever method you choose to create the garden bed. Asparagus prefers a nearly neutral pH of 6.5 to 7.0. It is best to amend your soil in the fall months with lime to increase the pH, or with sulfur to lower the pH. It can take up to six months to significantly change the pH of the soil. The Agcenter will make soil amendment recommendations based on to your soil test results. These recommendations include amounts of specific fertilizer components, as well as pH amendments. Be sure to include what you plan to grow in that area on the test kit documentation slip. The recommendations will be specific to the site and the crop. If you have difficulty interpreting the results of the soil test on your own, call Will Afton, our LSU county agent. He will help you with the exact amounts to apply. Typical fertilizing recommendations include adding one to two pounds of 5-10-10 fertilizer per 100 square foot of bed prior to planting. Then in August and February each year apply a side-dressing of one pound per 100 square foot. I do not use a purchased fertilizer. Instead, I top-dress the planting area with two to three inches of compost in August and February. Soil tests of my compost have shown extremely high levels of all the required soil nutrients.

Asparagus grows best in full sun with afternoon shade in the summer. When selecting your asparagus garden location remember that the afternoon sun location in early January is not the same as mid-summer. You really want to protect your tender asparagus plants from the brutal summer sun. It is easier to choose an appropriate location now than to have to provide a shade cloth every summer.

Good air circulation is also important. Asparagus is a perennial and will spread each year to fill an area of two to three feet at the base of the plant. It will grow into thick floppy plants that are seven feet tall. So, do not crowd the plants who live at the back of a bed or along a fence. Give them breathing space with good air circulation. Asparagus is susceptible to a few diseases, but ensuring good air flow, good drainage, drip irrigation, and initial selection of disease resistant varieties will go a long way towards minimizing problems.

Asparagus production ranges from cool/temperate climates to the subtropics, zones 3 to 8. However, the further south you go, the lower the yield and the shorter the plant life. In northern regions you can divide the plants in the fall the way you would other perennials. Most experts do not recommend dividing the plants in the southern regions.

A Tutorial on Planting Asparagus, continued

Asparagus can be planted from seed or one-year-old crowns. Planting from seed is less expensive, will delay crop harvest by an entire year and will be more labor intensive. Weeding and watering the seedlings is time consuming. If you plant crowns you can take a small harvest the first year of planting, although it is better to wait until the second year. Harvesting too soon will reduce yield and quality significantly. If you want to give the plants a healthy start and be harvesting them for years to come, postpone your initial harvest for two years.

Recommended varieties for Louisiana are Jersey Knight, Jersey Supreme, Jersey Giant, and Purple Passion. Most of these are all-male hybrids bred for disease resistance. The spears are large and flavorful and generally do well in our area. I planted crowns of Jersey Giant which I ordered on-line from a reputable seed company. You can plant crowns as soon as the soil is workable in the spring. In our area, that means January or February. Or as soon as crowns are available to be purchased on-line. There are some interesting varieties of asparagus recommended for Florida which are heat-tolerant and disease-resistant, such as UC-157. This variety generally yields less than the Jersey types but will remain in tight spears in warmer temperatures. Most Jersey types need to be cut at five inches or less if the temperature is above 70 degrees Fahrenheit or they will begin to open.

