

What's Coming Up:

Janet Macunovich answers your growing concerns
Issue 64, October 24, 2009

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Renovating a building or a landscape takes time. Visual messes and landscape losses (note the dead areas on the white pine, a result of root damage) are just about unavoidable during the process. To keep up the best appearance, set and maintain a focus on a spot that will not change drastically (unless at the very end of the renovation) and is situated at a worthy focal point such as a doorway. For more, see pages 1 - 3. Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila

Landscape renovation tools: Empty pots and tracing paper

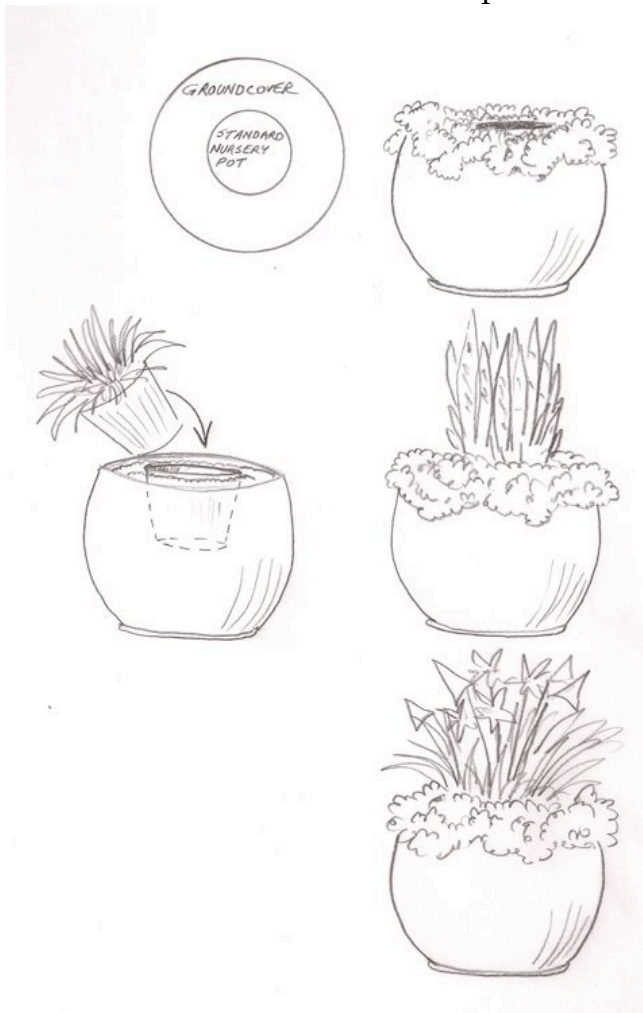
I need help. A year ago I purchased **an old home**. The front porch has two **big planters** and **extensive flower beds** on each side of these planters. I am **new at gardening**.

I **need some inexpensive ideas** for these two pots and the flower beds. I would like to put some type of perennial in the big pots. A little color for the pots would be fine, too. My goal is to keep things looking nice in front of the house. Since the house has been vacant for several years, it will take several years to restore the landscape. - Oscar -

Congratulations, Oscar! A couple of things come to mind right away. One, while you work on the house, **focus on keeping color and strong forms in** a relatively small but important landscape space or item -- **those planters** fit the bill. Two, until you're done with house repairs and updates, simply keep the front planting areas neat, which means weeded and clipped.

First, **to manage the weeding** in a way that's do-able even if you are brand new to gardening: Embrace the broad definition of a weed. That is, a weed is any plant growing where it's not wanted. Using this guide you **become a situational weeder**, pulling whatever doesn't look good to you in each spot, even if that same kind of plant *did* look good and you did leave it in place elsewhere.

As for **clipping, just do it**. Everything I see at your front foundation in the photo you sent is acceptable or even a bit large right now and that's typical. Most plants grow larger than we expect, are too big for the places they're given in our landscapes, and almost all of them will grow back well for a couple of years even if cut "wrong." (See "Deciding to cut.") Your house is beautiful all on its own. Don't let plants hide it. If there's **any doubt, cut more rather than less**.



