

What's Coming Up:

Janet Macunovich and Steven Nikkila answer your growing concerns
Issue 134, March 2, 2011

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We cleaned and sharpened tools all last month. Why can't we find those we need, now? Our standard kit of favorite tools: Pages 13 - 16.



Plants you can walk on

I delighted in spring imaginings yesterday... and decided to investigate **step-on plants**. I did not find too much about this in your CDs and my "archives" of your articles. I either missed it or it might make a good topic.

There are so many of the plants called steppables being offered. I am sure they aren't all great nor **best suited** to our distinct growing conditions. And **are some invasive?** Your plant lists from talks I've attended seem to use pussy toes, little potentillas, ajuga, thyme, and the like. Your wise thoughts on this subject would be appreciated by me and I hope others. - S.W. -

Left: Thyme makes a thick, fragrant carpet at the driveway's edge.

Thank you so much for looking back at what we've written before, S.W., and telling us what you did and didn't find. Our no-repeat-topics goal (see page 16 *Having us on file...*) makes us always glad of help identifying gaps to be filled and new-subject opportunities.

Branded! Not every tissue is a Kleenex® or every groundcover steppable

Stepables® --with one "p" -- is a product category name that an Oregon grower registered as a trademark. It's so clever and right it looks likely to join ranks with brand names such as Band-Aid®, Kleenex® and Jell-O that have become so generic we forget they're brand names.

Many very low growing plants that are used as groundcover can take some foot traffic, so they qualify as step-on plants. As far as we know, **none can stand up to regular trampling** like lawn grass does. It's better to say they *persist* in the face of light foot traffic or between stepping stones despite occasional squashing when a passing toe or heel misses its landing.

Now, get ready for a tune you've heard before. That is: The better the plants fit their site, the healthier they will be. It takes **healthy, vigorously growing plants to recover quickly** from mashing or to fill in bared spots with new foliage or runners and offsets.

So when you select a groundcover to plant alongside a footpath or between pavers, double and triple check references *and* go see it growing to be sure your site's hours of light, type of soil, moisture level and winter cold are all right for that species. Or buy just a few plants and give it your own trial.

Maintenance makes a difference, too. **Regular water, weeding and fertilizer are important** for a lawn, as are occasional aeration and overseeding for the hard-used places. A groundcover needs the same care.



Barren strawberry
(*Waldsteinia ternata*) fills this
sometimes-trafficked corner (arrow).

Some favorite groundcovers: Just one toe into a big pond

In **sunny spots** (minimum 6 hours sun per day) where the soil is well drained and feet sometimes stray we do love **pussytoes** (*Antennaria dioica*) and **thyme** (*Thymus* species, especially *Thymus lanuginosus* which is called wooly thyme). We've also been happy with orange **stonecrop** (*Sedum kamschaticum*) in lighter traffic areas, such as where gardeners walk in the beds once a month or so. If the sunlight slips to 4-6 hours per day -- the what's called part sun or **part shade** -- we rely on **Ajuga** (shown on page 4), bloody **cranesbill** (*Geranium sanguineum*) and **barren strawberry** (*Waldsteinia*, shown on page 2) to bounce back after sporadic abuse. Where it's **shadier** than that, we usually fall back on **myrtle** (*Vinca minor*) or **lilyturf** (*Liriope spicata*).

In both sun and part shade where **sogginess** may be an issue, we've been impressed by creeping perennial **forget me not** (*Myosotis scorpioides*) and **creeping jenny** (*Lysimachia nummularia*, which is "golden coins" in its gold-leaf form, *L. n. aureum*).

We can't recall including any *Potentilla* species in our groundcover lists. Most in that genus aren't at all tolerant of being walked upon. One that is -- silverleaf cinquefoil (*P. anserina*) -- is rarely sold. It's native over so much of North America that it is more commonly known by the name *silverweed*, the kind of moniker that works to keep a plant off the market.

We **never stop learning new plants**. There are so many species, we'll never even see them all, let alone study them on-site, over time. We're currently watching these and think they'll be keepers: Some creeping speedwell varieties (*Veronica repens*) in sun, and rupturewort (*Herniaria glabra*), mazus (*M. reptans*) and brass buttons (*Leptinella minor*) in part shade.



Above: Our patch of evergreen wooly thyme (*Thymus pseudolanuginosus*) borders our driveway. It has persisted for over 15 years under foot and despite occasional straying automobile tires. Although its color changes during winter (compare winter, above, and summer at left) it is welcome color whenever the snow melts. Sometimes we go scrape the snow away and snip some to bring indoors for the smell.



Left: Wooly thyme and dragon's blood *Sedum* (*S. spurium*) share space, one filling in where the other falters.

Wooly thyme really lives up to its name. Zoom in your screen view --it may appear that the thyme becomes fuzzy and out of focus, but that's just the fur on its leaves.

In print and on-line plant selection help

One source we respect for information about groundcovers is *Perennial Ground Covers* by David Mackenzie (Timber Press). Another is the website for Hortech, MacKenzie's nursery. Go to the URL www.premiumplants.net and you can click on "foot friendly" for his list of step-on groundcovers. Alternately, go to the Plant Selection Wizard page and make a customized list of plants for your purpose.

Another great plant selection tool comes from Walter's Gardens in western Michigan, one of the world's largest perennial growers. At www.perennialresource.com/encyclopedia you can check off growing conditions and plant features, then scroll through suggestions to further customize and print that illustrated list.

It's an eye-opener to watch such a list change **as the selection criteria become tighter**. For instance, Hortech's Plant Selection Wizard lists 115 items if you ask for all perennials and groundcovers for light shade which are under six inches in height. Add the keywords "foot traffic" and the list is pared to 12 (listed at right). Decrease the light to "moderate shade" and only six choices remain (bold items).

Invasiveness: Bad word to some is a feature of groundcover

Invasiveness is not desirable in natural areas, when the plant in question is an alien. It's also a cuss word among gardeners who want variety in a small area. (Such as C.S. who in asking a "mystery plant" question said, "It is a thug! ..taken over a large iris bed.... tangled in several *Heuchera*.... transplanted to other areas.... causing me lots of headaches.") Yet in looking to cover bare areas, particularly in tough places and across varied conditions, a plant's invasive tendencies are what we are rely upon.

So **every groundcover is probably a thug in at least some situations**. Some are worse than others, spreading, for instance, by seed as well as runner, able to establish in a wide range of environments where they out-compete natives.

Groundcovers for underfoot in part sun Those in bold are also suitable for darker "moderate shade" sites

toadflax ivy (*Cymbalaria aequitriloba*)
rupturewort (*Herniaria glabra*)
blue star creeper (*Isotoma fluviatilis*)
mini brass buttons (*Leptinella minor*)
Meehan's mint (*Meehania cordata*)
Irish moss (*Sagina subulata*)
miniature sedum (*Sedum requienii*)
dwarf thyme (*Thymus nitens*)
early thyme (*Thymus praecox*)
Waterperry veronica (*V. peduncularis*
'Waterperry Blue')
Turkish veronica (*Veronica oltensis*)

Haven't heard of these plants? Some are news to us, too, and we'd love to try them.