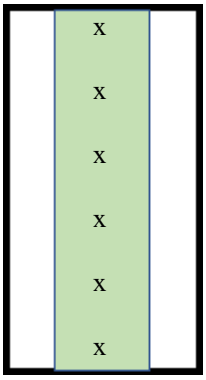


Figure 1a

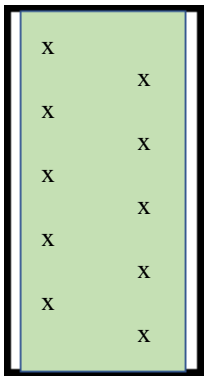


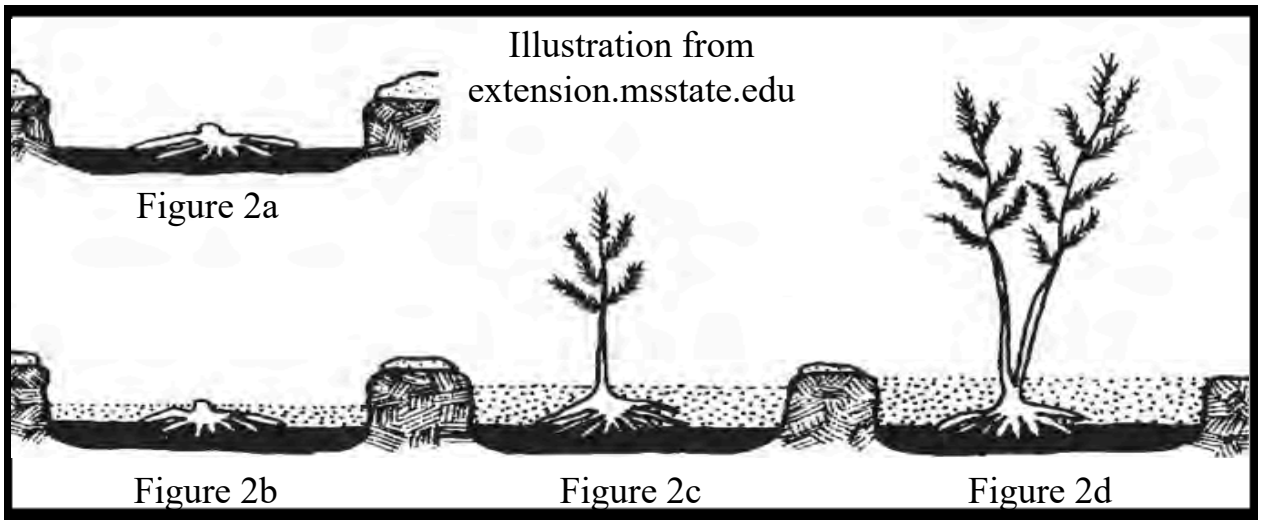
Figure 1b

Your raised bed should be three feet wide to accommodate one row of asparagus plants (figure 1a). Dig a trench down the center of the bed approximately twelve inches wide by eight inches deep. Add a scoop of soil to create a mound four inches high and twelve inches in diameter with about eight to twelve inches of space between each mound. Create these mounds all the way down the trench. For a more intensive production, dig a trench two feet wide and eight inches deep (figure 1b). Then stagger the mounds in two rows down the trench.

Draw your plan out on paper so you can figure out how many crowns you need to order. I usually order two or three more than I need just in case some of the crowns look puny. Usually, you must order the crowns in bunches of 10 or 12. I worked backwards, knowing I had to order 24 crowns. I prepared a bed large enough to accommodate 22-24 crowns. Crowns should be planted as soon as they arrive or stored in a cool dark spot covered with a damp cloth or newspaper.

A Tutorial on Planting Asparagus, continued

To plant the crowns, place one on each mound with the roots spread out in all directions. Each will look like a little octopus sitting on a mound of soil (figure 2a). To be certain you have placed them right side up, they will appear to have tiny hairs on the top and fat roots on the bottom. Partially fill in the trench to cover the tops of the crowns with about two inches of soil (figure 2b). Water thoroughly. As spears appear during the growing season, continue to fill in the trench being careful not to bury the emerging shoots (figure 2c). Once the trench is filled (figure 2d), top with a few inches of compost to create a slight mound taking care not to damage the tender little asparagus spears.



Then cover the entire bed with three inches of light fluffy mulch. I prefer pine straw because it does not mat. Mulching will reduce weed germination and help maintain even soil moisture. It should not be so thick or heavy as to prevent spear production which will continue throughout the growing season. During the first two years it is important to avoid letting the soil get too dry. The bed will need one to two inches of rainfall or supplemental irrigation once a week. Drip irrigation will help prevent diseases. A soil corer or moisture meter is useful. You want to be certain the bed is watered to a depth of eight inches.

Asparagus is a perennial that should provide you with produce for years to come. Your yearly harvest will be greatly increased by ensuring your plants get off to a healthy start. If you plant crowns and take good care of the bed you should have at least five or six skinny fern-like fronds per crown at the end of the first growing season. By the end of two or three years, each base should have several dozen fronds per plant.

