

What's Coming Up:

Janet Macunovich answers your growing concerns
Issue 68, November 21, 2009

Here you'll find:

Rake up a looper? Watch plants next year,
pages 1-2
How to identify a garden pest, page 3
When "a lot of gall" matters, page 3
Why insect I.D. relies on plant name, page 4
Winter garb for at-risk Japanese maple,
pages 4-10
Rosemary's indoor purpose, page 11
Share your "Best of What Came Up", page 11
Fitting kids in barrows, plants in pots, pg. 12
Who's Janet? How do I contact her? Page 12
Where to catch Janet in-person, pages 13-14
Invite Janet and friends to your community,
page 14
Janet's advice: 6 books on 1 CD, page 15

Right: Protecting a Japanese maple from winter sun can be a chore, or it might be the height of your gardening season. See pages 4 to 10 for why and how I protect my mom-in-law's favorite little tree. Turn to page 11 for another view of that tree with the note from my husband that made it one of the high points of my gardening year.

Photos ©2009 Steven Nikkila

Don't miss Page 11! Contribute your high points to a "Best of What Came Up" issue.



Bugged at raking time, watchful next year

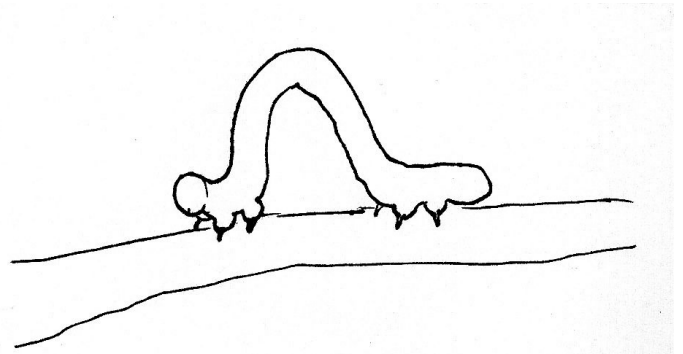
At the beginning of the month I was **raking**, and I noticed a ton of little **bright green worms** being churned up with the leaves. Without a picture to share with you, do any thoughts come to mind? Anything I should be concerned with?

I found these worms scattered all over our yard...which is pretty big, and surrounded by woods. But the majority of the leaves/trees are oaks. They were actually quite pretty! They were curled into a 'c' shape, maybe 3/4 of an inch long. - Jenny -

That's a tough question, Jenny. Basic biology and math give plenty of reason for gardeners to look at the plant first rather than starting with an insect. I give you "Putting a name to plant trouble" and "Insects win the numbers game" to explain my overall answer, "**Just wait, and next year watch** your plants."

It's the season when a gardener has spare time, however, and I know there are often interesting things to be learned by taking the road less traveled. So I checked into insects which are known to live on oaks, looking for those which might be green, worm-like, numerous and on the ground during fall. I also made a foray into general (not necessarily oak-related) insects of that description. When my eyes crossed and ears began to steam from information overload, I had **three possibilities**.

When I started from the plant, oak, I came up with **linden looper*** (*Erannis tiliaria*) as a possibility. These leaf eaters (of their namesake lindens, but also many other trees) are in the category sometimes called "inchworms" for their manner of locomotion -- stretching out, then bunching up into an inverted U as they bring up their hind end. Physically, this is an imperfect match. These can be more green than brown but they have enough brown that usually people will mention that color in describing them. It's also likely they'd be bigger by fall, closer to two inches than one.



Loopers are **rarely more than a nuisance**. If they should reach troubling numbers -- eating at a pace that would reduce a tree's total leaf surface by more than 20% before midsummer -- what you need to know is that the adult moths emerge in November and December to mate, after which the wingless females crawl up the tree to lay eggs on the bark. Those eggs won't open until the next spring as the tree buds out. So we'd coat any at-risk tree's trunk and main limbs with **horticultural oil in spring** to asphyxiate the emerging young, or apply an insecticide when that next generation is still very young and easily killed.