We make "show me" our next move after selecting plants from a book or Internet reference. We go see that plant growing somewhere, or buy one or two as a trial.



Above: Bronze-leaf *Ajuga* and a sedum duke it out, two invasive species vying for one spot.

Screening plants for invasiveness

If you ever wonder, here's a way check for credible reports of a plant's invasiveness.

The *Invasive Plant Atlas* (www.invasiveplantatlas.org) is a collaboration of the National Park Service and various native plants organizations. On its herbs/forbs pages you'll find most plants that might also be classed as garden groundcovers. However, at least one major player -- myrtle (*Vinca minor*) -- is listed with the sub-shrubs.

Keep in mind that a national list of invasive plants may include species that are not invasive in your particular region. So check reports from your own State, too.

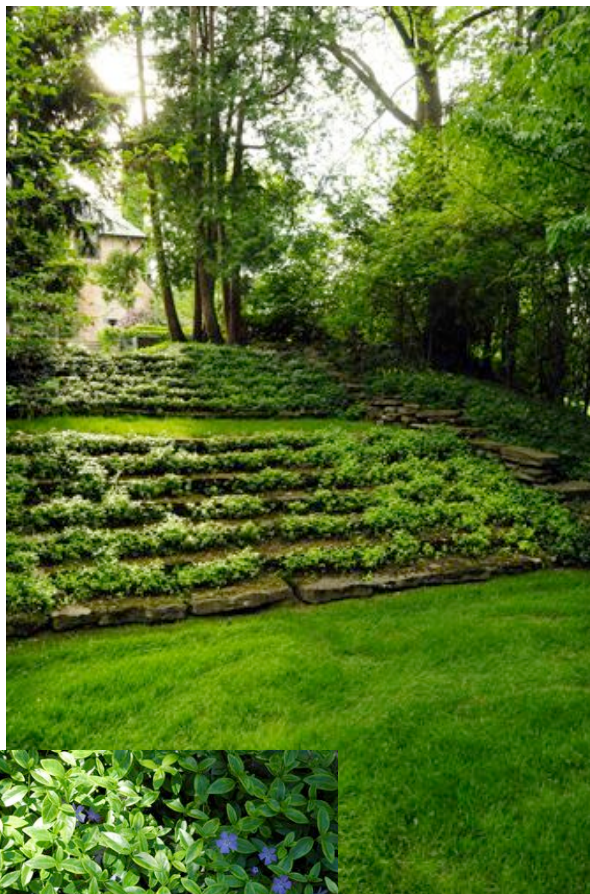
To find State and regional reports, go first to

<http://plants.usda.gov>

This USDA Plants Data Base lists both native and naturalized vascular plants of the U.S. and includes much of Canada, too.

Enter the plant name and read its profile. On the species' distribution map, click on your State or Province to learn if the plant is "I" (introduced/naturalized) or "N" (native) in your area.

For invasiveness, scroll down below the map for any "weed information" posted there, and note which areas reported it weedy.



Once and future invasives

Some of the groundcovers we mention in this issue of *What's Coming Up* appear in the Invasive Plants Atlas -- *Ajuga*, creeping jenny (*Lysimachia nummularia*) and perennial forget me not (*Myosotis scorpioides*).

Others we could have included are in the Atlas. They're plants you probably know, as we do, since they are established in gardens and landscapes all over North America -- bishop's weed / goutweed (*Aegopodium podagraria*), lily of the valley (*Convallaria*), archangel (*Lamiastrum*), *Lamium*, common pachysandra (*Pachysandra terminalis*), and myrtle (*Vinca minor*).

Others we list may be in the Atlas one day -- they are relatively new to garden use.

We wrote in detail about invasiveness in the article "Invasive Plants: Ethics," which is in our magazine *Landscape Ideas* (order it on page 26). Summed up all too briefly, we say: Consider other choices where you can and keep an eye on all new plants. We hope you'll give us a "by" here on all the if's and but's.



Myrtle (*Vinca minor*). It does the trick to fill the gaps in this shady stairway

All in the family landscaping

I hope you can help me and possibly give me guidance in the next few weeks. My son and daughter-in-law have asked for some help for their Chapel Hill, NC home. My son has asked for this for his 30th birthday!! My husband and I are going down in mid-March to try to plant some things for them. We can at least begin this project since our backs and shoulders can only handle so much.

They are in Zone 7. She is pregnant and due in September and they both work so there won't be time for much maintenance. This is what my daughter-in-law wrote:

In terms of overall things we would like to accomplish three things come to mind:

1. Fill in areas that are barren looking and try to make the plantings look less like "standard" builder landscaping
2. Add color
3. Create a landscape plan that is relatively easy to maintain with perennials rather than annuals

Some of the flowering plants that I (we) like are Rhododendron, Azalea, Hibiscus and Gardenia

I can't thank you enough for your help. You both are so excellent. I told my son that I had contacted the Gurus of Gardening. - B.N. -

What a joy, to bring your experience to bear in helping out this way. We'll approach this as we do any design, **one step at a time.**

Pictures and notes from "the kids" new home:

The areas we want to improve are the back yard, the front left side of the porch and the area near the mailbox with the large transformer box.



The backyard tree line has no plantings whatsoever which makes it a prime candidate for some work. This was where I would consider hydrangeas because they can take up some space and that area is shaded and gets more water than the rest of the yard due to the slope. We wouldn't need to fill it in completely but add some areas of height and color.



The left side of the front porch is a little sad looking. We have had to rip out a few of the small shrubs that grow close to the ground (have no idea what they are called) because they died/burnout and looked terrible. We like the green bushes up against the house but want to plant something else in front of them.

First and most important is the dialogue you're having to **establish objectives**. Before you move on to planting, specify all objectives and settle conflicts and contradictions. We have some ideas based on what you've already given us, but also questions (see pages 9 - 12).

Next, **set some kind of budget**. By that we mean looking at time as well as money. We know you won't want to start a project and leave it hanging, so consider this as you decide what to take on at each visit:



The beds on either side of this front door total about 200 square feet.

Estimated time and money needed for a DIY landscape project

For a 200 square foot area:

Develop a design and locate supplies:	8 hours
Remove and dispose of existing sod:	5 hours
Remove and dispose of shrubbery and/or existing perennials:	7 hours
Loosen soil; add compost to replace removed plants:	4 hours
Shop for and deliver plants and materials:	6 hours
Plant:	5 hours
Mulch:	2 hours
Clean up:	2 hours
Total estimated time:	39 man-hours
Cost:	\$500 to +\$2,400**

**Depends on plant- and material choices and your patience as expressed in plant at-purchase size.

These estimates are for **two people working flat out all weekend** including a Friday evening. It may also be three people, one of whom could begin working Friday morning as go-fer and delivery person. Obstacles are bound to pop up -- bulky trash may be unearthed and require disposal, a tool will break and put work on hold while it's fixed or replaced, etc. So don't schedule yourselves too tightly.

