

## What's Coming Up:

Janet Macunovich answers your growing concerns  
Issue 10, October 11, 2008

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It's a warm, blue-sky fall weekend. What a great time to be out in the garden! It's just icing on the cake that fall color is developing all around. This ginkgo tree (right, top) is one of the species that turns color overnight. Some people love not only its color but the fact that all of its leaves then fall off in a rush -- that means raking up can be done in just one episode. Other people mourn that trait, since quick leaf fall also means the color won't last weeks as it does on gradually-shedding species like sugar maple (right, bottom). Photos ©2008 Steven Nikkila



### Can a season be complete with NO zucchinis?

Janet, I've started **a vegetable garden** in order to save some grocery money as well as to be able to **eat healthy, safe food** (especially since the spinach scare). I know there have been reductions in bee populations. I have lots of big fat bumble bees snacking on my flowers. Why is it that I **fail to get any zucchini** even though there were lots of blossoms? Who has ever heard of no zucchini?! Will love to hear your input -- Cindy.

You're correct in looking for bees to fertilize zucchini and other squash flowers, Cindy. However, **other insects pollinate these plants, too**. Another pretty effective pollinator of squash flowers is the **squash beetle**\*. It may be joined in pollen transfer by the less efficient but still contributing **spotted cucumber beetle**\*\*. Both may also be classed as squash pests, but they do minor league damage that can usually be forgiven in light of their other contribution.

**Preserving pollinators is tricky** when we lose them among the many insects that inhabit or pass through a vegetable patch. In any comprehensive list of resident insects the majority will always

be beneficial, benign or of minor consequence. Yet those good guys are often caught in the crossfire when we attack pests and may even become targets without cause. The two beetles just listed, for instance, can be confused in name or appearance with *striped* cucumber beetle, \*\*\* a major league leaf eater that also sets the stage for bacterial wilt infections of its host squash.

I introduce other pollinators and mention potential confusion with pests to point out that other **pollinator populations are affected by pest control actions**. I understand if someone whose crop was once devastated by striped cucumber beetles exhibits the knee-jerk reaction "kill first, I.D. it later" the next time they notice a beetle of any kind on their plants. Yet by acting in that way they **may inadvertently reduce their plants' fruitset** as they kill what could have been left to live. For better results, I advise postponing the kill until we're certain an insect is a pest.

Yet even in the company of many pollinators, squash can fail to set fruit. To understand why, and what you can do, study this wee botany lesson.

The plant genus *Cucurbita* includes pumpkins, gourds, cucumbers and squash. Members of this group bear flowers that are either male (left) or female (right). The ovary of the female flower -- that swelling below the point where the flower petals attach -- is what can develop into a zucchini squash, pumpkin, gourd or cucumber.



Squash flowers occur in two types, pollen-producing "male" flowers and pollen-less female flowers that can give rise to fruit. Female zucchini flowers are easily identified by the mini-zucchini-shaped ovary on the stalk directly beneath the flower. The plant generally produces a number of male flowers before creating any females. This seemingly wasteful tactic may serve to attract pollinators, which then insures a good number of pollen-carriers will be on hand when the females finally open for business.

Sometimes **a crop may fail because female flowers were scarce** or lacking altogether. That can happen if a plant isn't in full sun. Light is energy and it takes lots of it to make a female flower.

**Weather changes can be a factor**, too. If a drought or other calamity occurs just as a plant is beginning to produce female flowers, a fruitless stretch may follow.

Some gardeners watch for female flowers on a squash (zucchini, pumpkin, gourd, etc.), then **hand-pollinate the bloom**. With fingers or paint brush they transfer pollen from male anthers to female pistil. That way they're sure the deed is done with enough pollen to make plenty of seed, which in turn sets a mighty fruit. The fruit may be aborted or malformed if it begins to form without enough embryos -- seeds -- to provide it with sufficient growth hormones.