A Tutorial on Planting Asparagus, continued

Did you know that Asparagus is native to the seacoasts of Europe and eastern Asia? The plant is known for its salt tolerance. Some gardeners suggest using a dilute salt solution on the planting bed to reduce weeds. I do not recommend this practice. The plants should last for many years and the salt accumulation over time will damage the asparagus and surrounding plants. So, if you do hear of some gardener using saltwater on asparagus plants, you know they are not completely crazy.

Asparagus requires a period of dormancy each year for a healthy plant and good production. The fall and winter temperatures in southeast Louisiana may be insufficient for the plant to become dormant on its own. You can do a few things to encourage dormancy, so the plants get a good winter's rest and are ready to produce lots of tasty spears in the spring:

- Do not provide any supplemental irrigation after October.
- Do not trim any fronds after October because that may stimulate more growth.
- Around the end of November, cut off all the plants at soil level. Remove debris and any weeds.
- Make sure there is no more than one inch of mulch covering the plants over winter. This will give the roots a chance to stay cold and dry. Heavy mulch will just retain moisture and could lead to root rot.

During dormancy you would add lime to increase the pH of the soil, if indicated by a soil test. In the early spring each year before the spears begin to appear, add two to three inches of compost, or one pound per 100 square foot of 5-10-10 fertilizer to the planting bed. Asparagus will start sending up shoots when the soil temperature rises above 50 degrees Fahrenheit.

These plants have not achieved full dormancy and are about to be cut and sent to the compost pile.

You could safely harvest a few spears the first spring, but the plants will be more vigorous if you postpone harvest until the second year. However, if you must, the rules for first year harvest are 1) do not harvest anything with a diameter smaller than a pencil, 2) harvest only for two weeks after spear production starts, and 3) harvest only one or two spears from each crown. The second year you can harvest for two to six weeks but again, no spears with a small diameter as this will be detrimental to the plant's long-term vigor.

A Tutorial on Planting Asparagus, continued

To harvest, cut the spears just below the surface. Be careful not to damage any surrounding spears especially those which are about to emerge. The spears can also be snapped off at the surface. Place spears in a refrigerator immediately. If left warm or at room temperature, the spears will toughen and become fibrous. It is best to place them in a cup filled with an inch or so of water, as you would store cut flowers. Or they can be loosely wrapped in a moist paper towel and stored in a perforated bag. Do not seal in a plastic bag or the spears will become soggy.

After four to six weeks of harvesting allow the rest of the emerging spears to grow into lacy fronds until autumn. This will ensure the roots get enough stored nutrients to make a healthy plant in the spring. Keep the bed weeded and watered until late October. By the third year, asparagus can survive periods of drought. Though, to improve the quantity and quality of your next spring harvest, provide supplemental drip irrigation as needed through the summer and early fall. Irrigation, along with mulching and ensuring afternoon shade, will greatly improve your results.

During the first two years you will have a lot of empty space in your asparagus bed. I took advantage of that and planted peppers and tomatoes on either side of the crowns. I had great crops of tomatoes and peppers. Some sources believe that the solanine produced by tomatoes will help to deter asparagus beetles. Other plants that play well with asparagus are basil, parsley, dill, comfrey, and coriander. Do not plant alliums, potatoes, carrots, or other root crops in this bed. During the first two years you do not want anything to disturb those roots or developing spears. After two years your asparagus plants should be taking over the space and you do not want to reduce airflow circulation by planting other crops in between.

There is a lot of information on the LSU website on the pests and diseases that affect asparagus. I personally have never had any problems with these. As with many plants, good cultural practice and a certain tolerance for some damage seems to work well. I hope by stating that I have not jinxed myself!

Resources:
Lsuagcenter.com

Mississippi State University extension.Msstate.edu

Texas A&M Agrilife Extension
agrilifeextension.tamu.edu

Laura Steffee
Master Gardener
Vegucator

STMGA Propagation Workshop
Fall 2020

The third annual St. Tammany Master Gardener Association's propagation workshop occurred on November 2, 2020. It was originally scheduled the day Hurricane Zeta visited Louisiana. What else could we expect from 2020! The workshop was held in the gardens of Paul and Susie Andres in Slidell. Eighteen master gardeners attended. The weather cooperated with clear skies and cooler temperatures. We were even able to light up the fire pit this year.