Background (continued from page 6)

The area by the mailbox is a concern because the large transformer box is such an eyesore. It looks bad from every angle. There isn't a ton of area to work with -- a little in front and a few feet to the property line on the one side -- but we would look to cover up the big green box a bit.



How pleasant it is for a father to sit at his child's board. It is like an aged man reclining under the shadow of an oak which he has planted.
- Voltaire -

Six **other thoughts**, for talking about this with your son and daughter-in-law:

- 1) A **design is the most important thing** you can do. If that's what you accomplish on a first trip it's a fine thing and will serve you well through the whole landscaping process. It can be well worth it to hire a designer. From a design you can identify individual do-able projects for future trips and be able to communicate clearly with each other about what's needed, where.
- 2) **You can design and plant one area at a time**, in priority order. If you do that, keep your focus on that one area. Don't be distracted by, "What about when we get to area B?" From one well-designed area you can flow right out across a whole property.
- 3) **For lowest care, focus on dwarf shrubs and groundcovers**. That nets lots of color, from only 25% as much time spent in ongoing care, compared to tending herbaceous perennials.
- 4) Don't start by choosing specific types of plants. **Start by describing a plant** for a particular place in terms that have no species name: what the plant should do, where it has to grow, and how you hope it will look. Here is what that might be if we're scheming for the right front foundation bed, and including from your daughter-in-law's report what seems to be a preference for plants with big flowers and bold foliage:

In this spot we need something with impact all year, to complement the house colors. It'll have half day shade, clay loam that may tend to be wet. It'll be in the west wind. It should either mature at 3-4' tall and a bit wider, or be easily pruned to remain that size. We'd like something fine in texture, as a contrast to the heavily patterned house walls and background for large flowered, bold leafed plants on our wish list. Blooms white or purple flowers. Attracts birds. Leaves that are dark blue-green will be better than anything tending to yellowy green.

Take that description to a good garden center and ask the staff to point you to candidates. How do you know it's a good garden center? People at a good garden center love a description like that. So present them with it and judge them by what they do!

- 5) **Start hard and tall**: For greatest satisfaction and to avoid exposing finished planting areas to collateral damage, install hard structures first, then plant trees. Follow up with shrubs, groundcovers and perennial- or annual flowers.
- 6) **To see your landscape take shape right away**, even if man hours aren't available now: If you can wait 6 months to plant, you can **create paths and beds** instantly. Outline them from your design, mow whatever is there very short and cover it with a blanket of newspaper (5-6 layers thick). Cover that with mulch at least 3 inches deep (that would take a bit over 2 cubic yards of mulch to cover both front foundation beds). By the time you get back to work on those areas much or all of the existing vegetation will be smothered. Bed preparation will be quicker.

Think about this and **present some possibilities to the homeowners, get their reactions** and ideas, revise and expand the plan, present it again, and so on until everyone feels good about it. Email again as you have more questions. We can't make promises since our spare time for such things is hard to predict and ever changing, but we'll try.

Hmm. Chapel Hill is a great area -- want to bring us along on one of your working visits and open it as a Garden By Janet session?!

Off-the-top ideas for **landscape changes**. Show them and learn from the replies:

Front foundation

You wrote: "The left side of the front porch is a little sad looking... We like the green bushes up against the house but want to plant something else in front of them."



photo ©2011 B. N.

We think that bed needs *less* texture, more groundcovers and more distinct shapes. How about keeping the evergreens pruned a bit lower, in tighter shapes, then filling in front of them with something low, evergreen that's coarse in texture and has big flowers (perhaps Lenten rose -- *Helleborus*). Or replacing those evergreens with a mounded, small-leaf (fine texture) groundcover and shifting focus toward the porch by adding a singularity such as a dwarf conifer that is upright or pyramidal.

Right of the door: Less height! A beautiful porch and a foundation finished to the ground don't need to be so covered up. We'd remove the tree and replace it with something low and wide -- perhaps transplant the shrub that's nestled up to the steps into the tree's place. That would provide continuity across the front, if the existing evergreens remain to the left of the door.



Foreground: A planting further out in the lawn can "dress" the house without crowding it, and give it a more unique look.

At the front corner of the lot

"...the large transformer box is such an eyesore."

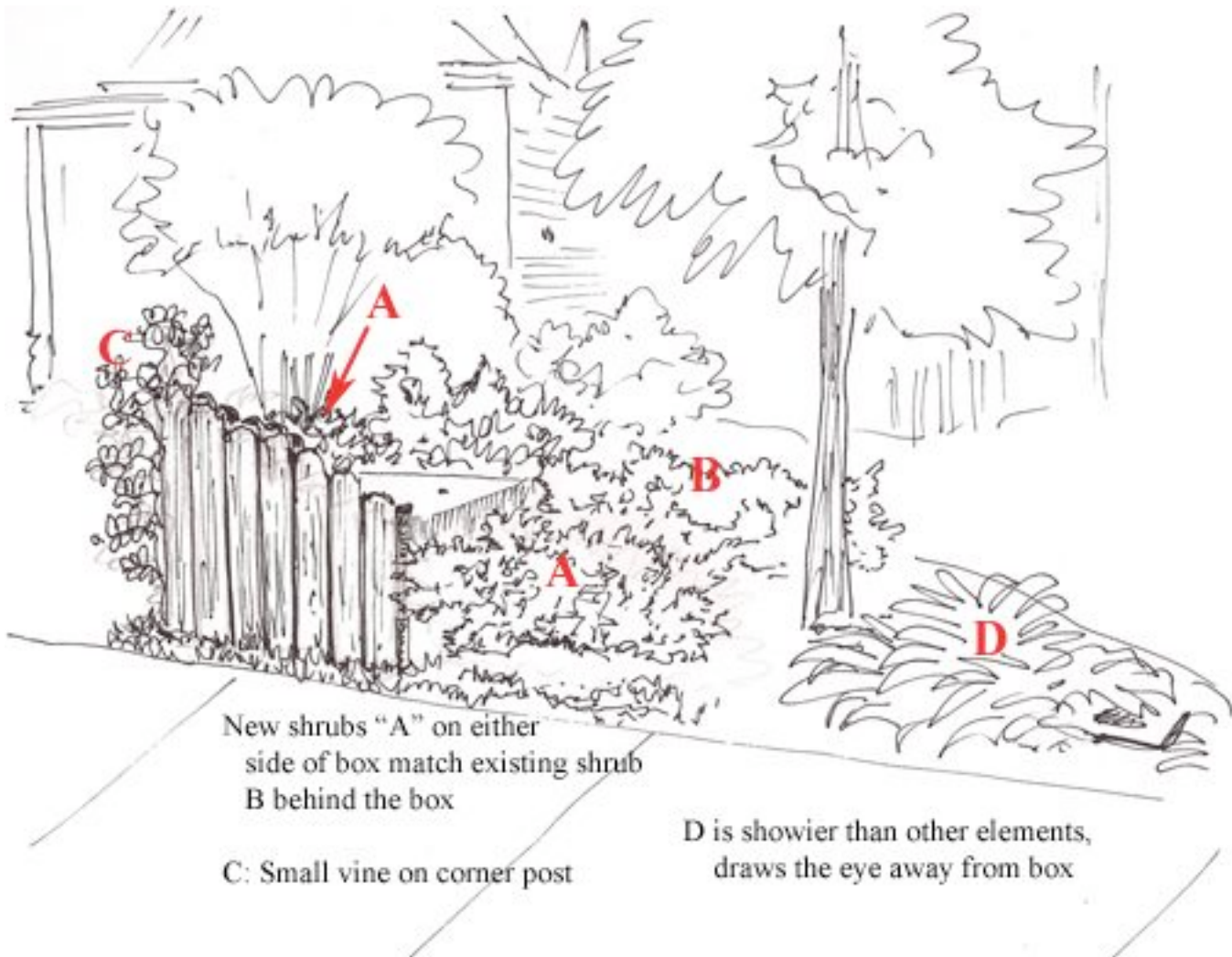
Utilities are not only hard to cover, they shouldn't be covered. Maintenance requires access. (We think we can hear some readers saying, "What's the beef - at least their box is *green*!") The most common mistake designers make is to draw attention to utilities by circling them --framing them -- with plant material or a bed. Better to create a focus elsewhere, to pull the eye away from the eyesore.