Gardeners are great because
they take time to see.
Everyone should
watch an inchworm at least
once in their lifetime.

- Janet -

When I broadened my scope to include all pesty insects that are green and on the ground in fall, I came across green- or **speckled green fruitworm** (*Orthosia hibisci*).** They aren't choosy eaters and so can be found in raspberry patches, vineyards, orchards and shade trees but the trouble they cause is **usually below the level that threatens the life of the host plants**. The match between this pest and your find is not good in terms of timing, however. These leaf-eaters are the size and color you describe when they first finish munching and go to ground, but would probably have left worm-like larval state to become brown pupae by leaf raking time.

However, my three-item list still begins with, "**90% chance it's of no concern**." Since insects-of-concern to gardeners comprise only a small fraction of any community (see "Insects win the numbers game"), a random sample of one is likely to be a decomposition specialist, predator, or bit player rather than one that presents an actual threat to our garden.

*Copy this URL to your browser bar to read more: cfs.nrcan.gc.ca/subsite/glfsc-sugarbush/minor-insects/3 (click on the photo for a closer view)

**For more: jenny.tfrec.wsu.edu/opm/displaySpecies.php?pn=98 (Scroll to the description and photo of "speckled green fruitworm.") And tulane.edu/~ggentry/LAleps05/species/Noctuidae/or-hibisci/orthosia-hibisci.htm

Putting a name to plant trouble

The best gardeners know that the key to **staying ahead of trouble is to keep an eye on** plants and notice signs of **abnormality**, damage, cessation in growth or decline/dieback. If you see anything going wrong, **identify the cause** so you can evaluate how much trouble it might be, whether intervention is advisable and what kind of action to take, when.

To identify a cause, consult a horticultural reference such as *Diseases and Pests of Ornamental Plants** (P. Pirone) or *Rodale's Garden Problem Solver* or *The Ortho Problem Solver*. Look under a **plant's name to read about common problems associated with that species**. Then use other references, including the Internet, to check into those diseases, insect names or problematic cultural conditions (drought stress, drainage sensitivity, heat stress, ozone intolerance, etc.). Look for mention of the symptoms you have seen, how to know when there is enough damage to warrant control, and what to do, when.

Many Extension universities have posted their libraries on-line, so Internet search engines such as Google and Bing can **speed up plant problem research**. In the search field, type the scientific **name of the plant**, pest or disease plus a word or words that **describe the symptoms** you've seen. For an oak problem, you might enter *Quercus* foliage eaten. From the list presented to you, **click on URLs which include .edu** to find Extension bulletins.

*Steven and I have a spare copy of this excellent book and others to give away. We'll distribute them by drawing names from those who contribute to "Best of What Came Up." See page 11.

Galls: How much is too much?

A gall on a plant is a localized swelling or outgrowth that results from an abnormal increase in the number or size of cells. They can be caused by bacteria, virus, fungi, insects, mites or nematodes.



Although galls may be visually impressive, they may be of little consequence to a plant if their formation doesn't "cost" the plant much energy or loss of leaf surface. This oak gall, caused by the feeding of a tiny wasp larvae, is so common on oaks that many people regard them as typical structures.



If a tree has so many galls in so many places that its overall leaf surface is diminished by more than 20%, then it may be that the tree is losing some ground. Photos ©2009 Steven Nikkila

Insects win the numbers game: Keep plant in focus to I.D. trouble

The Earth is pretty buggy: **A typical garden may host several thousand insect species.** The exact make-up of each property's insect community will differ based on its plants, because many insects are linked to particular plant species.

Most insect species in a given community are benign or beneficial. Of those that can be harmful, we'll notice only a few, perhaps when circumstances permit them to do significant damage to notable plants. **Most of the time**, weather, other insects, birds, small animals and plants' innate defenses come together so that there is **a balance between plants and plant eaters.**

So we shouldn't be concerned about an insect simply because we see it, even if that insect is numerous at the time we notice it. What can seem like a plague of insects to us may be no big deal to a plant, or might be reduced greatly by natural controls such as bird feeding between the time we notice the insect and its next plant-eating season.

