

What's Coming Up:

Janet Macunovich answers your growing concerns
Issue 29, February 21, 2009

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When insects chew on a cherry, it can ruin the tree's beauty for that year. Resist the urge to cut off branches with disfigured foliage, however. Pruning is a long-term injury while leaf-chewing is only a short-term insult.

Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila



Don't weep over **cherry tree - beetles eat it** but don't beat it

"We planted a **weeping cherry tree** last year and it was **eaten alive by the beetles** that invaded in summer," says Maureen. "Do I need to trim the branches so this tree doesn't look so pitiful?"

Don't prune that tree, Maureen. Not unless it's to take out dead wood or make some changes to improve its shape or size.

The beetles ate the leaves but did not damage the wood. At least I think that's the case. I can't think of any beetle that would be after anything except leaves on a cherry. Japanese beetles are my chief suspects and they certainly do not damage wood.



Insect feeding is not a problem in itself. We gauge its seriousness by how much leaf a plant loses and when. Even if every leaf on a tree loses as much of its mass to insect chewing as this one has to the Japanese beetle, the remaining leaf surface can still conduct photosynthesis to "feed" the tree. Damage that destroys less than 20% of the foliage -- makes the plant drop 1/5 of its leaves, damages 1/5 of every leaf, etc. -- is cosmetic but not life threatening.
Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila

One of the best things about Japanese beetles (there isn't much!) is that they don't start eating leaves until about July 1. By that time, plants have 3 months' growing time under their belts. That's plenty for most plants to have recouped all the starch they used to start growing in spring plus at least begin to put away energy toward future years.

Look at the branches now and **you should find leaf buds set there for this coming year**. Slice into one of those buds and you can probably see it's moist inside -- alive. (You might need to look through a magnifier.) **Cherry trees generally grow so vigorously that losing their leaves midway through a year is not a mortal blow**. They are able to finish setting themselves up for the next year.

When leaf-feeding insect damage is severe enough that the plant sheds the leaf, another may grow to take its place if it's early in the year. If severe leaf damage occurs in the second half of a growing season, the plant may shrug off the damaged foliage and simply wait. That was the situation (right) for this tricolor beech visited in August by fall webworm. By August it already had created and was content to finish the season with just its growth buds for the following year. The buds are those sharply pointed appendages below each leaf.



When we remove branches we "cost" the tree wood. That takes away starches and nutrients that were accumulated over years. It's a loss that can't be recouped quickly, one that may cut a lot further into the plant's nest egg than the beetles did.



It's always smart to identify the insect involved in damage. That is the key to looking into the pest's life cycle and weighing the full impact of its presence. Most are simple nuisances, affecting a plant's looks but not its long term health. Some are more serious because they also damage plant parts that are more permanent than leaves. Others are worth controlling even though they eat only leaves because they are new to an area, explosive in terms of population, and likely to damage additional species. This is the case with lily leaf beetle, an exotic pest now spreading west across North America turning lilies and their relatives into lace. In Michigan, I haven't yet seen lily leaf beetle damage (what's shown here occurred in Massachusetts) but when I do I will probably try to stem its tide and forestall the day I'll have to join East Coast gardeners in giving up growing lilies.

Photos ©2009 Steven Nikkila

Nothing magical about fairy rings in the lawn

During a winter when the ground disappears for weeks under solid snow cover, a thaw can cause us to see our lawn as for the first time. Diane says, "**My lawn has many fairy rings**. How do I control them? I realize there is only one way to beat it (fairy ring), that is to dig out the area affected by it. Well, I would be digging for days. Any suggestions?"

When I hear the term fairy ring, Diane, I think of **mushrooms that erupt in circular pattern** marking an area where an underground fungus is dismantling something such as dead tree roots. If that's what you mean by fairy ring, your gut feeling's right. You **can't get rid of the ring, only wait** until the organic matter it's living on is all used up.

If, however, by fairy ring you mean **a rounded dead spot in a lawn**, there is **much you can do**.

Necrotic ring spot* is a fungal disease especially fond of **bluegrass** lawn that's growing on compacted soil. Where a lawn began as sod laid on minimally prepared, **hard packed soil** -- for instance, post-construction ground barely covered with a bit of top soil -- necrotic ring spot **often appears three to four years after the sod was laid**.

