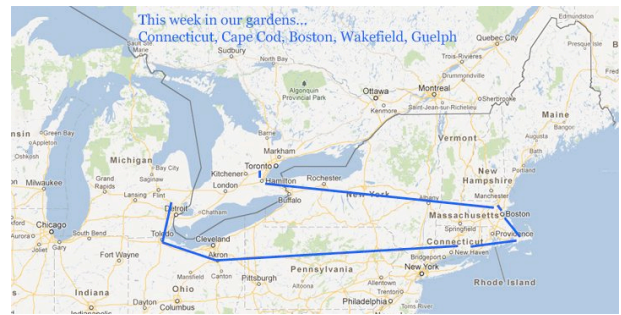


**GardenAtoZ.com** presents:

## *What's Up* this week garden news

Janet Macunovich & Steven Nikkila help you grow  
Issue #180, May 16, 2012

We're all over the map lately to help gardens grow.



That's how it is in spring, when so much is new every day and going on all at once. Stepping out into a garden to see what's up can easily become more of a jig than a waltz! This past week we tripped that light fantastic across a quarter-continent. That music continues this week as we plant what we brought home from Mother's Day garden center shopping.

Come dance with us to energize and beautify your garden.

Your links to this week's news on  
**GardenAtoZ.com**

<http://www.gardenatoz.com/what%27s-up!/ensemble-weekly-editions/the-latest/>



*We gardened last week in southeast Michigan (pp. 10-12), central Connecticut (pp. 5-6, 10, 11), Cape Cod (pg. 4), Boston (pp. 7, 9), and Guelph, Ontario (next issue!) These trips are fun, and always an adventure. We're grateful for the clients who invited us out, the friends who helped us get the work done, and the rich variety of tips that resulted, which we now share with you.*

Bookmark this Master Key  
to stories we post each  
week at GardenAtoZ.com

*(Pardon our dust: As of May 16 we begin catching it up after moving to a new host computer. So *this* pdf has newer news than what you'll find via the link. We'll fix that situation later this week!)*

### **Who are Janet & Steven?**

Entertaining answers in *About Us*  
<http://gardenatoz.com/about-us/>

### **Where to see us**

5/19\* Detroit, 6/12 Hale, MI; 6/14 Belleville, MI; 6/16 Chicago Botanic Garden

Details in *About Us: Where we're appearing*

<http://gardenatoz.com/about-us/invite-us-to-speak/where-we%27re-appearing/>

### **Support this effort**

to help the gardening community grow!

Sponsor us, order our books, photos and other good stuff  
at our *Market*

<http://gardenatoz.com/market/>

### **\*Saturday, 5/19, 8 - noon:**

We're still catching up our website after a computer hosting change. An addition:  
Plant, cut back spring bloomers and more.  
*Garden By Janet & Steven* at the Detroit Zoo in Huntington Woods, Michigan. Free.  
Join us by emailing Deb Tosch at  
[mstgarden@gmail.com](mailto:mstgarden@gmail.com)

## In this issue:



*Above: It's a spring-blooming, dense, 8' x 8' mound of gracefully arching branches called Van Houtte spirea (Spiraea vanhouttei). Others (such as Japanese snowmound, S. nipponica, below, right) may be more readily available at garden centers and by mail, but none are quite the same as Van Houtte.*

Head in a twirl over spirea names, pp. 2-4  
Final touch is an obelisk, page 4  
Design simplifies shopping, page 5  
Elbow room for perennials, pages 5 - 6  
Breathing room for phlox, page 6  
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Eye for trouble is a saving grace, page 7  
Lawnlessness and weak roses, page 8  
Fake rock's a real beauty, page 9  
Flatness adds dimension, page 9  
Clematis divided, multiplies, page 9  
Lawn care? We're there! Page 9  
At 45mph it's olive all over, page 10  
Arborvitae reduced... again! Pages 10 - 12  
Great bulbs have depth, pages 12 - 13  
Mistake to make a weed mad, page 14

**Japanese maple update** (re #179): Don't give up on a frost-bit tree, yet! It'll push out new growth and prune it together, in issue 181 and 182!