So plant your zucchinis in full sun next spring, take a useful-unless-proven-harmful stance with insects and stand ready with a paint brush if female flowers keep appearing but failing to fruit. Just don't blame me when friends shun you as one of those gardeners-bearing-excess-zucchinis.

\* Copy and paste these URL's to your browser bar to learn more: <http://www.agric.nsw.gov.au/Hort/ascu/zeck/zeck133.htm> and <http://vfv.caes.state.ct.us/PlantPestHandbookFiles/pphS/pphsqua.htm>

\*\* <http://insects.tamu.edu/extension/youth/bug/bug072.html>

\*\*\*<http://www3.telus.net/conrad/insects/cuke.html>

## Time to think about protecting plants from winter storm damage

Susan asks, "Could you review the issue of how to best winter-protect vulnerable trees and shrubs? Specifically, how to prevent tall emerald cedars (over 12') from splaying and drying out. As well as weeping Japanese maples planted too close to sidewalks/driveways and in danger of being buried under snowbanks."

Glad to, Susan. Here's some help with your Japanese maple and cedars. Over the next few weeks I'll cover some other angles northern gardeners ought to consider.

If you live in a region with heavy snow fall you know that a Japanese maple so close to a walkway as the one at right can run into trouble when snow shovelers must stack snow around, on and even over its branches.  
Photo ©2008 Steven Nikkila



### Weeping Japanese maples need crutches, cedars need cord and cuts

Shrubs and small weeping trees such as Japanese maples can become casualties of winter when shoveled snow becomes too great a load and limbs crack. To reduce the chance that limbs will break, place "crutches" under main limbs in fall before the ground freezes. The crutches may be sturdy forked limbs cut from other shrubs during pruning. Push the cut end of such a branch into the soil so its forked end sits an inch or three below the limb it will support. Don't let it touch the unweighted limb, or it may rub. The crutch should cradle the live limb once it's pressed down under snow.

Heavy snow can change the shape of upright red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) or white cedar (*Thuja* species also called arborvitae or *Chamaecyparis thyoides* that also go by the common name Atlantic whitecedar). A storm may transform that narrow columnar shape into an exploded firecracker shell, as pictured below.

The simplest fix is to tie one end of a light rope or heavy twine around one of the trunks near the tip, then spiral that line down around the cedar and tie it off to the trunk near its base. Be sure to remove the rope in spring.

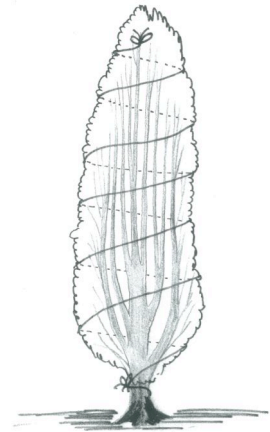
Single-trunk cedars handle snow load better than those with multiple trunks. They may bend with added weight but usually return to vertical once the snow melts or as the sap rises in spring.

Unfortunately, many cedars have numerous close-packed trunks rather than one because growers shear them while young to produce the bushy look consumers prefer. So do some pruning if your cedar has multiple trunks.

Over a few years, remove all but the sturdiest trunks. The younger the cedar when you start clipping, the better.

I tell my friends, 'No, I don't want to move South where I can grow winter vegetables.' I already grow things all winter in my head and they always come out perfect! - Curt Pickens -





Heavy snow can turn this cedar (*Thuja occidentalis*, also called an arborvitae) from an upright pyramid (left, above) into a fanned heap (center). Believe it or not, the one pictured here did regroup to regain its former verticality. If you can't handle the snow-splayed interim period or the suspense of wondering whether your plant will rebound, try a preventive technique such as spiral tying (right, above). Photos ©2008 Steven Nikkila

### Soap and water for plants' woes is also kindest to kids' hands.

Jean gardens at an elementary school, where **tropicals that summer outdoors** now need to be returned indoors. She asks, "Is there **something that will eliminate most of the pests** prior to bringing the plants indoors, but is also safe to be on the plants considering that many of the kids enjoy touching the plants, soil, pots, etc.? Is there a soil drench or foliage spray or a combination of both?"