Although there's fungus involved, its presence should not prompt fungicide applications but be taken as **a sign that the grass plants are too weak to fend off problems**. Digging out each dead spot, loosening the area and re-seeding with high grade, disease-resistant grass seed** can solve the problem. Yet that is only practical when the trouble is limited to specific areas, such as where overflow parking or regular foot traffic has compressed the soil. If the whole lawn is showing symptoms, then **core aeration and top dressing should be on your lawn care list** for this spring. (Please note that ring spot is most often noticed in late summer and so aeration is often described as a fall chore. Yet core aeration can be done at other times of the year and should be done sooner rather than later to help a weak lawn begin to recover.)

How core aeration works

When **a core aerator** is run across a lawn it punches into the ground with many hollow tines, pulling out cylinders of soil perhaps a half-inch in diameter and a couple inches deep. These cores drop on the surface and eventually dry and crumble. Compost or a sandy loam soil is the top dressing that's broadcast over a cored surface. The pits made in extracting the cores end up filled with loose, airy bits and thus **provide good places for roots to grow**. Loosened a pit at a time, the lawn becomes more able to sustain a dense colony of robust grass plants.

Soil that's very badly compacted **may require several rounds of core aeration and top dressing** before it begins to come around. You might aerate again in late summer or early fall, and also next spring. Lawns that are grown on soil that tends to pack down -- dense clay loam or silty earth -- might need to be aerated every fall or after every big party or other heavy use.

* Copy and paste this URL to your browser bar to learn more:
<http://www.extension.umn.edu/yardandgarden/ygbriefs/p324/necrotic-ring-turf.html>

**<http://www.ipm.uiuc.edu/diseases/series400/rpd408/>

Many gardeners resent tending turf. Yet few things make a garden look so fine as to be surrounded by deep green, velvety lawn.

Turn annual tool cleaning into friendly, practical fun

Mark asks, "I took my tools to your school once and got **help cleaning and sharpening** my clippers, shovel and weeders. Do you still do that?"

One of my students began that tradition, Mark. It was such productive fun that I couldn't bear to see it end when the school closed. So with my friend and fellow instructor Pam Palechek I co-hosted a tool cleaning party and pot luck last weekend. We invited everyone who's helped at the Detroit Zoo Adopt-a-Garden. About thirty people came bearing close to 200 tools and two dozen delicious entrees. It was great fun.

Here's **my recipe** for that event. Why not **host your own tool-cleaning party**?

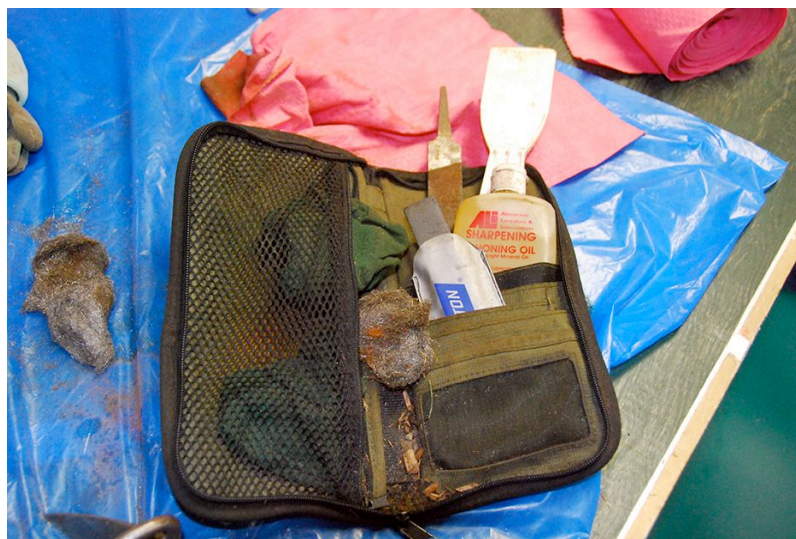
At right, Tom Theoret, Linda Pulnicki, Phil Gigliotti, Priscilla Needle and Deb Hall put their heads and tool care supplies together. Below, the mini-tool care kit I carry with me every day. Photos ©2009 Steven Nikkila



All you need for tool care

Here is what I lay out at a tool care party and what we do with them.