## What's coming up this week

### Plant shopping as name game: Choosing spirea for a hedge

I bought **snowbound spirea**, thinking it was bridal veil spirea with a different name. But there is a difference... how large of a difference is there?

I bought the plants with the intention of **expanding my existing bridal veil spirea hedge**, and although the snowbound looks very similar, I am hesitant to plant it until I know more.

**What are the differences?** Would it be obvious if I planted the snowbound alongside the bridal veil?

- D.B. -





Hard to tackle this by common name alone... That is, one plant can have several common names, different plants can share a common name, and people can interchange them. However, we think **you have two very different shrubs**, and to expand that hedge you should call/surf around for Van Houtte spirea or clone what you already have.

Here's the particulars of our thinking and this situation.

A spirea that was very popular for foundation plantings and hedges in the first 60+ years of the 1900's (at right in a hedge) is *Spiraea vanhouttei*, **Van Houtte's spirea**. It's frequently called bridal veil spirea or snowmound spirea. It's a big **8' x 8'** mound of **branches that arch** gracefully up and then down to touch the ground. It's smothered with small white lacecap flowers in spring about tulip time. Foliage is kind of blue-green. It's very dense -- lots of twigs per square foot, so that even when it's bare of leaves in winter it's nearly impossible to see through. (Thus its popularity as a hedge.) Birds love it as great cover from weather and predators, so if you part the branches to look under the shrub you're likely to see lots of white droppings underneath -- free fertilizer.



There are other spireas that bloom white in spring and have "snow" and "bridal" in some of their names. Bridal *wreath* spirea (*S. prunifolia*, left and right)) has tiny white rosette flowers in clusters, a bit earlier in spring than bridal veil. **Bridal wreath is upright, 5-6' tall.**



**Japanese snowmound spirea** (*S. nipponica*) is a mounded plant, with white lacecap flowers (below, right) pretty much the same as and at the same time as Van Houtte's spirea. However, it has a stiff habit -- it's **not weeping**. It's also smaller overall than Van Houtte's spirea, about **5' x 5'**. Dwarfism may be the reason Japanese snowmound is now available at many garden centers while Van Houtte's is not.



Dwarf does sell! Today's top-selling spireas are the **3-4' summer bloomers**, including *S. x bumalda* 'Anthony Waterer' and *S. japonica* 'Little Princess' (left). Most **bloom pink** (a couple have white flowers). Some have **colorful foliage** -- 'Gold Flame', 'Gold Mound', 'Lime Mound', etc.



So, if yours is an older hedge -- pre 1980 -- it probably consists of Van Houtte's spirea and you may have always heard it called snowmound spirea.

However, ask for snowmound spirea at a garden center and you'll probably be offered *Japanese* snowmound. Extend a hedge of one with the other, and you will be able to see the difference.

To extend a Van Houtte's spirea hedge, we would order new plants by mail, or **clone one** of the existing shrubs. That is, **dig it and split it into sections, or look for an arching branch that's rooted** where its tip touched down to the ground. A division or a rooted branch from the mother plant will grow pretty quickly into a separate, identical shrub.

### Quick-searching a mail order source

When we want to see which mail order sources carry a plant, we use **plantinfo.umn.edu**

It's a service of the University of Minnesota's Landscape Arboretum. We searched for *Spiraea vanhouttei* and were glad to see Miller Nurseries still carries it.

[http://www.millernurseries.com/cart.php?m=product\\_detail&p=792](http://www.millernurseries.com/cart.php?m=product_detail&p=792)

However, just as even our best garden centers can't carry all of the thousands of plant varieties we might grow, no information service can track them all. So when we scanned U of MN's list of *Spiraea vanhouttei* sources and did not see a favorite supplier there, we checked

**www.forestfarm.com**

Guess what? The spirea world's still growing! Now we want to try the dwarf, pink blooming form of Van Houtte spirea we read about in Forestfarm's catalog.

### More about spireas...

...at GardenAtoZ.com, where words in this article are links to additional information.