**The answer is soapy water**, Jean. Move the plant into a shaded spot and spray it thoroughly with a solution of water and dish soap or oil-based soap (Murphy's Oil Soap is my choice). Cover the pot surface, first, so the soil's air spaces don't become soap-clogged. Let the plant stand and drip for about 15 minutes, then rinse it with a forceful spray of clear water. Use that same hard stream and a scrub brush to clean the pot's exterior.

Do this **three or four times, at five day intervals**. It will knock off insects and eggs, and catch deeply embedded pests of the soil and crevices as they hatch out over time. A well-showered plant will beat one treated with any chemical you name, in terms of health and pest-less-ness. My own plants have summered out for nearly 30 years, seen only this treatment, and have never suffered or caused any in-home infestation.

Don't try to "clean" the soil. That will do more harm than good, would involve substances best kept well away from kids, and would have to be repeated at intervals. Yet any pests that might be lurking in the soil which could become an issue indoors will be caught in your sudsy cross fire as they emerge.

## Sweet autumn clematis is a vine with devilish ambition. Stand by to prune!

From Fran comes the query: "My **sweet autumn Clematis** (*Clematis terniflora*) is marvelous, but covering the world. When and how far down should I **prune it**?"

That clematis **blooms on new wood** each year, Fran. Thus you can **cut it as much as you like between now and next June** without reducing its next-fall show.

I cut some of my autumn clematis plants to stubs just a few inches tall in late fall as I clean up a garden. Others, serving as weed-reducing groundcover or cushion between the soil and pounding fall rain, I leave in place until early spring. Some that I have allowed to climb on a pergola or up into a tree I cut back almost as hard but leave whichever main trunk or limb takes the plant to its first level of support, so I will not have to guide it back into place next year.

The plants will sprout with gusto even from stems as big around as my arm.

Even after this drastic treatment some of my fall-blooming clematis need additional trimming at intervals all through summer to keep them within bounds. I cut branches whenever I find them wandering where I don't want them to go.

This kind of vine is one of the components of the rambunctious garden I'm describing next week at **my pruning workshop on Detroit's Belle Isle**. For hands-on help controlling overachiever trees, shrubs, vines and perennials, check "Where to catch Janet in person" at the end of this issue.

## This week in Janet's garden

### Grow with me! this week I will:

**Correct last week's error:** Where I showed you toadlily, monkshood and rough Joe Pye in issue number 9, I wrote "From right to left" where I should have written "left to right." So if you fell in love with the left hand image of three fall bloomers in that last issue, you should look to acquire toad lily. Thanks, Cheryl B., for catching that!

\*\*\*\*\*

**Cut all foliage off bearded iris.** The iris borer moths\* have probably finished laying their eggs on the foliage now. So if I cut off all the leaves and hot compost them, that will kill the eggs and there will be fewer of the iris borer caterpillars\*\* next year to chew the leaves and bore into the rhizome -- the thickened portion that lays along the ground. The holes the borers make are disfiguring but worse, they open the plant's tissues to infection by soft rot.

\*Copy and paste this URL to your browser bar to learn more: <http://flickr.com/photos/martytdx/2432640198/>

\*\*<http://www.irisgarden.org/borermain.html>

\*\*\*\*\*

**Stop pruning most woody plants.** Best to avoid pruning while leaves are forming in spring and falling in autumn. Two weeks ago, I gave the false cypress on page 6 its every-two-year pruning to restrict its size. In just 20 minutes its interior wood and buds found themselves exposed to strong light and fast temperature changes. That sudden exposure is okay while the weather is



mild but potentially harmful if it occurs now when plant tissues are still making their gradual transition to hardiness but temperatures can plummet 20 degrees or more at sunset.