All of this is available at a hardware store or in a department store tools section. Take the list with you and ask for help filling it -- you're likely to collect additional tool care tips from the store staff.



Cover work station surface with plastic sheet or tarp.

Clean dirt, rust and sap from blades.

Scrape, coat lightly with oil, wait, then scrape again, using:

- **Plastic scraper** (I use a plastic putty knife, as shown above)
- **Stiff brush** like a nylon bristle scrub brush or wire brush*
- **WD40 oil or mineral oil**
- **"Scratch pad"** (heavy duty, soap-free scouring pad)
- **Steel wool*** (soap-free)
- **Turpentine** or degreaser such as Goo-gone
- **Rags**

*I've heard to avoid wire brushes, sandpaper, or steel wool as they scratch the metal surfaces. I haven't seen negative effects and still swear by steel wool.



Sharpen blades.

Hone, file or grind to remove burrs. Work only on the beveled side of a blade on a bypass cutting tool (scissor-type cutting action). Move the file or stone along the blade in just one direction, usually from tip toward base. Avoid back-and forth motions which can leave burrs on the cutting edge. You will need:

- An oiled **honoring stone** (you might use "sharpening oil" but WD40 or 3-in-1 are okay)
- Small and medium **flat files** ("flat bastard" file, right)
- **Grinder** -- hand-operated, electric bench-mounted or a grinding wheel attachment for an electric rotary tool such as made by Dremel. Never grind to the point of visibly heating the metal, which can cause steel to lose its temper and nevermore be able to hold an edge. (Maddie Laule puts a new edge on a trowel using her Dremel tool and a grinding bit: Below, right.)
- A **vise or clamp** can be handy to hold a blade as you hone or grind. (Edging tool, clamped as it's sharpened, right)

Disassemble tools if necessary to sharpen the blades

- Assortment of **screwdrivers** and **wrenches**

Tackle **saw sharpening** only if you have **special files**:

- Very small files with surfaces that match the bevel on the saw tooth.

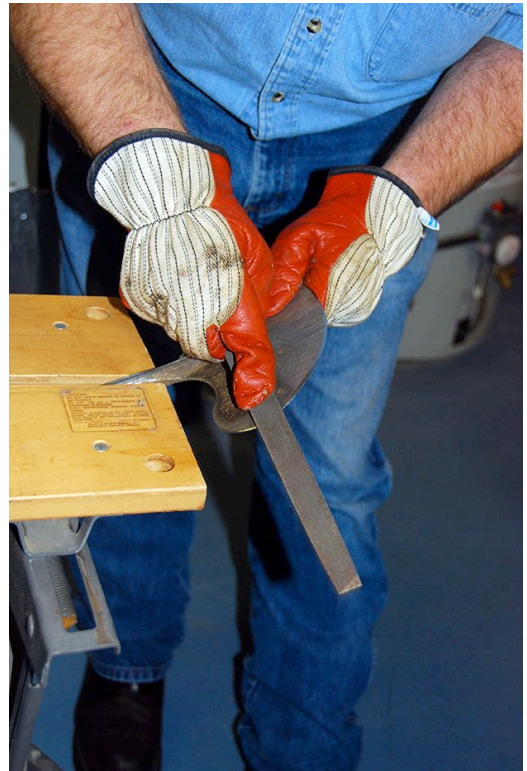
Oil gears, springs, joints, etc.

Remove any dirt. **Old toothbrushes** and degreaser come in handy. Operate the mechanism as you apply **WD40 or 3-in-1 oil** to work lubricant onto interior/hidden surfaces.

Maintain wooden handles.

Remove dirt and sap. Sand rough spots. Apply oil:

- **Turpentine** or degreaser / Goo-gone
- Rags
- **Sand paper** (medium and fine grit)
- **Linseed oil**



Prevent rust's return.

Apply a thin layer of **WD40 oil** to metal surfaces.

Open your basement to friends, line up a few basic tools and have a great time!

Photos ©2009 Steven Nikkila



Many people are surprised to hear they should sharpen a shovel or spade. Without a sharp edge, digging's harder work than it should be. These tools don't usually come with an edge but await the user's file. ("Why" they aren't sharpened by the manufacturer is a mystery -- perhaps they are too dangerous to ship when sharpened.)