The planters are impressive and anything from trees to groundcovers can be planted in them. (Check back to issue #60 for winter care considerations.) You can certainly plant perennials there but I think you will be disappointed if you do. That's because there are no perennials that bloom full-out from spring through fall and most are either ho-hum or shabby for at least part of each season. For season-long or year-round interest from perennials, **you need more space...**

... or **you can compensate for lack of space by changing the planting at intervals** during the year. My sketches at left are one way to do that. Although this involves more effort than a one-time planting, it's worth it to keep strong interest in an important area. It's also more expensive than one-time planting yet it's less expensive than spreading color all over the house front.

Make it possible to keep changing a key feature in an important planter by "planting a pot" in it. Sink an empty pot into the potting media in the planter. Choose a pot of a size commonly used at your local garden center for instant beauty items such as forced pansies, lilies or mums. For the very large planters shown in Oscar's photo, the inner pot might be 10-12" in diameter -- able to accept a deluxe size instant beauty item.

The empty pot can be centered in the planter, as drawn here, or it might be placed to one side or the back -- whatever best suits the overall look.

Drop any plant into the pot -- it might be a shrub, bulbs, a young tree, a houseplant, even holiday evergreen boughs. Replace each item as it passes its prime. At Oscar's home the planters have a solid color wall as their background -- even if they are moved out into expanded beds. Plants with clean lines and dramatic, large leaves will stand out against those walls.

Plant long-interest groundcover plants of one or more types around the empty pot. For this home and planters, I'd suggest a low, gold juniper such as 'Mother Lode,' bigroot perennial geranium (*G. macrorrhizum*) or a trailing sedum such as 'Red Carpet.' For a more subtle look -- less contrast between the plan, the outer pot and backdrop -- try the sage called 'Berggarten' or a 'Blue Rug' juniper.

Now, on beyond the planters. Print out that photo of your house -- make it at least 8 x 10 inches. Cover it with tissue paper or tracing paper, outline the main features and then doodle some changes. When I do that (on page 3) I see **a beautiful house** that is in danger of being hidden by its plants and which could be **better served by extending the planting areas** so they come further out from the building. Think about it and email again when you have more questions.

Deciding to cut back: The gardener is always right

There is no wrong way to cut, only wrong plants and gardeners forced into drastic cuts. If a shrub, vine, tree or clump of perennials is bigger than you feel is right for a spot, cut it as you will, when you will. If the plant doesn't grow back afterward, then you haven't lost anything except a plant that is not suited to you, and you have part of the cutting done that would have to be done anyway to replace it with something better.

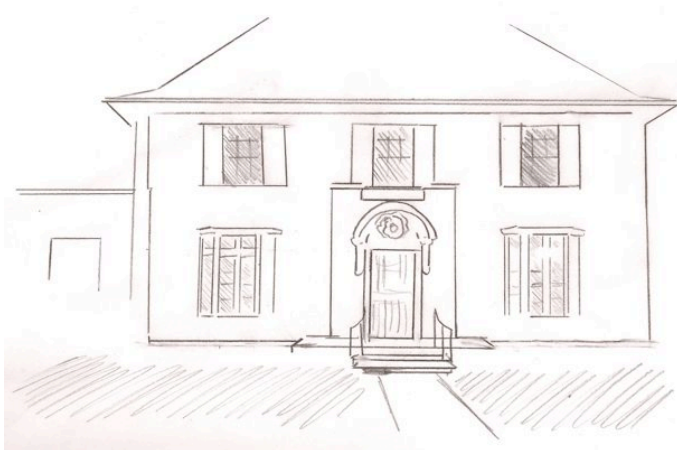
Continual interest from perennials

If you want a worthwhile show from a perennial bed from early spring until fall frost, choose an area of at least 50 square feet. Make that 100 square feet or more if the bed's a long way from the main viewer. Next, you'll need 10 to 15 types of perennials that will thrive on that site. Choose only those with reliable, long blooming periods.