Photo by P Andres


Photo by P Andres

The workshop, an event to encourage master gardeners to produce plants for STMGA's Northshore Garden & Plant Sale, was organized around the book *Plant Parenting* by Leslie F. Halleck. COVID-19 precautions, such as, social distancing and masks, were observed during the workshop. The entire session was held in the outside gardens because of the ideal weather. All participants had hands-on opportunities to propagate various plants. Although a few varieties of vegetables were available, most of the master gardeners concentrated on propagating the ornamentals.

Susie Andres prepared a delicious lunch and all enjoyed a relaxing afternoon. A few folks even learned something! Looking forward to doing it again next year.


Photo by P Andres

STMGA Propagation Workshop, continued

The top 10 plants that were “slipped” or rooted during the propagation workshop:

The Schefflera was the most popular and easiest to root. Many attendees brought home the starts from this plant.

The orange Jacobina, originally from Barbara Moore, is just two years old. It will even be better at next year’s workshop.

The pink Jacobina, my initial introduction to this cultivar, is great for a shady area.

The Philippian Violet, a mainstay of my garden, blooms both in spring and again in autumn.

The Esperanza or Texas Yellow Bell, common in the Texas hill country, is an aggressive bush that can spread through seeds if not pruned carefully. It is native to the southeast United States.

The Red Firespike, a must for any pollinator garden, blooms from mid-August until the first frost forces it into dormancy.

STMGA Propagation Workshop, continued

This milkweed attracted several Monarch butterflies, caterpillars, and chrysalis that we observed.

The Hemelia, great for pollinator gardens, blooms in the spring and summer providing a source of nectar. In autumn its berries provide food for other wildlife.

The white shrimp plant is about 5 years old. The coral shrimp plant, a new addition, will take a year to become established.

Will Afton, LSU Agcenter County Agent, did a citrus grafting demonstration during the workshop. The graft is now resting in the greenhouse. I am hoping to follow its progress to maturity.


Photo by P Andres

Paul Andres
Master Gardener
Vegucator

A Message From The STMGA President

I am very pleased to take on the duties as St. Tammany Master Gardener Association president for 2021-2022. A little about myself – I retired from a defense contractor in 2012. I became a master gardener in 2013 and began my happy retirement life in gardening. I have served as *The Gardengoer* Editor in 2013-2016, Photographer in 2016, Publicity Chair in 2017, Northshore Garden & Plant Sale Chair in 2017-2018, and Vice President in 2019-2020. Serving the organization gave me the opportunity to get to know many of our members, and to understand the mission and functions or our organization. This is the year to refresh our efforts to fulfill our mission.

The Mission Statement of the Association is:

A. To increase knowledge of horticulture to its members and the general public.
B. To support and assist the Louisiana Agricultural Extension Service by providing the community with information on good gardening practices through news articles, clinics, presentations at garden clubs, schools and other community groups, and by telephone contacts.
C. To assist new master gardeners in fulfilling their volunteer commitment.

Our association faces new challenges in 2021 as we continue to be impacted by COVID-19. We will need to expand our toolbox of methods and ideas to meet our mission. Where appropriate, we can host face-to-face events using social distancing and wearing masks. We can schedule workdays in our public gardens and school gardens following COVID-19 guidelines. We can produce lectures through Zoom and video our table talks for our YouTube channel. We can continue our partnership with St. Tammany Library by giving a library lecture over Zoom. Garden clubs are meeting and looking for speakers. We are looking for new projects to initiate. If you have ideas for new projects, contact Mimi Padgett for educational projects and Dave Maher for fingers-in-the-dirt projects.

A Message From The STMGA President, continued

The Class of 2020 is busy planning our Spring Seminar 2021. It will be different, but effective in educating our members and the public. Planning for our Northshore Garden & Plant Sale March 19 and 20, 2021 is well underway. Again, the operational word is "different." Our vendor layout at the Fairgrounds will be spread out. Some things we cannot do as usual, but alternate ways are being planned.