Tom Theoret (right) did more than give his shovel one edge, he notched it. Darl Slentz uses a power grinder to sharpen its teeth. Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila

Short report from the field:

Fran wrote to comment on last week's item on Rex begonia care: "Your **begonia discussion was excellent**. I went to one of the suggested web sites, also excellent. I do the begonias at the Cranbrook greenhouse. **My mantra is do not water the begonias**. When people bring unhappy begonias in, I find the **main problem is over watering**. When greenhouse volunteers see a begonia drooping, they think it must be dry and run to the nearest sprinkling can. Actually, begonias (and other plants) very often droop from too much rather than too little water."

This week in Janet's garden

Grow with me! This week I will:

Sort seeds I'm thinking about growing this year.

My first sort is by germination requirements as explained on the seed package, catalog or growing guide:

- All **those that sprout best when warm** will start together in my furnace room. Not because they need it *that* warm (see "Plant's-eye view", page 7) but because that room has no windows. Spaces near my 1950's leaky windows often fall to below 50°F at night).
- Species that **prefer cool** can bunk in the unheated back room or be direct-sown outdoors any time now.

- The few that can't be buried but **must have light** can bask atop the surface of the seed starting mix, with transparent cling wrap over the top of the flat to maintain high humidity.

Then I separate the **quick-sprouters** from the **slower species**, trying to arrange things so that once they pop up the seedlings spend no more than a week or two indoors. I know they will be stockier, healthier plants if I get them quickly out into the sun. So I either arrange to put them in the protection of a cold frame or time my sowing so they'll sprout about the time that frosts end.

I sort by time with the understanding that what the package says may take 8-14 days to sprout may be up in 4 days if I sow near full moon.

Last frost dates

The average date of the last spring frost* in:

Charleston, South Carolina: April 6

Chicago, Illinois: April 25

Toronto, Ontario: May 9

Detroit, Michigan: May 12

Cedar Rapids, Iowa: May 13

Madison, Wisconsin: May 13

Cleveland, Ohio: May 18

Barrie, Ontario: May 26

* For more cities, copy and paste this URL to your browser bar: <http://www.victoryseeds.com/frost>

Keep pruning. I have one more Japanese maple to work on. (To prune with me, see "February tree pruning" and "Pruning trees and shrubs" on page 9.)

The Japanese maple we pruned last week (below) took its cut-back gracefully. We operate on this one every two years to keep it small, since the space it occupies won't accept its 25-foot potential. Photos ©2009 Steven Nikkila

Plant's-eye view of temperature

We often read that a plant needs cool, prefers to be warm, etc. To plants:

- **Cold** is below **40°F** (4.5°C).
- **Cool** is **50- 60°F** (10-15°C).
- **Warm** is over **70°F** (21°C).

So:

- Any extended period below 40°F simulates winter to a hardy plant.
- In order to "vernalize" -- go through the chemical changes that would happen if it was on moist ground outdoors through winter -- seed does not need to freeze, only spend 30-60 days in moist paper in a refrigerator (where it's about 40°F inside).
- Temperatures below 60°F convince a tropical plant that it's the off season and dormancy is the way to go.
- Plants that flower best in cool weather begin to stop forming flower buds when it's over 70°F.



Steven and I are making the 500-photo sequence from our last Japanese maple pruning session into a digital presentation. We aim to put it on a computer disk we can mail to those who want to know but aren't free to join us at a "Garden by Janet" session. So far, we think the show works -- viewed in rapid progression it's almost a movie. Yet we see that it will need words, too. Stay tuned for its release next month. (End of year update: Project on hold, insufficient response from readers... but email if you're interested. You can still vote it back out of storage!)

Garden of the mind

We can't be "out there" but can still **cultivate mental ground!**
Use vegetable names to complete this story: (Answers on page 11.)

It was winter, that time when we're prone to _____ our gardening partners with questions about the upcoming year. For instance, one day Pat sighed, "Oh, Chris, don't you _____ all that our garden has been passed over by the beautification award committee? _____ start now to add the best new plants and plan some events so people can see what we've done!"