A plan for such a garden is provided in my book "Evergreen Entries." That book's on my CD. If you have my CD, open the "Evergreen Entries" file and scroll to pdf pages 110-111. (More about my books on CD on page 14.)



To "try out" new looks without the effort and time required for actual landscape renovation, trace a photo of that landscape view, eliminating anything that's suspect or expendable. Then sketch new plants and beds onto your bare bones outline, or cut pictures of plants and other features from magazines or catalogs and place them in the scene to visualize additions. A change that may work in this case is to bring the beds well forward and move the big planters off the porch and into bed. This frees up porch, bringing it back into balance with the entry. Photo ©2009 Oscar's realtor!



Hefty hellebore's up and moving: Divide it!

Hi Janet,

My husband **dug up my huge *Helleborus*** (from our Waterford house) and brought it up to Bellaire, Michigan (zone 4) where we live now. It **needs dividing** but I don't know when to do that. Could you **tell me when** and is there a certain way to divide it? Also, should I cut the leaves off at this time; it seems like it would make it easier to divide - Diane -

Does your husband hire out, Diane? An old lenten rose can be a big job to lift.

Like peonies, hellebores live long so they **can remain in place, undisturbed** for many years. They **can also be divided**. For hellebores, that's **usually done in spring, post-bloom**. However, I've divided them at other times, too. They're easy-going survivors.



Lenten rose (*Helleborus x orientalis*) is a long lived plant that doesn't need frequent division to remain healthy. Yet it can be divided -- I sliced wedge shaped pieces from this crown by sliding my knife between stems and down through the congested center much as I would with a hosta. I divided this three year old plant yielded eight good sized divisions. Diane's huge old plant may yield two dozen.

Dividing the plant in fall or early spring can sacrifice some of the hellebore's spring bloom. So division right after bloom might be considered "best" timing. Nonetheless, fall division is do-able. Rinse the soil from this crown and roots and you may even be able to see details in the crown clearly enough to slice and pull out divisions with flower stems still attached. However, if the flower buds snap or are cut away, it's only a temporary loss. If it happens, the resulting division might even establish and increase more quickly since it will not be diverting energy to blossom- and seed production. Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila

Since yours is out of the ground, **divide it now. Don't cut off the leaves**, which provide some winter protection to the crown. If they break away as you divide the plant, you might spread some airy mulch or fall leaves over the replanted crowns as a substitute cover. You may lose some of the flowers that the plant has set to bloom next spring, but that will be only a one-time loss. It's simply hard to work around the flower buds if you divide in fall. Some are likely to be damaged, clustered as they are in **a crown that's congested** like some hostas.

Use a knife to **slice down between buds on the crown**, take V-shaped sections, then shake/tease apart the separated crowns and their attached roots. It's a big help to first wash the soil off the crown so you can see what you're doing. On an older clump the first division is tough to pull away out without violence; those that follow come easier. It's like lifting out the first slice of a dessert pie. It comes out in pieces... at least when I'm the server.

Anemone doesn't know -- or care! -- which end is up

Hi Janet,

I've been **planting spring flowering bulbs** for decades, but this is the first year I decided to try **woodland anemones** (*A. blanda*). **How can you tell the top from the bottom** of these things? They looked like large hard raisins to me. It's too late for this time, I just guessed, but if these grow, I'll try more.

So, for future reference... Thanks, Sylvia

Every end is up on these guys, Sylvia. The bits we plant are not true bulbs but thickened bits of rhizome -- the plant's subterranean root-like stem. So they're much more like a potato than a tulip. They have buds/nodes/eyes all over, any of which can sprout.

A node is a meristem, a producer of "stem" cells which can become any kind of new cell the plant needs -- leaves, leafy stalks, flowering stems, roots. Which kind of cell develops depends on outside stimuli such as moisture, gravity, heat and the passage of time. After resting for a period that the plant's internal clock registers as winter, the node(s) facing up on that tuber will be warmer first and be sprouting against gravity so it/they will produce foliage and flower. Nodes facing down will produce roots.