Here, since the bed is already in place and some years have been invested in developing a good sized tree, keep the bed. Then add shrubs to match what's already there behind the box, one on your side and one on the neighbor's side of the box. Buy these small so you don't have to dig deep. Even so, call Miss Dig first for guidance in where to avoid digging.

Since there is so little space between the box and the sidewalk, think about masking it with a hard structure that can slide in and out of place, so maintenance isn't impeded. Maybe two small fence sections, each fastened to a single carefully installed corner post and clamped at their far corners to short stakes. A small vine such as evergreen honeysuckle could grow on the corner post, amenable to being cut back to naught if and when the fence sections have to be lifted.



photo ©2011 B. N.



"The backyard tree line has no plantings whatsoever... wouldn't need to fill it in completely but add some areas of height and color."



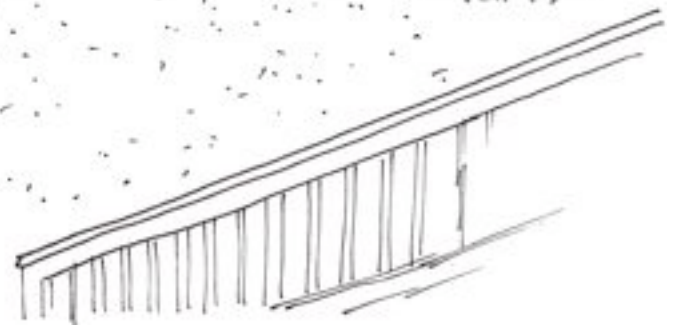
We don't disagree that the back yard needs something but we think it has plenty of height already. It could use texture -- things that look good from above -- and a breaking up of space to create interest. Groundcover areas could make the edge more interesting and act as transition between the natural wooded look and mowed lawn.



For the health of the trees and any chance at establishing any understory plants, the trees need to be thinned, too. More so in the area pictured on the right, here, than in the other. Our first step would be to choose the best existing trees, perhaps with the help of an arborist. Then we'd do the small-tree cutting and have an arborist take down bigger stuff.



photo ©2011 B. N.



We'd use small diameter trunks and branches to build rustic wood arbors that would define spaces and provide texture. Between an arbor and a 10-12' round-crowned shrub (leatherleaf viburnum?) in a new island bed, we'd effectively screen the corner. Groundcover beds could extend and transition the woods into the lawn area. We'd create a wide path mulched with material chosen for its contrast with the woods floor. This would lead the eye back into and through the area, visually breaking it into sections.

This week in our garden

Grow with us! This week:

Clean some pots for sowing seed. A bit of bleach in the scrub water helps cut down on losses to damping off -- that heart breaking, irreversible situation when fungus infects the stems of seedlings, which fall and die. Probably even more important than clean pots though, is to use soilless mix so you begin with fewer spores, and fill pots all the way to the brim to capitalize on air movement. If the soil surface is below the pot rim, air can't move there. Even a little moist, stagnant air sure does foster fungi.

Cut back indoor plants and overwintering stock now. The growth that will come after the cutback will be vigorous and dense, good to look at and also good for taking cuttings.

We received a question two weeks ago about clipping an *Allamanda* and a flower maple (*Abutilon*). By the time we answered a few days later N.B. had already done what great gardeners do -- followed instinct and chopped them. Perfect form, since new growth was beginning and no sense letting the plant develop from tips you're only going to cut.

Right: Our jade trees' outer foliage was scarred by cold when we left the trees outdoors one night too long last fall. Why let them grow out from those weak, marred tips when we know we want the plants to be smaller, anyway? Time to cut back, then let the first strong flush of spring growth re-shape and renew.

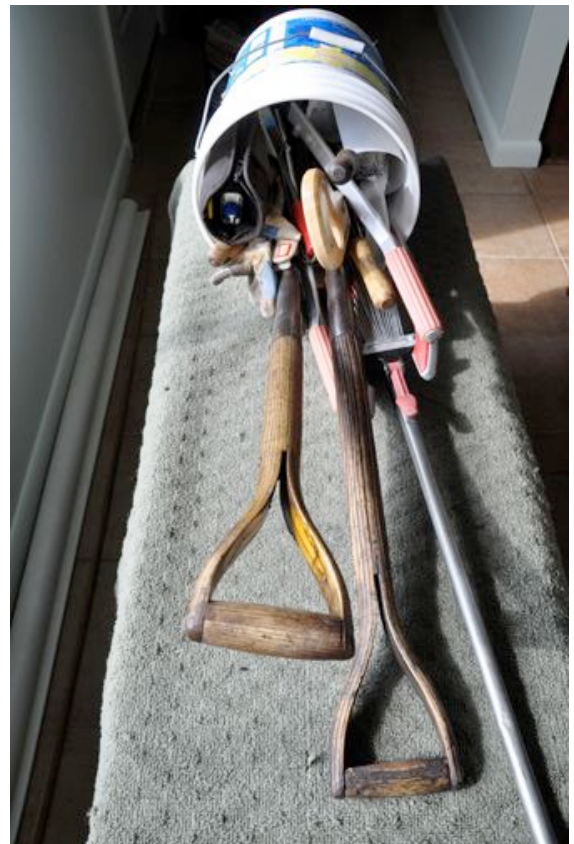
Find all our tools. Where do they get to over winter?

Our check list, as we try to reassemble one each of what we call our "standard kit." (This is also for A.S., who asked, You showed us your tool bucket one time in Master Gardener class. I wish I'd written down everything. Can you tell me again which tools you think are essential?)

Gloves. In summer and for light work we like the Atlas 260 gloves with nitrile on the finger tips, finger pads and palms only. For spring, fall and heavy work we use Velcro-at-wrist leather-and-fabric glove sold at Do-It Best hardware stores, or the similar style (men's or women's) from Woman's Work. www.womanswork.com



work. For our heavy use we've used this model -- a Treaded Garden Spade -- for 30 years. We aren't snobs about where our tools are made; we choose this one because we've owned dozens of other brands and know this one to be the strongest. It's made at an English forge and sold by Clarington Forge in Canada (www.claringtonforge.com). We also own their smaller Border Spades -- purchased originally for our kids and then favored by smaller gardeners who have worked with us.