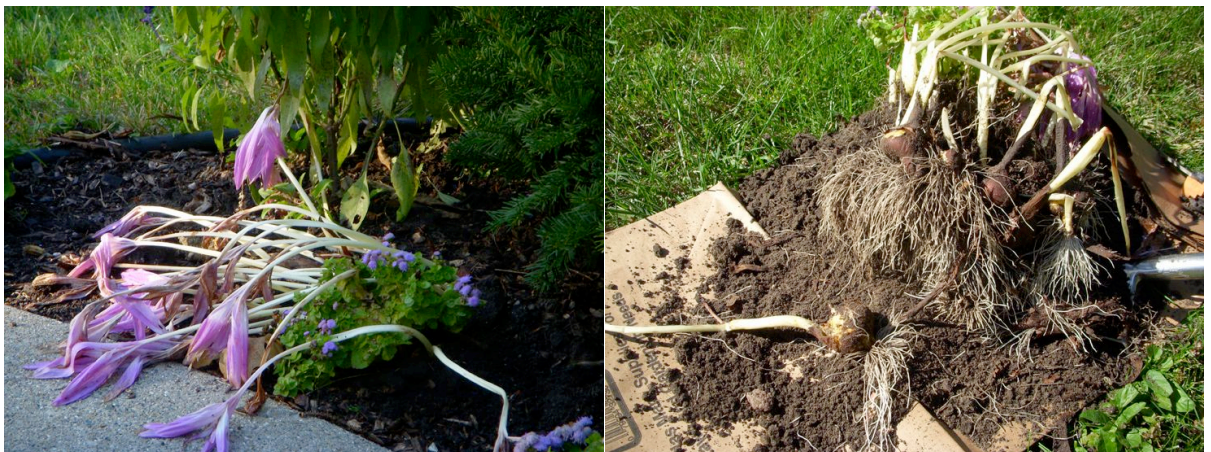


For hands-on pruning and help in understanding why rampant beasts like fall clematis can be cut any time yet slower beauties like this falsecypress (*Chamaecyparis obtusa aurea*) need more deferential treatment, come to my workshop "**Cutting Back the Rambunctious Garden.**" Read about it at the end of this issue, in "Where to catch Janet in person."

\*\*\*\*\*

Divide fall-blooming bulbs such as *Colchicum*. They're done blooming now and won't develop any foliage until spring. I lifted half of the clump shown below, left, to get what you see below, right.

There were over 20 bulbs in that division, from a single bulb planted five years ago.





## The 45mph garden

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.

That wasn't-there-yesterday **fall gold** may be a yellowwood (*Cladrastis kentuckea*). Seeing one of these little-used trees in all its glory can fill the mind's eye for many miles and tie up your brain with that age old question, "What *was* that beautiful thing?!"



Yellowwood is a medium size North American native tree hardy to USDA zone 5. It produces fragrant, hanging clusters of white flowers in June. It has attractive, smooth gray bark. Photo ©2008 Steven Nikkila

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



**Grins:** To realize I've been the pot calling the kettle black, each time I've visited southern California and ranted about, "These ridiculous palms! Why do they grow these stupid things, allowing precious water to go up gawky poles 60 feet tall to fuel a top knot of foliage that doesn't provide any shade but does need dead stuff taken out regularly?!"

Realization of my hypocrisy came when my friend Judy pointed to one of those limbed-up spruce trees (right, above) and called it "a Michigan palm tree." Photos ©2008 Steven Nikkila



**Grow-ans:** Having to part with the last bloomers of the season, as we cut down the garden in fall. Leave up what may look good over winter but remove what you won't want to see there. New England asters (*Aster novae-angliae*) are gorgeous in October but unless they're dwarf mounded varieties (below) they can appear scraggly through winter. Photo ©2008 Steven Nikkila



### Who's Janet?

**"A woman who gets a lot of mileage out of a garden"** is how Janet Macunovich was once described by the owner of a garden she maintains through her business, Perennial Favorites. "You design and plant it, Janet. I enjoy it and then you come here and look where I do but see so much more!" She explained. "I love hearing your stories about the plants and it's fascinating to hear *why*

something is growing a certain way or having trouble." Janet brings the same depth and enthusiasm to books and articles she writes, classes she teaches and practical how-to materials she develops. Email questions to her at [JMaxGarden@aol.com](mailto:JMaxGarden@aol.com).