We are coming out of a depressing year of 2020. We all hope to see the end of the pandemic in 2021. Let's get creative, learn new things, and become the master gardeners of our new era.

Jan Pesses
STMGA President 2021-2022

2021 Northshore Garden & Plant Sale

I don't know about you, but I'm ready to get started doing master gardener activities again! We are in the planning stages for the Plant Sale scheduled Friday, March 19 and Saturday, March 20, 2021. Will and I are at work using Louisiana State and LSU guidelines to make this the safest gathering that we can. There will definitely be some changes to the format, but we will have a plant sale!

Will sent out a survey to see how many may be able to volunteer for the Plant Sale. If you have not already done so, please fill out the survey and send it back to Will. It is only three questions.

I am looking for three chairpersons for the Plant Sale, one for coordination of the volunteers, one for the Plant Holding Area and a chair for the Set Up/Clean Up Committee. Please consider volunteering for one of these important positions. We need all areas to be covered. Call or email me and I will explain the duties for these positions.

I hope you have started propagating your plants to donate to the Backyard Plant booth. Lisann has put the instructions in MoM for the requirements to submit a plant donation. There will be black plastic pots available at the January meeting for you to take home and fill with your donated transplants. Thanks so much to Sue McGuire for giving these to us.

As in the past, we will begin signing up volunteers at the STMGA membership meeting on January 20, 2021. You will also be able to sign up via email after that date.

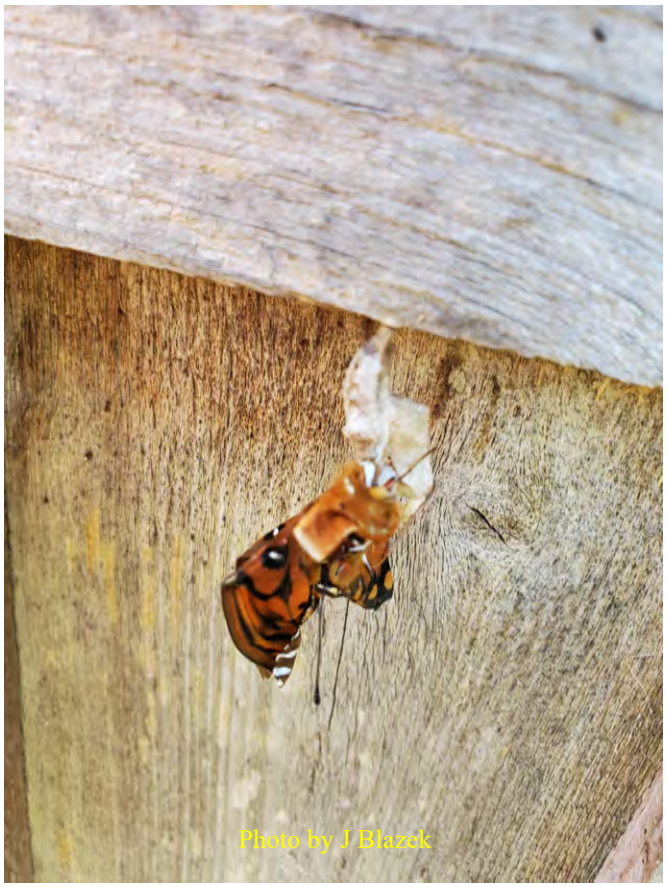
Peggy and Pam are in contact with all our vendors and most have said they are eager to be back this year. Kappy is working on getting the Food Trucks as well.

Will is trying to get many of the same speakers we had lined up for last year's canceled Plant Sale. We had some fantastic topics and I hope he will be able to get them to re-commit this year.

As I said at the outset, this Plant Sale will look different but Will and the Plant Sale chairpersons are committed to having it. We will follow all of the state and LSU guidelines to make it safe for you, our vendors and the patrons to attend. Call or email me with any questions. We look forward to this event!

Julie Deus
Northshore Garden & Plant Sale

Emerging Gulf Fritillary



Emerging Gulf Fritillary


Photo by J Blazek


Photo by J Blazek

Jamie Blazek
Master Gardener
Vegucator
Editor, *The Gardengoer*

THE GARDENGOER

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE

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