Spade. For edging, digging, transplanting. Straight edge better for clean cuts in sod and roots. For the average gardener most rectangular blade spades will

Gardenviews store in Northville, Michigan is carrying the Treaded Garden Spade (right, below) for those who believe as we do that the only way to shop for tools is to hold them in your hands.



Fork. For digging in hard packed soil, weeding, transplanting and aerating. Also from Clarington Forge (www.claringtonforge.com) Ours is that company's potato fork but smaller or lighter people may go with their border fork or shrubbery fork, and bigger gardeners may prefer one of the longer handled garden forks. All are great tools. One model available at Gardenviews in Northville, Michigan.

Left: Janet's fork is venerable, and spends winter with its handle oiled and wrapped to prolong its life.



Adjustable rake. Not a leaf rake, it has round wire tines less likely to accumulate a tangle of the cut stems and varied leafy stuff we rake. Available at many hardware stores and on-line suppliers (search for adjustable wire tine rake). Gempler's (www.gemplers.com) has it as a "Leaf Rake w/Adjustable Handle."



Trowel with a sturdy handle and a blade made of metal that will hold an edge.



Weeder. Everyone has their favorite. What works in your own hand is what counts.

We're entering our fourth decade of using the Dutch hand hoe. Drag to undercut small weeds, turn the head and use the longer part of the triangle to pry out bigger weeds. Sneeboer USA carries both the right- and left handed model. We each use both, working right-handed some days and left-handed on others to help fend off hand- and wrist repetitive strain injuries. www.sneeboerusa.com click on Weeders and then Hand Hoe.



Bypass-blade hand pruners. Felco and Corona make quality bypass pruners but we most often use Fiskars Power Gear bypass pruners. (Many garden centers, hardware stores, on-line suppliers and Home Depot.) They make a clean cut, have a blade made of metal that holds an edge and can be sharpened, have handles that fit better in our not-large hands, and work with a rotating action that's easy on our wrist, hand and thumb issues.

Folding pruning saw with curved blade. We like ARS brand. Corona and Felco brands are also good. We strongly recommend a curved blade. AM Leonard Co. carries the ARS saw (www.amleo.com)



Sharpening kit for the field. Honing stone -- 1" x 3" "pocket stone," -- plus honing stone oil, 6" flat bastard file for keeping an edge on our spade, Scotch Brite pad and plastic scraper to keep tools clean and rust-free. We also often have a rag and some WD-40 oil for removing sap that can build up on blades. All can be found at most hardware stores although the honing stone in the *small* size (best for hand pruners!) can be elusive; we generally find pocket stones at independent hardware stores.

Hedge shears. We choose for those with blades that hold their edge well, light weight, great balance and a shock absorber. These are our favorites and we sometimes fight over them. ARS professional hedge shear (www.gemplers.com). A similar, shorter and less expensive model is the ARS super light hedge shears, of which AM Leonard is one supplier (www.amleo.com).



Loppers with bypass blades that hold an edge well, and a shock absorber. We like the Felco loppers. (www.gemplers.com has them in 20" length as well as our 21" model.) For clean up work we also use the short handled (12") power gear Fiskars with anvil-cutter (Home Depot stores and other places that carry the Fiskars line of garden tools).



A few other items worth carting around.



A 5-gallon bucket, for hauling all the tools or water or plants or weeds. It can also be a seat and is always good as a brace to help us stand back up after we've been down a while.

Biodegradable string. Ours is often degrading before our eyes.

A sturdy pocket knife for dividing and such.



A whisk broom.

A cut-down plastic gallon bottle to use as a scoop or a dust pan.



One last thing to do in our garden. Brace for the storm.

Maximum question time is coming. For much of the year our weekly email includes comments along the lines of, "Wow, that was fast!" In spring, we don't hear that very often because so much happens at once.

Deer are hungriest, moles' cumulative mess becomes noticeable, plant identity crises most numerous, plant selection's come down to the wire, and people are more aggravated than ever that last fall's oak leaves have yet to come down. Although we can't keep up* we do keep smiling. We love every question, learning right along with you as we research and phrase answers. On pages 16 through 20 are snippets from the past week's email.

*We send a personal reply to pretty much every question we get. Those most timely, popular and non-repetitive of topics we've already covered, also appear here.

Having us on file or on CD: Index makes "no repeat" policy practical

We write to learn. It's been one of our goals since we began our weekly Q&A column 18+ years ago. So we rarely repeat a topic, and if we do we try to advance the discussion by giving a re-cap and then moving on into different aspects or variables from the common ground.

When we switched from weekly newsprint to searchable e-files we realized our readers who save our articles and those who own our CD collections* could do their own re-cap and even

To make all 19 years of our articles available to you...

...we've been working on our own web site, with an open library of our work and a real-time forum so you can also read and join in to all of the discussions that go on here between newsletters. We aim to have that site up this year but we do have to cross a big hurdle in terms of development and hosting cost. If you would like to make a donation to help us do that, we'd appreciate it. Send a check payable to Janet Macunovich, to 120 Lorberta, Waterford, MI 48328.

create custom libraries. So sometimes in answering the most popular questions we include notes such as "check issue #51." When you see that we've mentioned it more than once, you'll find even more on that topic if you use the index we issued or the one on our CD.

*Six years of answers on hundreds of topics in *Asking About Asters* and 100 more weeks, fully illustrated, on *Potting Up Perennials*; see pages 26 & 27.

Darned deer!

I looked out this morning and there were *eight* deer eating our shrubs. I chased them and saw that the rabbits had been up on the banked snow eating the burning bush and they've peeled all the bark at snow bank height...

Repellents might work if you begin applying them right away as new foliage emerges, re-apply just before the product's effect is due to wear off, and switch sometimes to different repellents. Cut girdled trunks or canes below the damage and let them re-grow. They're not salvageable. Cut them before new growth begins.

Fencing is probably in your future.

If we can't fence the whole yard against deer we can at least make it difficult for them to browse favorite shrubs.

Mole mountains emerge from melting snow

Do you have anything on moles? The snow melted and I saw mole hills everywhere. For sure that's what people will be asking about at the Garden Show Master Gardener booth.

Trap and kill them in April. It's impractical and unwise to try to gas them or kill what they come to eat. Repellents are not effective.

Sure it's cruel to kill a mole that's doing nothing except its part in insect control and soil aeration. But if mole tunneling is making it unsafe to walk in an area, or is popping up and drying out root balls of plants, it comes down to us or them...



Rediscovering the garden: Can't put my finger on what this is

I am not sure any more what this plant in my garden is; I bought it last year. I think...