**Follow the Master Key** to read this article on-line, with complete links.

(This is not a come-on; it's simply not right and even a disservice to include such links here. In this static document the links can't evolve as they do programmatically on GardenAtoZ.com. Given all the changes occurring daily on our site, static links become dead ends.)

## What's going on in Janet & Steven's gardens Obelisk as exclamation point for a bed renovation

On Cape Cod we remade a perennial **bed that features roses**. Roses are problematic when they're in the spotlight, lacking the distinct form and texture that can carry a plant even if it's not in bloom, or has been cut back between blooms.



So we're looking now for a 5' white wooden **obelisk to give steady-eddy distinction** to the central feature, a climbing rose.





## Sketch a design to simplify shopping

Whenever there's a planting to be done, deciding, finding and **buying plants is a major task**. It can be a challenge for one person acting alone, more than twice as tough to consider two gardeners' ideas and actions, and mind-boggling for a larger group... **unless you have a design** for your shopping list. At our Detroit Zoo Adopt-A-Garden, many regulars in our volunteer group wanted to participate in planting. So with design in hand and the coordinative effort of super-volunteer Deb Tosch, we're *all* buying and bringing plants.



Want to **come help at the zoo**, learn about planting, perennials, cutting back spring bloomers and more? You can join us to *Garden By Janet & Steven* on May 19, or June 2 or.... These are free hands-on sessions to which you bring your hands, eyes, trowel, clippers and enthusiasm. Send an email to [mstgarden@gmail.com](mailto:mstgarden@gmail.com) so Deb Tosch can give you the low-down on how and where to join us.

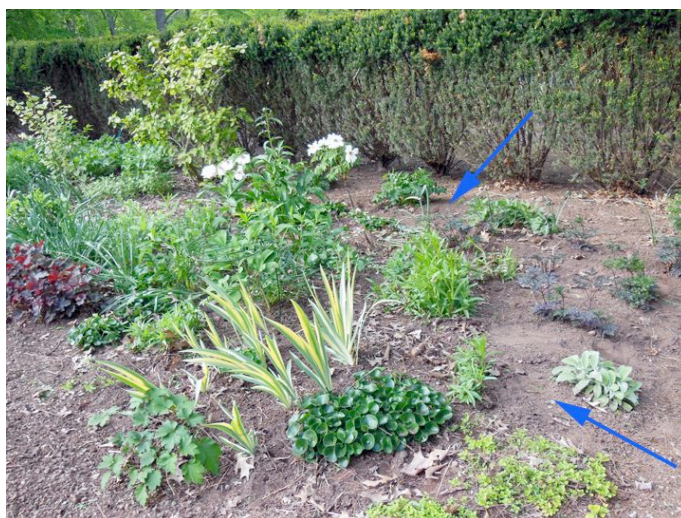
*We're ready to plant the brown half of the bed below, which used to host a dense colony of an obnoxious daylily. A design's made the shopping easy. Email [mstgarden@gmail.com](mailto:mstgarden@gmail.com) to join us at the zoo*



## Give perennials elbow room

B.G describes a garden's transition from spring into summer quite well: "...a miniature jungle... every inch ...holds 3 plants." We keep that in mind, especially in spring. Whenever you weed, divide, or plant, leave room for plants to grow.

*Right: Last week, when we weeded a garden in Connecticut, we were most pleased with this space. Empty? No way! We removed three wheelbarrow loads of blackeye Susan to release iris, peony, fairy candle, and hibiscus -- at the blue arrows, each potentially 3' x 3' of summer glory but just beginning to sprout.*





In another area of that garden we released curly chives (*Allium senescens glaucum*). It should have been a dense, sinuous mass of blue (left) all summer and contribute July blooms, but was disappearing under the advance of two neighbors (below, arrows). Queen of the prairie (*Filipendula rubra*, background arrow) had crept forward 36", while plumbago (*Ceratostigma plumbaginoides*) had expanded inward 24" from its designated front position.