### Where to catch Janet in-person:

**Saturday, October 18, 10:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m., "Cutting Back the Rambunctious Garden."** A hands-on workshop sponsored by the Detroit Garden Center. Learn to prune shrubs, trees and perennials that want to outgrow your garden. At the Nature Zoo on Belle Isle in Detroit, Michigan. \$35. For more information, call the Detroit Garden Center at 313-259-6363 or email [detroitgardenctr@yahoo.com](mailto:detroitgardenctr@yahoo.com).



Want to learn how to keep a Japanese maple from getting as big as it might (left, above) without turning it into a boring cube (right, above) or lollipop? Interested in keeping other plants small, making a lilac healthier or a redtwig dogwood brighter red in winter? You should come to Belle Isle October 18 for my how-to lecture plus hands-on training called "Cutting Back the Rambunctious Garden"!



**Tuesday, October 21, 9:00 a.m. to noon, "It's big but we can move it"** We've got a number of shrubs and dwarf conifers to move at a garden in Franklin, Michigan. Come see and hear how. Free to my readers. Email or call Janet (JMaxGarden@aol.com or 248-681-7850) for details and to reserve a spot in this limited-space workshop.

**Saturday, November 1, 10:00 - 11:30 a.m., "An Enchanting Winter Garden,"** to help you identify your garden's off-season strengths, plan changes and select additional plants and features so it's a joy to see from November to April. This presentation is sponsored by Gardenviews store, 202 W. Main in Northville. There's no fee but you should call to reserve a seat (248-380-8881) -- we meet across the street from the store, in the Rec Center and it certainly is nice to know how many places to set!

**And later that same day, November 1, across town: 1:00 - 3:00 p.m., "Redesigning the garden's bones."** I'm taking a look at how to improve the structure of a garden in Troy, Michigan. You can come see how this kind of design work is done during the very best season to see, evaluate and plan changes to the "bones." Free to my newsletter readers. Email or call Janet (JMaxGarden@aol.com or 248-681-7850) for details and to reserve a spot in this limited-space workshop.

**Early November, date to be announced, "Garden by Janet - Bring your gloves and tools!"** At a Beverly Hills, Michigan garden, we're **testing the drainage, interpreting soil test results** and seeing the results of plants growing in soil of differing drainage and nutrient levels. Learn how to do all this for your own garden. Date and time to be announced as soon as the soil test results come in from the lab. Email or call Janet (JMaxGarden@aol.com or 248-681-7850) for details and to reserve a spot in this limited-space workshop.

### **About attending Gardens by Janet sessions:**

We gardeners are let-me-see, hands-on people and that's how we learn best. In these sessions, I offer you that kind of chance to grow. You can visit me where I'm working and you can either watch or work with me side by side. I hope you'll bring your gloves and join in so you realize the most value for the time.

At the **gardens I tend through my business, Perennial Favorites:** My clients understand my enthusiasm for teaching. They open their gardens for my "how to" sessions. When the work I'm doing may interest to you and the situation allows on-lookers or apprentices, I invite you in.

I've volunteered in the **Detroit Zoo Adopt-A-Garden** program for 20 years. During that time more than 100 people have worked with me, some for a day and others for years. We have fun, we learn, we accomplish much. The program requires regular garden volunteers complete an interview and orientation process but you can try it on a temporary pass as my student. **If you'd like to join me at the Detroit Zoo,** email mstgarden@yahoo.com. Make the subject line of your email "I'll help at the zoo with Janet." That email will put you in touch with my good friend Deb Tosch who keeps my group's schedule straight while I plan and lead the work. You'll receive upcoming work dates and instructions for getting to the zoo and meeting up with my group.

Watch this space to join me in other non-profit gardening events and in gardens I design and tend.