We might be able to help, as might someone at a garden center help desk or at your Extension office. Supply a sample or photo showing at least two leaves or leaf buds attached to a stem. A stalk with a seed pod would be great, too. Send us the photo via email, or mail us the sample (sandwich it between two pieces of paper; do *not* enclose it in plastic). If you take the photo to a help desk, please don't expect much if you're showing it to someone on your cell phone. Make a large print of the photo so the detective you choose can see detail.

What can I plant in this space...

I have a space along the east wall of my house where I want something. Couldn't decide on anything last year. It's pretty shady and there's a bed about 5 feet deep and six feet wide.

We develop lists of candidate plants from things that will thrive on the site. Then we ask of each, in this sequence:

Will you look good here given the background and other things in the main viewer's view?

Will the caretaker be able and willing to render the care you need?

Is your price and purchase size right for this project?

Will you fulfill one of this project's list of objectives?

Any "No" answer boots a potential candidate off the list. To help someone with plant selection, the designer needs background information to be able to answer those questions. Your goals and vision for the garden are critical input. Other important facts include growing conditions plus a look at, or photos of the site taken from, the main viewer's perspective.

Janet's book *Designing Your Gardens and Landscape*, takes you through this a step at a time. Sometimes when given complete information we can include some ideas here. You can also take that background information to consult a designer at a garden center or engage one at your home.

Oh that oak!

Here is our vote for the worst tree for leaf pickup - Red Oak! We have more than a dozen in our yard, and pick up billions in fall. Plus some stay on the trees until Spring, giving us even more. Thankfully we can cart them right into the woods behind the house where they eventually make wonderful leaf mold. We also make compost and have rain barrels. I feel raking and carrying water buckets to the plants is great exercise to stay strong. - G. B. -

Rattle your rake all you want, the oak leaves that grew on non-flowering twigs will hang on until spring. Try this: Let them fall and stay where they fall. We do, and the gardens love it.



More on hard soil

I enjoy your newsletter and the inquiry regarding breaking up clay reminded me of my own adventures. At my home in Troy I was blessed with the back fill of clay. An avid gardener, I employed two methods to make my soil garden worthy. I am sure these are not new methods to you but they are great fun to recant.

Someone gave me bags of frozen smelt that were surplus to them. I wrenched a few inches of the top soil in a planned garden area and put down the smelt fish.

The next summer I returned to the area with shovel and determination in hand. The shovel dove to the depths in response to my enthusiasm. Microbes and beautiful earthworms enjoyed the treat all winter and greeted me with the best garden preparation ever!

The other was a planned raspberry patch in a sodded area. I covered the area with a bale of straw for the winter and in the spring planting the berry starts was a joy.
- R.A. -

My garden club gals have a saying:
"Gardeners rarely go to rest homes -
we just keel over in our gardens."
- G. B. -

You smelted a garden! We can understand it would work but we're glad we weren't around to sniff it, or our dogs to roll in it and bring the aroma indoors.

We'll add this to our list of unusual soil amendments, right up there with the guy who credits a hosta's huge growth to the dead groundhog buried under it.

Wondering about wonder product's effect on important soil microbes

Scientists are checking in with us in response to our issue #133 article on the topic of using surfactants to try to break up hard soil. Among them, D.G., who wrote:

Glad you had the courage and vision to take on this incredibly complex topic. Not sure why I spent so much time researching this , but for what it is worth here are my thoughts.

Your focus was on the what effect the surfactant had on soil structure. That was in response to the question and you handled that very well.

I would like to point out perhaps the greater unknowns (and possibly greater risks) are the effects on both (1) the soil microorganisms and (2) what Chemical Engineers call mass transfer/transport phenomenon (specifically the movement of chemicals and minerals through the soil and to the roots).

(1) There is much evidence on how horticultural soaps (surfactants) and oils are environmentally friendly and broad based pesticides which can disrupt the ability of insects to survive. The question should also be asked what effect surfactants might have on the

cell walls of *micro organisms* which are part of the underground food network necessary for good plant health.

(2) Transport of minerals in the soil is still poorly understood and adding a foreign material (likely man made and previously unknown in this environment) is a significant change with the real possibility of having unintended consequences on the performance of the root/soil interface and solubility of chemicals and minerals. Absent some well conducted academic research I would be cautious on adding large amounts of surfactants to planting areas.*

Beds may look a tad messy as snow melts away. Don't succumb to any urge to clean up the soil -- it's fine as is!

Here are some web references of the research to date. Most focuses on toxic waste cleanup, use of surfactants to assist this and what the effects might be on soil biology.

"Even at low concentrations, surfactants seem to alter soil physics, soil chemistry, and soil biology significantly"



<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/etc.5620121007/abstract>

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15765586>

<http://www.cabdirect.org/abstracts/20093192551.html>

* For the record, crude oil producers inject surfactants underground in carefully planned locations and follow it with a water wash in an attempt to recover trace quantities of crude oil remaining in a reservoir after primary production has fallen to a very low rate. This is called secondary recovery of crude oil. I have personally seen core samples of before and after secondary recovery. The core samples after treatment are totally clean of all oil. It is an amazing sight and it is quite clear just how effective a surfactant can be at removing everything in its path ahead of it following a water wash. I suspect that the effect on topsoil of surfactant followed by a heavy rain might even be more disruptive and detrimental than one might at first suspect.

Insecticidal soap: Death by "Dishpan Hands"?

The point D.S. makes about the similarity of effect between horticultural soap on an insect and a surfactant on soil microbes' cell walls can be applied to people, too.

Soap can cause skin to dry in the same way it acts to kill an insect, by softening cell walls. The insect doesn't simply develop "dishpan hands" however. Its exoskeleton dissolves.

As for the product in question in issue #133, we know it is like most such products in its effect on human tissues. From its MSDS -- the Material Safety Data Sheet*, a manufacturer's report required by federal law:

"Vapors and mist irritate nose and throat. ...Liquid and mists can severely irritate or damage eyes and cause corneal burns. ...Prolonged or repeated skin contact may cause irritation and dermatitis."

*Available by contacting a product manufacturer or searching on-line for (product name) MSDS.

Woo hoo! Our readers' tests may be the first!

The manufacturer of the product we wrote about in issue #133 -- Aerify -- sent a reply to our queries which has caused us to end our search for objective university tests of Aerify. Specifically, they advised us:

"To date there have been no formal University testing of this product.
However, it is certainly tried and true by lawn care professionals."

Do you favor the fast, brief surf on pages 16 - 20? Then help us do more of it!

You can help us make all of our between-the-issues banter and research available to everyone. We've gotten the preliminary work done **for a website with a free forum**. This year the challenge is to fund the programming and get it launched. Donations are gladly accepted, no amount too small! Send a check to Janet Macunovich at 120 Lorberta, Waterford, MI 48328-3041.

When we -- Steven and Janet -- were senior instructors in charge of the Michigan School of Gardening, we and the school's other instructors collaborated to manage a fully moderated gardeners' forum. Not only was every topic we handled available to everyone who came to that forum, but we moderators used our expertise in each area and tools built into the website to be sure that every post was accurate, or appropriately qualified and explained. We're itching to do the same once again. 2011 can be the year we launch... if we have your support.