This woodland anemone's tubers sometimes sprout erratically, so we're advised to **soak them** overnight in warm water before planting. I haven't seen that make a difference and I do see the anemones I plant come up eventually even if some take their first year on site as a vacation year.

No denying it, *Anemone blanda* tubers look like rabbit turds. (Above.) Like many anemones, this species spreads by underground stems called rhizomes. It stores energy in tuber-like structures on its roots. We plant those tubers -- any which way up -- and early the next spring we reap the reward in windflowers.

Photos ©2009 Steven Nikkila

The burning question: What to say to a shrub

I asked you to caption this photo. You did, in a collection that conveys great gardening insights:



Ginny writes, "What a pity that the leftmost shrub of this stunning burning bush hedge was never given the opportunity to flourish like its neighbors! Those that are fronted by a well-maintained perennial garden got a much better start in life than the poor forgotten runt that was left to fend for itself in the native undergrowth."

And, "Remember to consider light conditions when planning for fall color. Notice how this hedge's brilliant pink fire fades to green as your look from left to right, where the shade of that neighboring tree is deepest."

Luann sums that up, with, "Burning bushes can be spectacular if they receive enough sun."

Cindy in Singapore says the photo brought two things to mind: "Tough cookies and 'fleeting flame of the forest.' Flame of the forest is a common local tree with beautiful bright red blooms all year round."

Kay, aware of the tendency of burning bush (*Euonymus alatus*) to seed around into woodlands, suggests we title the image, "Invasive Beauty" or "Scarlet Trouble." Sharon seconds that motion with the caption, "When bad is beautiful."

Nancy found design lessons in the picture, which seemed to her to be saying "Plant for seasonal color" and "For a 'wow' effect, plant in masses."

Sandy donned a design hat, too, remarking, "Oh my gosh, too much red - the red burning bush hedge overpowers the smaller sized garden!" And, "Heavy Chevy - this red burning bush creates an unbalanced horizontal landscape that's too heavy on top!"

Linda starts with poetry and ends in pragmatism, with the caption, "Tan lines and tight toes. I'm sure the picture shows exactly where the burning bush hedge gets its leaves shaded and its roots increasingly restricted by the nearby trees."

Marilyn saw what I did, with a simple, song-inspired, "Let the sunshine in."

Everyone who made caption suggestions became eligible for a drawing, and Cindy's name came out of the hat to receive a copy of my six-book CD, *Asking About Asters*, plus a copy of *Taylor's Guide to Shrubs*. Congratulations, Cindy. The book and CD will be on their way to you as soon as you email me with your current street address.

Bulbs upside down: Curves and time cure topsy turvy planting

In general, bulbs should be planted pointy-end up. However, like onions that sit higgledy-piggledy in a net bag in my kitchen drawer, they can sprout in any position. The shoots simply curl as necessary to proceed upward, and eventually the plant puts itself right.

A bulb's leaf- and flower stem will always grow away from the pull of gravity. So when the stem emerges from a bulb that's turned upside down, that shoot quickly bends back on itself to grow upward. Roots, meanwhile, go with gravity's flow -- down and out.

If the soil around the bulb is loose, all is well. The shoot breaks the surface and blooms as it should. The roots stay in the soil.

At the end of each bloom season the bulb that was there at the start is exhausted. The plant develops a new bulb. It forms underground, at the base of the stem. This new bulb points up.

This week in Janet's garden

Grow with me! This week I will:

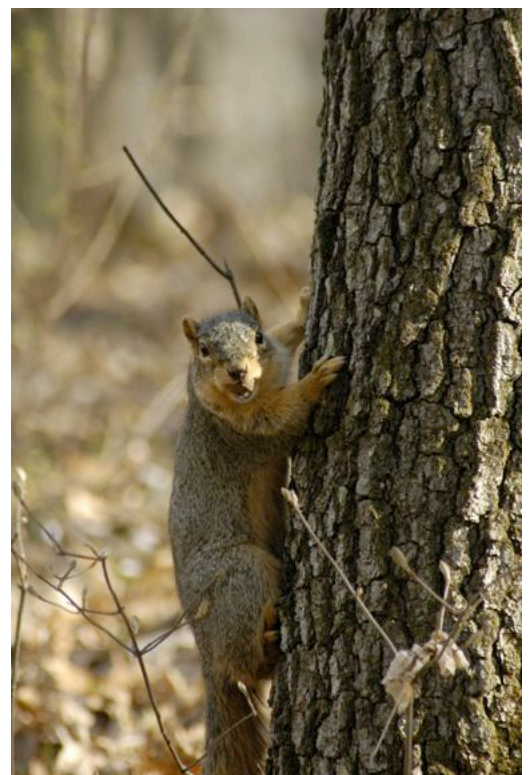
Cut down the perennials I'm cutting down. If I'm clipping it back at season's end (it is never essential; a perennial can simply remain "as is" through winter) I'm doing it for looks and/or to remove potentially contagious material. So I don't want to leave any of it. No stubble.

By the way: I cut down a good many plants that are still green. If it bothers them, they've kept that to themselves so far.

Thin out the squirrel-friendly places at the top of an arborvitae hedge. Oooo, those squirrels are always coming up with ways to aggravate me. While pruning the hedge this year we noticed one section seemed to have been clipped level before we got there.

I realized it had indeed been **pruned -- by squirrels**. They'd been nipping the soft tip growth to use in their nests. "Well how about that, for once they're *saving* me work!" I said.

Alas, the joy lasted only until we saw that the squirrels were clipping those areas because they **had become pretty twiggy** from repeated cutting. An accumulation of small crotches there -- did I simply miss thinning this section the last time I pruned? -- offered great support for a slumbering squirrel. Those crotches became a box spring topped by a mattress of nipped tips, a combo that blocked out almost all light to lower and inner branches. Even more shaded than subordinate growth normally is, everything **below the squirrel zone was becoming thin**.



The things we do to share the garden with wildlife! Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila

We pulled out all the nests and **thinned branches in the nesting area to reduce the twigginess** so light would penetrate. Then we noted our maintenance schedule to come by with a pole occasionally and poke out new accumulations from below.

Dig up dahlias, cannas and other tender perennials I want to save. I'm not putting them into storage quite yet. First they'll "cure" for a few days as the soil dries away. In storage, they resist rot better if their skins cured first for a few days in warm, dry air.



Canna clump, ready to cure in a warm, dry place. Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila

Watch for my *Janet's Journal* article in the November 1 Michigan Gardener magazine for more on storing such plants. I'll also tell you more, here, as I put various roots to bed.

Collect fallen leaves. I never tire of it.

I'm not talking about raking leaves into a bag but selecting them one by one to admire them.

Sometimes I **share them with friends who are no longer in fall color country**, or who can't get out. I slip each leaf between two pages of a notebook, then put the notebook under something heavy and let it sit for a day or so. Sandwiched in paper the leaf dries a bit. The darkness stabilizes its color and weight keeps it from curling. I may arrange the leaves on a piece of cardboard and cover that with paper towel or make a multi-layer sandwich of loose leaves separated by paper towels. Then I top the whole package with another piece of cardboard for crush protection and mail it away. Packaged flat and dry, leaves stay whole and colorful in transit and may keep their colors for a year or even longer.

Once, I let a large collection get plenty dry, then boxed them and sent them to my mom -- then in the desert Southwest -- so she could see the colors plus hear that lovely rustle of dry leaves.

On the next page is what I would send to you if you were unable to get out this week. It would come titled "One fine October afternoon in zone 5."