More rational than looking at trouble from a bug-first perspective and accepting that huge list of initial suspects, is to **narrow that field by focusing on problems common to a particular plant.** In this week's "green worm" situation, beginning the search for insect I.D. with "oak" rather than "worm" reduced the number of candidates from thousands to about 60. We refined the search by scanning for those which might be green and present on the ground in fall, or those known to cause the trouble we've noted, such as galls forming on the twigs or leaves.

Better yet, simply watch each plant for signs of **significant damage**, such as reduced growth or the loss of more than 20% of its leaf surface, especially if either one comes before mid-summer. If we see such trouble, **investigate** what can cause that symptom on that particular plant species. That investigation might lead us to insects -- but it may take us to other causes.

Once we have a likely match, we can use that pest- or problem name to learn what kind of damage it can do, and when to watch for that to occur.

Japanese maple: Winter protection for the right tree in the wrong place!

You mentioned protecting a Japanese maple for winter, one time when you came to our library and talked about fall garden work. But then another time I heard you say that you don't do special winter protection. Which is it? I have a new Japanese maple, a pretty tree and I want to make sure it does well. - Ann -

A Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum*) **does not need winter protection if it's in the right spot.** The spot's right if it's in USDA hardiness zone 5* or warmer, in the protection of bigger trees, in well drained, fertile soil.

Sometimes these trees are planted in the wrong spot and then protection can be essential. On the next 7 pages is **the story of an at-risk Japanese maple I tend** and an illustrated how-to of the kinds of things I do to keep it safe from winter's worst.

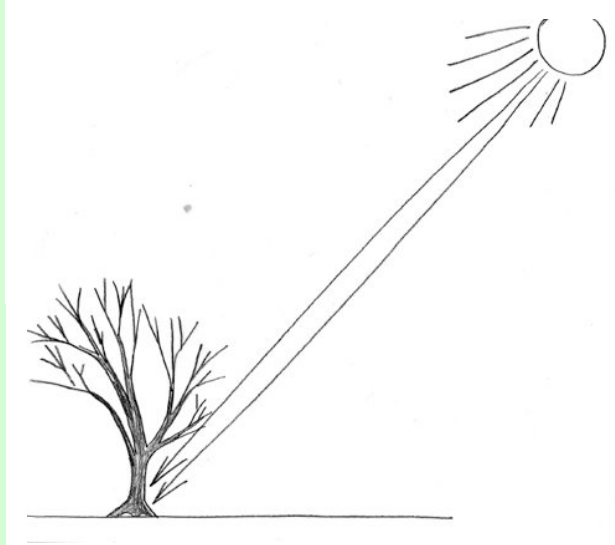
*Copy this URL to your browser bar for a zone map:
extension.missouri.edu/webster/webster/weather/HardinessZones-compressed.JPG

Japanese Maple: Fine in a forest, Fried in a field

Japanese Maple (*Acer Palmatum*) is adapted to the understory where day to night temperature changes are moderated by overarching trees (below, left). The trees block summer sun and slow the escape of ground warmth in winter.



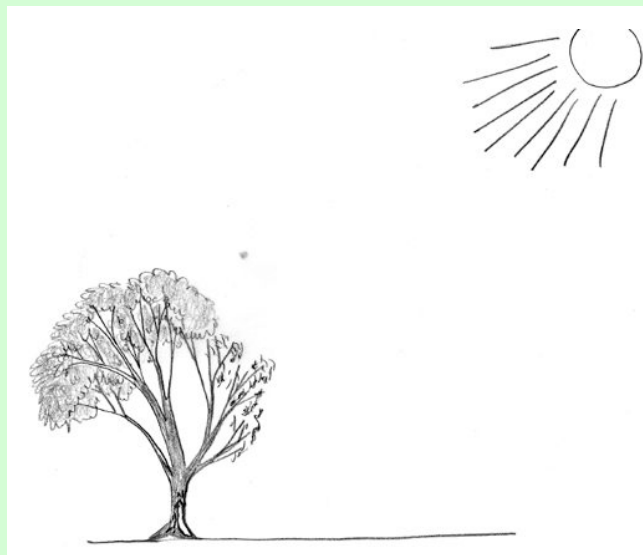
In the open, the sun warms the maple's trunk (below). Vital cambium cells under the thin bark cast off some of their cold hardiness, absorb stored water and resume living. When air temperature drops precipitously at sunset those prematurely roused cells freeze, rupture and die. The base of the trunk, last part to harden in fall, is most at risk.