We intend to keep this newsletter free and without strings, ads or Spam attached -- likewise the website. **Your donation can help make it happen.** Send a check to Janet Macunovich at 120 Lorberta, Waterford, MI 48328-3041. Even \$1 is very much appreciated now as we switch from work we can do as a labor of love, to paying the technical experts to "grow" us a secure, easy, fun, fully searchable and illustrated forum.

Irrigation	15	42	Oct 1 2007, 08:58 PM In: fertilizing By: StevenNikkila
Forum Led by: GailMorrell			
Lawns	83	184	Jan 2 2008, 05:02 PM In: ice and snow any problem on la... By: SueGrubba
Forum Led by: StevenNikkila			
Organic Gardening	15	27	Jan 7 2008, 08:40 PM In: Newspaper & magazine inks:... By: JanetMacunovich
Forum Led by: NancyPerry			
Ornamental Grasses	21	74	Jan 13 2008, 11:02 PM In: Ornamental grasses in containe... By: KarenBoyie
Forum Led by: SueGrubba			
Outdoor Lighting	4	5	Jan 6 2008, 10:29 PM In: Nightlighting and winter wildl... By: SueGrubba
Forum Led by: SueGrubba			
Perennials	241	561	Jan 14 2008, 08:44 PM In: Winter flower By: JanetMacunovich
Forum Led by: SueGrubba, G			
Practical and General Ga	103	241	Yesterday, 04:42 PM In: Metal window boxes By: GailMorrell
Forum Led by: GailMorrell			
Professional Gardeners	7	12	Jan 5 2008, 07:19 PM In: Gardening Talks By: DebHall
Forum Led by: MillHurley			
Propagation	15	30	Jan 14 2008, 08:52 PM In: Started my seeds By: JanetMacunovich
Forum Led by: KarenBoyie			
Rock Gardens	13	23	Feb 6 2007, 04:49 PM In: Rock gardens: overwintering a... By: StevenNikkila
Forum Led by: StevenNikkila			
Roses	86	181	Jan 14 2008, 08:03 PM In: Hip Hip Hooray By: Corky
Forum Led by: NancyLindley			
Shrubs	221	489	Jan 13 2008, 08:40 PM In: pruning deer-damaged rhododend... By: KarenBoyie
Forum Led by: StevenNikkila			

Oh what fun our gardeners' forum was, and will be again. Free, too, once we've had your help to launch it.

Who's Janet? Who's Steven?



A professional gardener and educator since 1984, Janet Macunovich designs, plants and tends gardens through her business, Perennial Favorites. She teaches and writes about gardening at schools, conferences, in her books, this weekly column, the monthly Michigan Gardener and other publications.

Horticultural photographer Steven Nikkila was a hobbyist with a great eye who went back to college for a photography degree once he ushered his own children into grade school. Needing an elective one semester and thinking to bring home good information for his wife's gardening business, he took a class in ornamental horticulture and found himself hooked. Soon the leaps and bounds he'd been recording as his children grew had rivals in files of leaf and ground. He went on to earn a degree in horticulture, while illustrating his wife's books and lending a hand digging gardens. He calls it, "A great combination," and says, "I love this job almost as much as the best one I ever had -- raising my kids."



Email questions to Janet or Steven at JMaxGarden@aol.com or call 248-681-7850.

Where to catch Janet & Steven in-person:

March 7, Monday, 7:00 - 8:30 p.m., help from Janet about *Gardening in Small Spaces* at the Northville Library, 212 W. Cady St. in **Northville, Michigan**. Free. Call 248-349-3020 to reserve a seat.

March 10, Thursday, 7:30 p.m., join Janet for *Canned Goods: Container Gardens* at the **Farmington, Michigan** Hill and Dale Garden club meeting in Heritage Park's Spicer House.

March 12, Saturday, 10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m., *Garden by Janet - Making wattle fencing*. Open to Michigan State University Extension Education Center Tollgate Farm volunteers. At Tollgate Farm, Novi, Michigan.

March 12, Saturday, 3:00 - 5:00 p.m. *Free range Q&A.* You bring the topics to Gardenviews Store in Northville, Michigan. Janet helps you with the answers. Free.

March 14, Monday, 6:30 - 8:30 p.m., *Great Plants and Combinations* by Janet at the Lathrup Village Gardeners meeting at Lathrup Village City Hall, 27400 Southfield Road, **Lathrup Village, Michigan.** Refreshments, raffle, educational exhibits, too. Voluntary \$5 contribution asked of non-members.

March 15 & 16, Tuesday and Wednesday, 7:00 - 8:30 p.m., a two-part, come to one or both presentation by Janet to help you *Get Your Garden Ready for Spring.* Open to residents of Rochester and Rochester Hills and their guests, at the Rochester Hills Public Library in **Rochester, Michigan.**

March 17, Thursday, 7:00 - 8:30 p.m., Janet's advice for a *Low Maintenance Landscape* at the Waterford Township Library in **Waterford, Michigan.** 248-618-7694 for more information. Free.

March 19, Saturday, *Improving an Established Garden* is Janet's part of the afternoon sessions at the 12th Annual spring education event, "The Art of Gardening Seminar", hosted by the Allen County Master Gardeners in **Lima, Ohio.** Registration forms and more information is available at www.allen.osu.edu or contact Gretchen Staley, Allen County Master Gardeners Association, at 419-302-4234.

March 24, Thursday, 7:00 - 8:30 p.m., Janet's recipe for *More Color, More Fun* at the Waterford Township Library in **Waterford, Michigan.** Free. Call the library at 248-618-7694 for information.

March 26, Saturday, Janet's at the Huron County Master Gardeners' Spring Into Gardening Day in **Ubly, Michigan.** *Naturalized Gardening* and *Perennials for the Collector* will be Janet's contribution to the day long event. Pre-registration is required to attend. Go to the following website:

To attend Garden by Janet sessions:

We're let-me-see, hands-on people. That's how we learn best. From time to time there are *Garden by Janet* sessions listed here to afford you that kind of chance to grow. You visit us where we're working to either watch or work with Janet. Generally, there is no charge and we're in one of two kinds of locations:

1) At the **gardens we tend through our business, Perennial Favorites:** Our clients understand our enthusiasm for teaching. Some open their gardens so small groups can see and practice "how to." When the work we're doing may be of interest to you, we invite you in.

2) In the **Detroit Zoo, Adopt-A-Garden** program where we're 22-year veterans. Many people have worked with us there, some for a day and others for years. We have fun, we learn, we accomplish much. You can check out this program by coming in as my student on a temporary pass. **To join Janet at the Zoo,** email mstgarden@gmail.com with the subject line of your email "Help at zoo."

http://www.msue.msu.edu/portal/default.cfm?pageset_id=27408&page_id=44700&msue_portal_id=25643 for more information.

April 2, Saturday, Janet is part of English Gardens "Garden Party" weekend in its southeast Michigan stores. *Low Maintenance Landscape* will be discussed at the West Bloomfield location (248-851-7506) at 10:00 a.m., at the Royal Oak store (248-280-9500) at 1:00 p.m. and in Ann Arbor (734-332-7900) at 4:00 p.m.