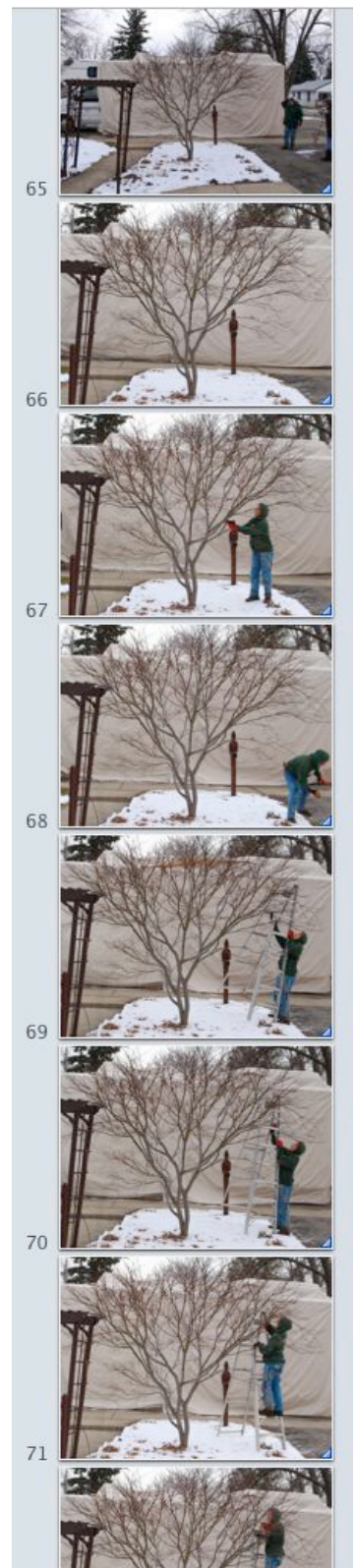
"I can go along with that," replied Chris, "but I'd rather focus on the landscape at our offices. That guy Bill gets my _____, the one who always brags about his Better Business Bureau Eye-Appeal ribbon. I'd like to _____ him!"

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

Grins: To **increasing sensations as winter eases out**. Since Groundhog Day birds have stepped up their song. Now scents are on the rise. In a thaw it's thrill to catch the first subtle fragrance of warming soil. I'm even happy to once again sniff the occasional skunk, after months without it.

Grow-ans: To expecting the world **from a gardening seminar**. It's *plenty* to come away with just one good idea, processed and developed in an atmosphere super-charged by the eagerness of dozens or hundreds of gardeners. If you also have email addresses, phone numbers or the published work of the speakers as reference points, that's golden. I think my day was well spent with gardeners last week hearing about heirloom vegetables and flowers, kitchen gardens, and lawn-free front yards. From my nine pages of notes and eight hours of attention I have these **four fresh ideas** and know exactly where I will apply them:

- Do more with **chard** this year.
- Include more **attractive structure in the vegetable garden** from crisp bed shape to attractive vine supports, so the area carries visual appeal into winter.
- Move some plants and set some stepping stones in order to respect the sacred American right to **exit a car without tiptoe-ing in a garden**.
- Take time in the kitchen to **present the produce I grow more attractively**. Everything from chopping to chewing becomes more fun.



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.

Where to catch Janet in-person:

February tree pruning, date to be announced, "Garden by Janet - Bring your gloves and tools!" In Franklin, Michigan, we're **clipping an upright Japanese maple to restrict its size.** We're watching for the next date that's right for tree, gardener and photographer. Want to come learn the art of keeping a tree small? Email or call me (JMaxGarden@aol.com or 248-681-7850) to reserve a spot and learn the location. Include your phone number so I can call you when we set that date. This is a limited-space workshop. Dress for the weather! No charge.

Saturday, February 28, 9 a.m. to noon, *Master Gardener Flower Gardening*. Janet teaches this segment of the Wayne County Michigan State University Extension 2009 Master Gardener course. It's open as always to active Master Gardener volunteers who would like a refresher on a topic. Contact your Master Gardener coordinator for details.

Saturday, March 7, *Propagation*. At the Kent County MSU Extension annual "Stuck on Gardening" conference. Janet leads you through secrets to reproducing all kinds of plants. Other topics at the conference are *Look Ma, No Grass* by Ralph Heiden, *Something Old, Something New* by Rebecca Finneran and *Fall Scaping* by Stephanie Cohen. \$55. For more information call the Kent MSU Extension, 616-336-7734.