We removed the invaders from the chives' rightful spot (dashed line circle) and also cleared a wide perimeter. Now the chives will fill in. The queen of the prairie and plumbago will lean/sprawl outward to cover the ground, and visual balanced once again.



## Breathing room:

### Phlox best when given air

Tall phlox plants (*P. paniculata* and its hybrids) are **predisposed to powdery mildew**. Same goes for bee balm (*Monarda didyma*) some asters, and other perennials. Stress such a plant (drought, shade, poor nutrition) and it succumbs to its nemesis.



You can **reduce infection** by keeping such a plant coated with fungicide. Water with a drip line and the foliage surface will be drier and fungus-resistant. Yet perhaps the most important preventive is sweet, moving air. Keep **space between stems and plants**.

This chubby phlox (right) is pretty in spring but may be a mass of browning, graying foliage in a month after mildew fungi proliferate in the dead air between stems. So we cut out all weak stems and thin the remainder to leave just a few stems per plant (left). (Arrows point to early mildew on what were inner leaves.)





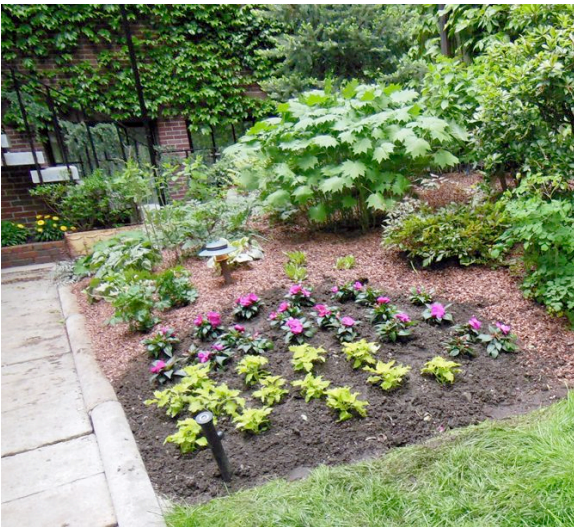
## We bare it all in annual beds

**Don't mulch annual flowers and vegetables.** They don't fare well in mulch. Unlike perennials and woody plants that expand buds and shoots created the year before, annuals create themselves with all-new ingredients. In a mulched bed some of the soil's nitrogen supply is tied up in mulch decomposition. It's a temporary loss but in play at just the time annuals need all the nitrogen they can get. In side by side tests, annual plants in a mulched bed reached just half the size of mulch-free neighbors.



*When we remade this mixed border in Cape Cod, we left mulch-free space for the annuals. (The mulch is Coast of Maine Dark Harbor Blend.)*

*When we plant annuals we give them room to grow. No crowding. For an immediate show, we don't crowd but we do start with larger transplants. (Cocoa hull mulch around perennials and shrubs; New Guinea impatiens 'Grape Crush' and coleus 'Wasabe' from 4" pots.)*



## Trouble quashed:

### Eyes open for what we don't want to see

Many of the problems that can ruin a bed at high summer are showing themselves in spring. Look, and look into irregularities. Once you know what to look for you can act before the worst symptoms or losses.

*We noticed discoloration and deformity on a Japanese anemone leaf. Now, it's away at a plant pathology lab for I.D.: Is it a virus? Nematodes? An I.D. is key to if/what to do to control it.*



*A river birch twig's normal color is red-brown (above, left). When we see the twigs are sooty gray-black, we know there's been a rain of excrement from sucking insects -- aphids or scale. Even before this birch leafed we knew to watch for aphids. We kept an eye on them, ready to intercede if the infestation was too much for the tree.*





**Green thumbs up To the lawnless among us.** It's not for everyone but it sure can be beautiful. Lawn grass is still unbeatable for bearing up where feet bear down. However, some open areas engage eyes more often than feet, and gardeners there are breaking away into lawnlessness.

Applaud those you see... and cut them some slack, too. As stand-outs among so much turf, the public eye doesn't give these spots any rest. For instance, dormant grass may be overlooked during a dry summer month and past-bloom perennial gardens are accepted as simple greenery, yet alternative lawn plants are often criticized for any slump.