Photos ©2009 Steven Nikkila

- 1 - graystem dogwood
(*Cornus racemosa*)
- 2 - sugar maple
- 3 - peony
- 4 - arrowwood viburnum (*V. dentatum*)
- 5 - Norway maple
- 6 - red maple (might be a hybrid
between red- and silver maple)
- 7 - shagbark hickory
- 8 - (tiny, tip) oakleaf hydrangea
- 9 - pin oak
- 10 - crabapple
- 11 - groundcover plumbago
(*Ceratostigma plumbaginoides*)
- 12 - sweet Solomon's seal
(*Polygonatum odoratum*)
- 13 - a different crabapple
- 14 - Japanese maple
- 15 - sassafras
- 16 - variegated porcelain vine
- 17 - swamp white oak
- 18 - Chinese spicebush (*Lindera angustifolia*)
- 19 - flowering cherry
- 20 - blackberry lily (*Belamcanda chinensis*)
- 21 - dawn redwood



- 22 - river birch
- 23 - hosta (sorry, variety long since forgotten; a big blue-leaf one)
- 24 - blood red cranesbill (*Geranium sanguineum*)
- 25 - flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*)
- 26 - ginkgo
- 27 - serviceberry

The 45mph garden: When privacy screen is a thorny deal

You can put a gardener behind the wheel but you can't take the flowers out of his eyes. Look at what's catching driver's eyes and raising questions this week.

As leaves fall in autumn many people notice that some **deciduous roadside plantings** hang onto their foliage much longer. Some ask, "What is that I see, that **provides privacy** for so much longer than other plants?"

The plants that come first to my mind in that scenario are **common and glossy buckthorn** (*Rhamnus* species). They're invasive non-natives. In most cases, they planted themselves on that verge as many weeds do -- getting a toehold along edges.

Some say, "Aww, but what's the harm? I'd love to have that kind of screen from the road -- faster growing than evergreens and seems to grow dense even in shade."

I say, "**Buckthorn is a headache**. Plant it anywhere on your property and it will be everywhere in no time. For an even better screen using native species, **plant sapling oaks or beeches**. Then coppice them -- cut them to the ground every few years. That will keep them producing lots of juvenile foliage as they do when sheared repeatedly as a hedge. Juvenile foliage goes tan but remains in place right through winter. That's a feat buckthorn can't beat.



It would be tough to follow the flight of the Frisbee and leaps of my dog on this winter day, if the oaks holding their juvenile leaves weren't there as a background. Juvenile foliage grows on wood not yet able to produce flowers and seeds. Oaks, and beeches, too (right -- I love beeches' pinky tan winter color) continue to produce a lot of this foliage and also sprout readily from stumps for decades and even centuries so long as they are cut back regularly.

Photos ©2009 Steven Nikkila



Wrap-up with Grins and Grow-ans that turn our green thumbs up or down

Grins: To **being able to be outdoors**

where we can see and appreciate so many things non-gardeners never even notice. Even if we're outside only one day a week, and even when we're out but not gardening, our senses are more attuned to sights, sounds and smells around us. This week, Steven noticed motion alongside the road as he came home from planting. While he watched this snowy egret hunting and catching crawfish, he also noticed that most drivers going by showed no sign of seeing it... until it skipped out onto the road to try its luck in the opposite swale.



Grow-ans: To **leaving weeds under shrubs as we clean beds in fall.** I see that some people weed carefully throughout a bed but may break off their hunt of running root weeds such as oxalis when they get under a shrub's skirts and into its roots. Don't stop there! If you can't loosen that soil with a fork and continue the chase, then smother those weeds with newspaper and mulch. They may



seem few and scraggly, shaded as they are but they are the seed source and root-producing nucleus for next year's headache.

Who's Janet?

The gardener's trainer. For over twenty years Janet Macunovich has been helping gardeners grow through her classes, books and other publications. She shares what she learns in attending classes herself at educational institutions all over the country, reading, participating in professional symposia, and applying it all in her own and client's gardens.

To learn more, email JMaxGarden@aol.com and ask for What's Coming Up, Issue #1. Email questions to her at JMaxGarden@aol.com.

Where to catch Janet and friends* in-person:

*See "Invite Janet or Steven" on page 13.

Tuesday, October 27, *Collector's Garden*. Janet speaks as part of an all-day conference hosted by the **Garden Club Federation of Massachusetts** at Andover Country Club in Danvers, Massachusetts. How to maintain the diversity you love but bring some harmony to your collection. With suggestions for more great plants you simply must have! For GCFM members and guests. Contact your garden club for registration information.