April 3, Sunday, The "Garden Party" continues at English Gardens' southeast Michigan locations. Janet will be advising on the **Low Maintenance Landscape** at the store in Clinton Township (586-286-6100) at noon and in Eastpointe (586-771-4200) at 3:00 p.m.

A Plowman on his legs is higher than a Gentleman on his knees.

Benjamin Franklin, Poor Richard's Almanack 1746

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 meeting,
 - a **hands-on workshop** at a site of your choosing or
 - a **multi-part class** for a 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 talks or get a referral and list of speakers.

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 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 expert instructors who knew their stuff in the garden as well as knowing how to get their messages across in front of a group. Janet and Steven 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.

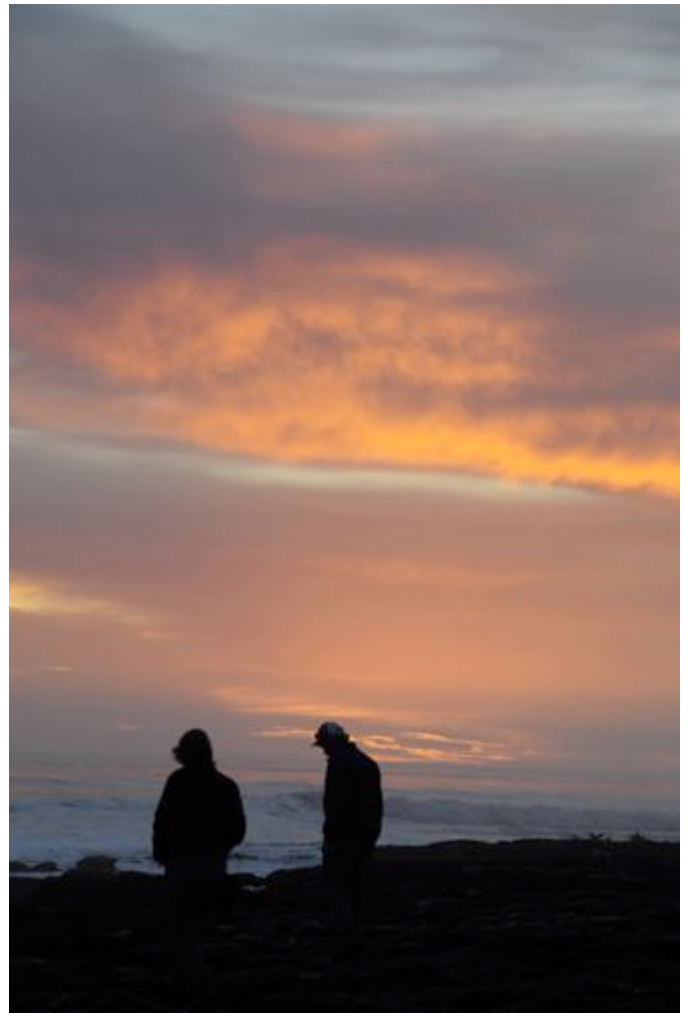
Time to garden your walls...

Steven's decorated many walls with great garden and Nature images. He can help you do the same with photos that capture the garden beauty you love, framed or on canvas to your specifications.

You can own any of Steven's images from *What's Coming Up*.^{*} Or if you have a flower, type of scene or hue in mind, request your dream. His library includes tens of thousands of plants and natural images, so Steven can assemble a customized photo sampler and price list for you. Email us at JMaxGarden@aol.com for details, to request a sampler or to place an order.



^{*}Images in our newsletter are depicted in low-resolution to facilitate e-mail transmission. Steven's originals and art created from them are full resolution, with so much clear detail they are sharp even as wall-size cloth banners.

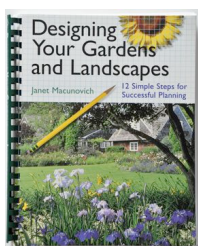


Prices for **Steven's garden art** vary with your wishes in format and size. Examples:

Matted, framed, overall 11 x 15", \$48
36 x 48' no-fade **cloth tapestry**, \$215



Support our work! Add friends to our mail list, or buy them our publications:



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First published in 1990 as *Easy Garden Design*, a 150-page step-by-step recipe that's become a design classic. Janet developed, uses and has trained thousands of others to use this process. People say: "This is exactly the simple, clear approach I need!" This design process is applicable world-wide.

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Soft cover book. Text by Janet Macunovich. Color illustrations by Steven Nikkila. \$20.00



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A digital library of six years of Janet's work: weekly columns, newsletters and over 200 extra Q&A letters to individual gardeners. 1,681 questions answered about soil preparation, fertilizing, pruning, design, choosing plants, foiling bugs and much more. No repeated topics. Fully indexed; the entire collection can be searched from one index.

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Janet & Steven's complete digital library New for 2010

Set of two CDs: *Asking About Asters* and *Potting Up Perennials*. \$30.00



Janet and Steven give you: Trees*

A choice collection of Janet and Steven's advice for tree selection, planting and care. Each article made its debut in *Michigan Gardener* magazine and has been on hold since, awaiting completion of its fellows until this comprehensive compilation became possible. Topics include: Selecting trees; fall color; what's happening to ash trees; replacing a big tree; descriptions, lists and photos of great trees; why starting small is a good idea when planting; planting how-to, why's and why not's; staking, watering and fertilizing; mulching; rescuing a tree from the lawn; preventing construction damage; pruning to keep trees and shrubs small; removing suckers; detecting girdling roots; and dealing with maple tar spot and lecanium scale.

10" x 13" magazine, 48 pages. Color illustrations. \$12.00

Janet and Steven give you: Landscape Ideas*

Janet and Steven's favorite articles on landscape design and renovation: Designing with foliage color; covering up after the bulb season; doubling up perennials for 3-season color; shady solutions; using usual plants in unusual ways; designing hypo-allergenic gardens; Murphy's Laws applied to gardens; renovation how-to; fragrant plants and designs; attracting wildlife; rockwork; invasive plants; discovering a site's hidden assets; using herbs in a landscape; and how to cheat to improve a garden quickly. These articles appeared first in *Michigan Gardener* magazine individually between 1999 and 2010. Now they're collected in this set for your design library.

10" x 13" magazine, 48 pp. Color Ill.'s. \$12.00



Janet and Steven give you: Garden Care*

Vital how-to for tending a garden, from Janet and Steven's favorite articles on: bed preparation; soil testing; making a weed-free bed; spring start-up; improving hard-packed soil; fertilizing; watering; cutting back and deadheading; repairing irrigation; drought-tolerant plants; sharpening tools; tweaking in summer; staking; and the art of fall garden clean up. Items in this collection were selected from among Janet and Steven's ten years of *Michigan Gardener* articles. Each made its debut in that magazine, waited for its companion pieces and now they all join your library in this more durable and comprehensive form.

10" x 13" magazine, 48 pages. Color illustrations. \$12.00

Janet and Steven give you: Trees, Landscape Ideas and Garden Care *

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*For a look inside, email JMaxGarden@aol.com with the subject line "Magazine peek."

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