When cambium dies, new bark stops forming there. The flow of starches- made in the leaves and shipped through the cambium to fuel root growth- falters. Existing bark dries, cracks and eventually falls away to reveal the damage. Below. Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila



One spring, the repeatedly damaged cambium cannot fulfill its commitment to the roots, which die back from lack of fuel. That summer during a hot, dry period when leaves demand extra water, the roots' loss becomes fatal. Part or all of the tree wilts and dies "mysteriously." This may be the most common cause of Japanese Maple failure.



A Japanese maple in winter: Creative protection

Right plant, wrong place. Try as we might, we all end up with one sometime. A Japanese Maple in the wide open, facing the southern sky is a very wrong place. Yet it's the very right plant for Mom.

Mom loved the one that was there when they bought the house. We pointed out the damage already done during the little tree's few years on the site, (see "Fine in a forest, fried in a field") and offered to move it to a better place in back. She and Dad said, "Oh, well..." but their eyes begged, "Please! you guys can do anything with plants and we like this one so much right here..."



So, for years we pampered and protected it from further harm. Until it died, as we'd known it would. Its first wounds had been too extensive, the Midwest summers too demanding of its compromised cambium.

Then we planted another! Why? Because, "Your Dad loved that tree. Are you *sure* we have to plant something different?"



Now every year we protect it from the winter sun. Simple? Hardly!

"Simple" would be circling the whole tree with fencing then stuffing that full of crisp leaves or straw. Ugh- as in ugly. Not the ticket for a much loved front yard star. Maybe a bit too attractive to cold wild things seeking winter quarters, too. Instead, we go the extra mile to both shade that vulnerable trunk base plus make it look good.

A cute little shade screen, placed south and west of the trunk, can work. An approach I call bough-tiling is a more natural look (right, and above right). To do it I skirt the whole south side of the trunk with evergreen boughs beginning at the ground, working up, overlapping branches like shingle siding until it's a shaggy, thick shield.

More often lately, I get creative. Last year we turned it into an ornamental grass, with thick straw bundles of grass culms swaddling the trunk. Take a look (above, left, with how-to on the following pages). Take the idea, too! We're all in such predicaments at times and I'm glad to help out.

Photos ©2009 Steven Nikkila



The story begins in November: Fall color not yet faded. Some leaves are still clinging to Mom's Japanese Maple. It's time to protect its trunk from the winter sun.



Hmmm. look at our *Miscanthus*(below): Beautiful, sturdy and taking up room right I need to pile snow in winter. We realize it's straw, it's very available and it has a high 'R' value.



So, we cut it down. First we bundle it. It makes it simpler to handle as we cut it.



Then we lop it off flush to the ground.



Photos ©2009 Steven Nikkila

We bundle most of the grass into smaller bunches, and take it all over to Mom's.



Here we are, Dominic Howell and I, inserting a bundle down through the canopy alongside the tree's trunk, on its vulnerable southwest side.

We shortened the bundles, cutting off some of their base so their height would better fit the little maple's stature. This gave us mini-bundles, which we placed all around the trunk's base.



Photos ©2009 Steven Nikkila

What's Up #68, Page 8

All text plus otherwise uncredited photos ©2009 Janet Macunovich JMaxGarden@aol.com

At this point, the trunk's protected. Here are all the bundles strapped snugly in place.