*Does it grow low and hold its own against weeds? Can it play well with others of the same persuasion? Pick a few such species and plant them in blocks to make a living, no-mow quilt. Creeping phlox (Phlox subulata), Vinca minor and perennial geranium (G. macrorrhizum) work well for J.K. while P.M. uses sweet woodruff (Galium odoratum) and ajuga (A. reptans) in a shadier area.*



**Green thumbs down To keeping weak roses.** If it doesn't grow well, dig it out and try another variety. There are too many great roses to waste time with weaklings.

*When you dig out a failed plant, take a minute to learn what it's telling you about its match to your garden. Two things all three of these roses told us:*

- 1) "Thank you for planting us deep so we could stand up to winter and grow extra roots from our graft unions."
- 2) "Your soil is too lean to meet our needs. We still have almost the same size root ball as when you planted us one- and two years ago. We can extend roots only if there is nutrient-rich, moist soil around the tips and also just beyond. If the soil's rich, in just a year or two we can reach out as wide below ground as our branches reach up above."

*From left to right, the strongest to the weakest of three culled roses. Our basis to cull, pre-dig: How many healthy,*



*thick new shoots they were producing. Once unearthed, we could also judge by new roots grown from the knob that is the graft union.*

**Burying a rose's graft union at planting** has been the practice at the Morden Research Station in zone 3 Ontario for over 30 years. It became standard procedure in our gardens after we saw its effectiveness 25 years ago at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Burlington, Ontario. The graft union is protected all year and can develop its own roots for greater vigor and stability.



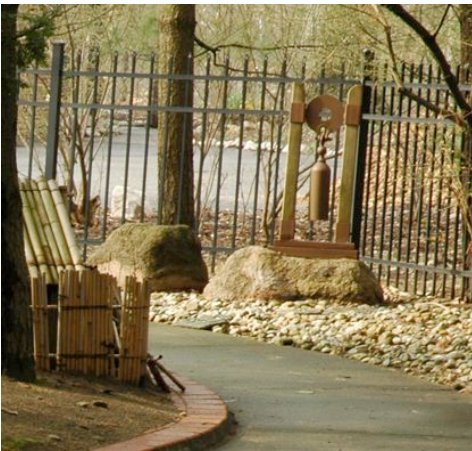
When a rose has a good root system, strong new growth comes after a hard cut in spring. This rose (right) had already developed multiple new shoots and strong new growth by April 15 of this unusually early spring. "Too bad!" We said to the rose when we arrived to tend the garden. "We have to cut you back!" We then took out its oldest canes and the spindly end of season growth from the previous fall that had produced wimpy, criss-crossed shoots. The rose said, "No problem!" This shoot (right, red) developed in just three weeks from one of the cut-back main canes.



## Tip cuttings

There is a wealth of information on our Forum. Current stand-outs:

**Fake rock's a real beauty**



A discussion of **hiding a well head** includes some attractive fake rocks.

<http://forum.gardenatoz.com/index.php?/topic/50-camouflaging-an-ugly-well-head/>

## Adding dimension with flat plants

Ideas for replanting a **small courtyard feature** 2-D plants: an espalier rose or a climbing hydrangea grown as a tree:

<http://forum.gardenatoz.com/index.php?/topic/134-little-courtyard-big-tree/>

## Clematis divided

Can you divide a clematis? Yes: **Dig it and slice it**. With photos, at: <http://forum.gardenatoz.com/index.php?/topic/196-dig-divide-move-a-clematis/>

*Regarding clematis: It's time as they begin to bloom to pat yourself on the back if you prune them each spring to keep new wood coming. Remove a cane every spring, clipping it right down to ground level, and the vine will not develop bare ankles. It'll bloom like this Bostonian beauty (right), down low as well as up top.*

## The low-down of lawn care from top notch advisors

Voices of experience discuss **hiring a lawn service**.