Tuesday, October 27, 7:00 to 8:00 p.m., *Improving the Older Garden*. A talk hosted by the **Massachusetts Master Gardeners' Association**. At Elm Bank on Washington Street (Route 16 West), the Massachusetts Horticultural Society facility in **Wellesley, Massachusetts**. Design, maintenance and plant selection tips to correct for and capitalize on the passage of time in a garden. For information about attending this event, contact Betty Sanders at 508-359-9453 or betty02052@yahoo.com

Tuesday, November 3, 6:00 to 9:00 p.m., *Flower gardens segment of Wayne county, Michigan Master Gardener volunteer training*. For active Master Gardener volunteers, one of the perks of the position is an open invitation to refresher courses -- the Master Gardener may return at will to audit the training underway for new volunteers. If you want to brush up on annuals, perennials, design, planting and care, this date's for you. Janet knows vets will be there along with the new recruits, so each time she covers this basic material she uses different plants and situations as examples. At the Wayne County Michigan State University Extension facility at 5454 Venoy Road, **Wayne, Michigan**.

Friday, November 6, 10:00 a.m. to noon., *Garden by Janet: Identifying and correcting drainage trouble*. In a relatively new garden on an older property in **Plymouth, Michigan**, things "just aren't growing right" and Janet's got the notion that the beds were constructed in a way that impairs the drainage. If you would like to see what poor drainage can do, from subtle to glaring symptoms, how to check drainage and how to correct it in an established garden, this is the place to be. Free. Limited space. You must contact Janet for location details

Saturday, November 7, *Garden by Janet - Bring your gloves and tools!* At the **Detroit Zoo**, Woodward Avenue at I-696. Your chance to volunteer at the zoo in exchange for Janet's hands-

on instruction. On this day, Janet's group finishes fall clean up with final cut backs, fertilizing, mulching, pruning and perhaps some special winter protection. To join Janet at the zoo, email mstgarden@yahoo.com with the subject line "I'll garden at the Zoo with Janet."

Invite Janet or Steven or their expert friends to your club or community.

We go where we're invited! That's taken us all over the country and then some over the past 20 years. We address many topics, drawing from our list of **100+ talks**. We also continue **to meet groups' needs** and expand our horizons by developing new material or "hybridizing" from what we already have.

So, whether it's...

- a **how-to lesson for a garden club** meeting,
 - a **hands-on workshop** at a site of your choosing or
 - a **multi-part class** for a small group,
- ...we're game!

We can also connect you to one or a whole line-up of other experts who know how to explain how-to. So give us a **call or send an email** to make a date, request our list of classes and talks or get a referral. **JMaxGarden@aol.com** or **248-681-7850**. Our calendars fill about a year in advance for spring weekends, and six months ahead for most other weekends and evenings. So give us some lead time. Then we can meet you in *your* garden.



Steven Nikkila and Janet Macunovich (above, left) have been digging, shooting and teaching how-to for 22 years. They began producing conferences in the early '90s and then ran a gardening school for 12 years, featuring instructors who knew their stuff in the garden as well as knowing how to get their messages across in front of a group. That line-up includes people like Deb Hall (above, right) who's dug many a deep dahlia-overwintering hole with Janet as well as impressing her with unmatched ingenuity, creativity and humor. Janet and Steve are glad to help you themselves or refer you to these others to meet your group's need. Contact them at JMaxGarden@aol.com or 248-681-7850 when you want to set up a talk, workshop or class. Photos ©2009 Sonja Nikkila and ©2009 Steven Nikkila

A complete library of Janet's gardening how-to on one CD... just \$24.

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To get a copy of my CD, send a check payable to Janet Macunovich, to 120 Lorberta, Waterford, MI 48328-3041. Include your name and full mailing address.

My CD has everything from six of my books: How to prep soil, design, choose and de-bug plants, plus one A-Z index!

Jam packed with information that's easy to access. Type any key word into the index's "Search" field to receive a click-thru list of every place those "hydrangea" facts, winter interest tips, acidity explanations, etc. appear in this CD's 6 books.