Next, we make our disguised maple more graceful, inserting individual stalks of grass to create a flared look. The base of each stalk penetrates and is held by bundles already tied in.

Photos ©2009 Steven Nikkila



Voila, a
maple has
become a
maplegrass



Winter, do your worst, you can't heat and hurt
this tree's straw-swaddled trunk.



Photos ©2009 Steven Nikkila

This week in Janet's garden

Grow with me! This week I will:

Invite you to help me this holiday season, with:

The **BEST** of What Came Up

Please join me in summing up the season in issues #73-74. We'll do a great job, given your intense and still increasing level of participation plus the fact that we've all become comfortable with technological wonders such as emailing photos.

If you're game, **email me your idea**:

- Choose something great -- plant, situation or idea -- that came up in your garden this year.
- Describe it in **50 words** or so.
- Include **a photo** if you wish. Attach the photo to the email as a file in .jpg format.
- If you send a photo, include the **name of the photographer** we should credit. We must have the photographer's permission to use the photo.
- Include your postal address. Steven and I have some gifts for contributors.

As an example, here (above, right and at right) is an item I consider a high point:



My "Best of What Came Up" was a note from my husband: Janet,

After 35 years you still amaze me. I pull up to Mom's house to see how you protected her Japanese maple this year and I see - a HEMLOCK. I think, "What the heck, did she take the maple out!?" Then I see you just disguised it. What a wonderful, creative woman you are.

Love,
Bunny

Bring in the rosemary. It's been fine out on my zone 5 back porch so far, could stay out there even longer since it's hardy to zone 6, and is better off out there where the light and humidity are more plant friendly. However, it's the beginning of the holiday season so I need the plant to do its indoor job -- perfume the air.

I meant to prune back our rosemary this summer but never got to it. Good thing the branches are flexible or I'd have to prune it now so it would fit through the doorway.

Photos ©2009 Steven Nikkila



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

Grins: To kids in wheelbarrows. Wheelbarrow rides are often bright points in a lifetime of memories. Pretty amazing, that just a few minutes in that seat can last so long and remain so warm.

Grow-ans: To trying to find a new, same-size pot to replace one that cracks. Fall is not a good time for repotting, since roots grow slowly if at all as a plant's energy dips to its lowest point of the year in the short days of winter. Thank heavens for duct tape!

"Your wheelbarrow needs oil, it squeaks!"

"I know. Let it be. It drowns out the creaking of my joints."

Is Lily Koen having the most fun, or am I getting the most from it? Or perhaps that honor goes to Nancy Ranieri, looking on! It was a fine day to put our Detroit Zoo gardens to bed, and maybe a day that will live forever in Lily's memory.
Photo ©2009 Deanna Koen

Who's Janet?

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. Email questions to her at JMaxGarden@aol.com.

Where to catch Janet and friends* in-person:

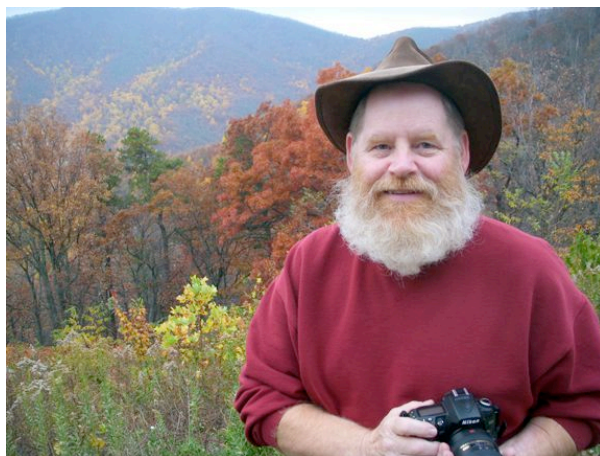
*See "By seeing Santa?!", January 30 and "Invite Janet or Steven" on page 14.