<http://forum.gardenatoz.com/index.php?/topic/173-lawn-care-service-advice/>

We're wowed by the expertise present in the Lawns forum. We asked Len Szymanski to Moderate there, bringing his 20+ years answering lawn questions for the Extension, to our site. In this topic below, he gets great assists from Rudy, whose correspondence and careful observations first featured here in the 1990's and by rising stars Daniel Davis and DSmith.



Ever **aerated your lawn**? Chances are you should because airy roots support great grass. But... when's best to do this?

<http://forum.gardenatoz.com/index.php?/topic/210-time-to-aerate-a-lawn/>



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## The 45 mph garden

It's catching driver's eyes and raising questions this week.

### It's olive over the roadside

Creamy white or pale yellow blooms and foliage that shows its silvery underside in any breeze make miles-long spectacles along many highways now. The heavy, sweet scent's notable through if you have a window down.

It's probably autumn olive, *Elaeagnus umbellata*. It was recommended by various organizations and introduced to wild areas for attracting birds (the fruit is red with silvery scales, and tasty to humans, too). However, it naturalized too well and is now on invasive introduced species lists in many States.



#### Invasiveness alert: Autumn olive

*Elaeagnus umbellata* (**autumn olive**) is able to naturalize and expand into wild areas to the detriment of native plants. Please think twice about planting it.

#### Alternative species

Looking for scent? Plant an **elderberry** (*Sambucus canadensis* or *S. pubens*) or **clove currant** (*Ribes odoratum*). Elderberries are native all over the eastern U.S. and southern Canada. The currant -- earlier to bloom but even sweeter -- is native in much of the West, and here and there in the Midwest.

Aiming mainly for bird berries? The elderberries and currant qualify. So do **snowberry** (*Symphoricarpos albus* and *S. occidentalis*), and **coralberry** (*S. orbiculatis*). *S. albus* is native in patches across the northern U.S. and pretty common in the upper Great Lakes and west across Canada; *S. occidentalis* occurs in the Great Lakes but is more common throughout the North American Great Plains. Coralberry occurs here and there all over the eastern U.S. but most frequently in the mid-section of the



## Aiming for answers: Hit or Miss

"What happened next" from previous articles.  
Celebrating the hits, updating the misses.

### One more angle on reducing an arborvitae

C. says, "I read your articles but I'm still not sure about how to cut back arborvitae..."

We know it's a tough one to picture. We recently came at it from a different angle in terms of illustration. On the next pages we step you through it. Be sure to let us know if it speaks to you.

History is rich with...  
disastrous outcomes of  
some intentional  
introductions...

- From *100 of the World's Most  
Invasive Species*, published by  
The World Conservation Union -



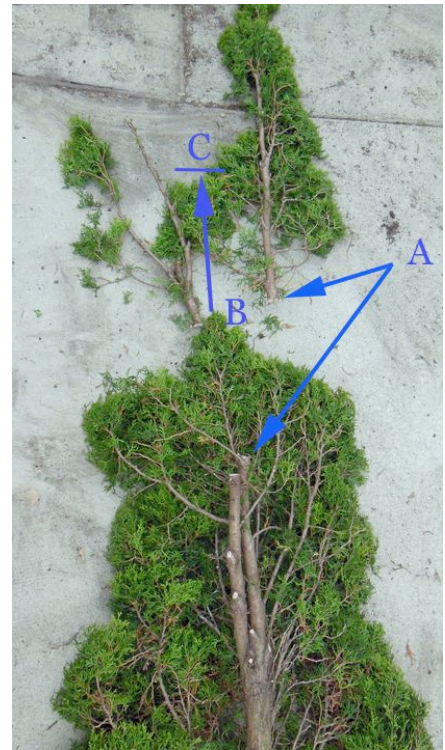
*This chunk (below, left) was the tip of an arborvitae until we cut it off in order to reduce that plant's size. It's big enough to be an entire arb, so we decided to use it for a pruning demonstration. We've taken all the branches off along one side of the trunk, so you can see the cutting-back process in cross-section.*



*Right: First we cut back the top. (Arrows from A indicate the points which were joined until we cut.)*