Sunday, March 8, 2 p.m. *Your Front Door Garden: A Gorgeous Green Greeting* and Monday, March 9, 2 p.m., *Natural Landscapes*: What it means to go native on an urban lot." These two talks by Janet are part of an impressive seminar series running throughout the week-long Chicago Flower & Garden Show. At Navy Pier, Chicago. \$14 weekend, \$12 weekday entry fee. For more, go to www.chicagoflower.com

Tuesday, March 10, 1 p.m. and 7 p.m., *Renovate Your Garden or Landscape* at the Walled Lake library on Maple Road east of Pontiac Trail. Sponsored by the library and the Lakes Area Garden Club. Call the library at 248-624-3772 for more information.

Wednesday, March 11, 6 p.m. at the Fred C. Fischer library in downtown Belleville, Michigan, *Shade Gardening*. Janet covers plant selection, design and maintenance strategies, planting among tree roots, and soil preparation techniques for shady situations. \$20 voluntary contribution. Call 734-699-3291 to reserve a seat.

Pruning Trees and Shrubs

If you've ever wondered how and when to prune trees and shrubs to ensure beautiful bloom, good shape, manageable size, and healthy plants, this is for you: Garden designer and writer Janet Macunovich covers: How well and how long popular landscape plants hold up to

pruning; Simple, proven techniques for keeping plants within the bounds you set. Macunovich encourages you to "Bring a branch!" Clip a limb from the plants you want to trim, to be sure they are included in the "how to!"

You can attend at one of these two locations:

• **Wednesday, March 18, 6-9**

p.m. at **Telly's Greenhouse**: 3301 John R Rd., just north of Big Beaver in Troy, Michigan. \$20 per session. Call Telly's to register: 248-689-8735

• **Wednesday, March 25, 6-9**

p.m. at **Fred C. Fisher Library** in downtown **Belleville**, Michigan. \$20 voluntary contribution. Call 734-699-3291 to reserve a seat.

• **Questions?** Call or email Janet: 248-681-7850 or JMaxGarden@aol.com

Saturday, March 21, Beginning Green. Part of the Taylor Conservatory Foundation and Wayne County Community College District's "Growing Great Gardens" event at Wayne County Community College, 21000 Northline Road in Taylor, Michigan. Janet explains how you can "green up" and improve your ecological footing each time you begin gardening, whether you're a beginning gardener or simply resuming your gardening in spring.

Other topics include Growing Food in cities: One Plot at a Time, Attracting Butterflies and Pollinators, and Tips to Beautify Your Home and Community. 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. \$20. Advance registration recommended. Info and registration form at www.taylorconservatory.org/news.htm. Questions? Email taylorconservatory@sbcglobal.net.

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

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Asking About Asters Janet Macunovich's Growing Concerns Special Edition

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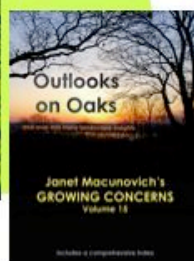
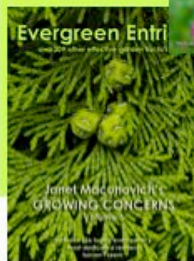
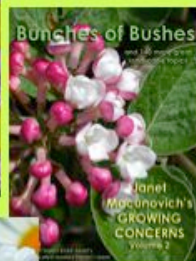
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Send your check payable to Janet Macunovich at
120 Lorberta, Waterford, MI 48328-3041

Include your name and complete mailing address.

Stay tuned to JMaxGarden@aol.com for information about the 2009 release of more from Janet's Growing Concerns files. (Are you on my mailing list? You should be! Just send me an email to receive my free weekly newsletter. Then you can begin compiling your own free library and annual index.)



Please let me know if you are interested in hard copies of this library. I am ready to issue one or all of these volumes in paperback in 2009, based on demand.

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**: I've worked for many years with some of my clients, who not only trust me with their landscapes but also understand my enthusiasm for teaching. They open their gardens to small groups who want to see and practice "how to." When the work I'm scheduled to do may be of interest to you and the situation allows on-lookers or apprentices, I invite you in.

Answers to **Garden of the Mind** puzzle: pepper, carrot, lettuce, gourd; beet or squash.