By seeing Santa?! Many dates and places around Southeast Michigan. That's right folks, the resemblance is no accident. **Steven Nikkila is a Santa's Helper.** He's pretty sure that Santa is one of his Finnish kin, so he does his best to assist that jolly old elf by collecting wish lists from kids and gardeners each holiday season. Look for him at the Village of Rochester shopping mall in Rochester, Michigan, and other locations. You can send him



your gardening wish list -- we'll publish them here

before the holiday. Then you can leave a print-out of this newsletter where your special someone can find it as a hint! Or to invite Santa Steve to your holiday gathering, contact him at horthphoto@gmail.com or 248-681-7850.



Some of you have noticed the resemblance, especially during the second half of each year when Steven lets his beard grow long for his off-season job...

Stay tuned here for:

December, January and February. Garden and landscape design classes, in and around the Detroit area. Multi-session, hands-on workshops -- Janet's long-time specialty.

Tuesday, January 12, 2010. "What's Coming Up for professional gardeners." Join Janet at the **Association of Professional Gardeners meeting.** Details will be available here and at www.associationofprofessionalgardeners.org

Thursday, January 14, 7:00 p.m. "Saving Time and Money in the Garden." Economize with Janet at **Cromaine District Library, Hartland, Michigan.**

Saturdays, January 23, January 30 and February 6, 9:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. "Garden Design, New Plants, and Janet & Steve's 50 Favorite Before-Afters." These sessions featuring Janet Macunovich, Cheryl Bennerup and Steven Nikkila are sponsored by The Detroit Garden Center as part of its 19th annual winter seminar series. They'll be held at Historic Trinity Church auditorium, 1345 Gratiot near Easter Market in Detroit. Registration information will be available here and through The Detroit Garden Center at 313-259-6363, detroitgardenctr@yahoo.com or www.detroitgardencenter.org.

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

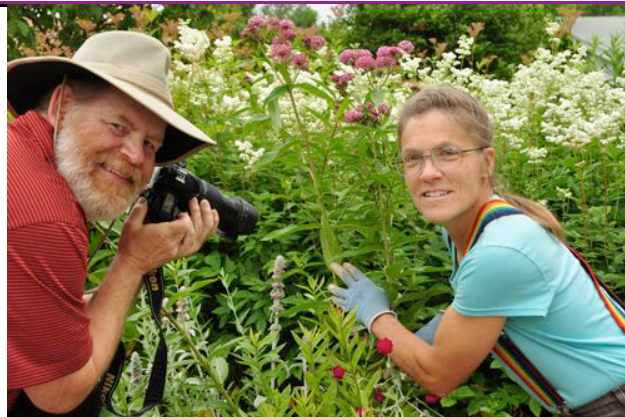
We go where we're invited! That's taken us all over the country and then some over the past 20 years. We address many topics, drawing from our list of **100+ talks**. We also continue **to meet groups' needs** and expand our horizons by developing new material or "hybridizing" from what we already have.

So, whether it's...

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

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

Steven Nikkila and Janet Macunovich (top) have been digging, shooting and teaching how-to for 22 years. They began producing conferences in the early '90s and then ran a gardening school for 12 years, featuring instructors who knew their stuff in the garden as well as knowing how to get their messages across in front of a group. That line-up includes people like Cheryl Bennerup (right). Cheryl and Janet began their relationship 20 years ago when Cheryl grew perennials for Janet at her Milford, Michigan greenhouse and continues today as Janet taps into Cheryl's know-how as chief of propagation and troubleshooting at one of the country's largest perennial growers, Sunny Border Nursery in Connecticut. Janet and Steve are glad to help you themselves or refer you to others to meet your group's need. Contact them at JMaxGarden@aol.com or 248-681-7850 when you want to set up a talk, workshop or class.
Photos ©2009 Sonja Nikkila and ©2009 Steven Nikkila



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. Some 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, I invite you in.

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

Is this *What's Coming Up* newsletter useful to you? Imagine how a whole year of these weekly newsletters could help your garden grow.

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

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