*Right, B: We make the cut to shorten the leaders -- the dominant trunks -- far enough down into the shrub that the new top (B) will be composed of leafy tip(s) of side branch(es) rather than the thick woody stub of the original leader.*

*Right, C: Since we want to do this cutting only every two or three years, we cut to leave the new tip(s) lower by two- to three years' growth than the original. Before our cut, the tip of the plant was at C. Based on the current growth rate we see on the branches, Point B will reach C in 2-3 years.*



*Below, left to right: Now we can cut the sides back to reshape the plant so its sides angle gracefully up to its new tip.*

*Below, left: The hedge shears trace the angle we're considering. Can we cut that drastically -- considering that arborvitae doesn't grow back from leafless wood? Yes, we can, because we see that when we cut along this line there will be green leafy branches left all along the way.*

*Below, center: So we cut along each side at that angle.*

*Below, right: These are indiscriminate cuts. We don't worry that some leafless branch tips are thus exposed along with the leafy tips. Finishing cuts come next - turn the page!*







Now we'll use hand clippers to remove non-productive, unattractive woody stubs.

Left: Such a stub is in the circled area in this photo, and that area's enlarged below.

We can clip back each woody- or barely-leafed stub (blue arrows) so that its tip is a leafy side branch (the upright stub might be cut at either of the orange arrows.)



When we're done, fellow Detroit Zoo Adopt-a-Gardener Judy Storr holds the "shrub" upright for inspection. Not bad: A leafy, well shaped, smaller arb!

## How great to move bulbs *now*!

Just to say thanks for the advice about moving bulbs now. I always thought it was a no-no but you said yes-yes so we moved several dozen bulbs to new places. We also had the nerve to plant them deeper, like you showed in newsletter #176, when we saw they were doing as you said, splitting into little bulbs from being too shallow. -V. -

Glad to have been of help. And thank you for

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the reminder that we needed to revise that article on our website to include shallow/deep bulb comparison pictures. Here they are.

*When a spring bulb is planted shallow, it's more likely to produce offset bulbs and fairly quickly become a crowded, non-blooming clump. Planted deep, it multiplies more slowly, keeping its strength in one bulb.*



*Left, and below, right: This tulip was planted only 4-5 inches deep because it was intended as an annual -- planted in fall, admired in spring, removed and discarded after its bloom. We pulled it to make way for annuals and so can show you that it's already split into several smaller bulbs. Those bulbs are so small they are unlikely to produce a bloom.*



*Below, and bottom, right: In contrast, these daffodils have been more than two years in-ground at 11" and each is still one large bulb.*





## **Big mistake, Big lesson:** Where big blunders become great treasures. Quack grass won't croak

I was gardening with someone who obviously didn't know about quack grass -- she was weeding by just pulling its tops off.

I told her, 'That's a mistake, it only makes it mad!'

- Celia Ryker (Designer & Forum Moderator) -

*Quack grass is a very persistent weed and its presence in a bed changes game plans.*

*We say, about smothering to kill vegetation to make a new bed:*

*Smother by May 1, OK to plant the next September;  
smother by September 1, safe to plant the next May."*

*However, if quack grass is in the mix, we know it won't die so quickly!*

*So we are pretty sure we will be able to plant in the fall in this bed we helped prepare for smothering in Guelph last week. (More about it in our next issue.) The sod we turned to trench its edge showed no signs of harboring anything more pernicious than bluegrass.*

*It's a different story in another bed, because that sod harbors quack grass. There, smothering is likely to take a year.*

*See that long white root? It's quack grass, still alive though its bluegrass host has died. It's been in the dark under cardboard and four inches of mulch for over five growing-season months but is still lively enough to be piercing the cardboard with its new tip growth.*



### **Parting shot: When persistence is a sweet return!**

While we gardened our way to the East Coast and back, GardenAtoZ.com finished its migration to a new computer home. We can begin updating it once again. We have three issues' worth of news to translate to the website. It will be very nice to be back on track. Give us this week to catch up, then look for *these* stories there with more, larger, clearer photos and live links.