What's Coming Up:
Janet Macunovich answers your growing concerns
Issue 8, September 27, 2008

Here you'll find:

To water well, take rain and irrigation amount and frequency into account. Learn each soil's ability to hold that moisture, as explained below. Also consider plants' differing needs. Some such as the laceleaf Japanese maple (above, left) may present you with leaf scorch if the bed dries 'way down between waterings, yet dry, warm interludes are just the ticket for a smoke tree.

It rained, it poured so when do we resume watering?

S.C. wonders, "Since we had torrential **rains recently, how long will that last?** When do I have to water again?"

The answer is **different for every soil, S.C.**

On average, **an inch of water** will wet soil three to four inches deep. That may meet plant needs for **a week**. It's important to note that well drained, well aerated soil that can accept a six inch, one-day downpour may allow all but an inch of that moisture to drop away to the subsoil. To roots in that soil, the downpour is no different than a day-long, one inch drizzle.

The real question is what a particular soil does after it's given a full load of water. Some soils retain water against the pull of gravity, others can't, and some support plants that use water more rapidly than others. If a soil has **lots of clay particles or humus** (decomposed organic matter) it tends to **hold moisture** well and give it up to roots over days or even weeks. Some **sandy mixes dry more quickly,** holding little and releasing it in hours. **Plants in wind and sun exhaust available water faste**r than shaded plants.

It's up to us to **develop a feel for each bed** -- how well it can accept water, how long it holds it, and how frequently it needs more. Do it by slitting the soil each day after a rain or a soaking, then testing by touch whether it's still moist (cool) several inches below the surface. You may learn that one bed needs water four days after a rain, another is still moist ten days later. When you water with respect to those differences you will probably see better growth, too.

Clipping's better than wishing to cure a non-blooming wisteria vine

Patty writes: "My two Chinese **wisterias have never bloomed**. This past spring (late March-ish) **I pruned them** according to some instructions found on the Internet. However, I didn't see any difference in the buds to tell if they were for blooms or leaves. Both vines are lush and green now and I have pruned them numerous times this summer to keep them from going wild. **This is the first summer** I have done this. Can you give me information or resources to **help me**?"

The thinnest vine in the photo on the left is an unbranched wisteria tendril. It's "juvenile wood" -- a plant part not ready to bloom. It sets pointed, thin buds that will produce only leaves the next spring.
The plumper buds (right) contain a shoot that can do more than produce a leafy tendril -- they can bloom! We know them by their stoutness and because they are clustered on "spurs" -- short side branches off of wood which matured in a horizontal position in warm sun. Photos ©2008 Steven Nikkila

Hang in there, Patty. Wisteria vines are 'way up there on the list of frustrating plants. Yet they can be tamed and you sound like **you're on the right track**. However, bringing them to first bloom is a process that **takes two years** or more. That is, the pruning you do in 2008 and 2009 is toward bloom in spring 2010. You should keep pruning and look for pre-bloom signs next summer. It will help to know what to look for (see pictures).

Despite growing like weeds almost anywhere they're planted, these Asian forest species frequently refuse to bloom. The goofiness of the "cures" we try is a measure of our frustration but none of them work -- so refrain from beating it with a chain, cutting off half its roots, or flooding its root zone with beer and urine. The true cure takes time and discipline, such as you're investing, to **replicate the natural conditions** that make wild wisterias bloom.

I learned this 30 years ago from two veteran gardeners in England who tended both new and venerable vines. I've seen their advice bear fruit many times.

Wisteria evolved where success lay in grappling up through a shaded canopy, putting lots of energy into climbing but none into blooming until it reached full sun and "knew" it was truly at the top. There, **both physical and chemical cues** tell the vine "this is it."

Physically, there's a change when new growth is unable to find anything above itself to lap over. It will mature and **form wood in a horizontal position** -- a departure from its early vertical days. At the top, it's also warmer because it's not shaded by anything.

The **chemical** change happens internally when compounds in those horizontal limbs **accumulate** rather than run down and away. It's their **interactions with sunlight** and each other that promote formation of flower buds.

We can't fake the chemical change -- no one knows what chemical mix it *is* that trips the flower-forming switch. What we can do is force the physical change and allow the environment to induce the chemistry.

That means we choose a point that is "top," **train the vine to lay horizontally** there and repeatedly **clip off side branches that try to continue up**. This allows the top growth to develop in horizontal position and without shading foliage above. A practical schedule is to clip the vine hard **every March** -- leave only main canes and blooming-age side spurs (see picture and diagrams) -- and **each July** to remove all whippy new growth.

Didja know: Wisteria may bloom in fall?

Spring-blooming plants sometimes open a few flowers in late summer or fall. This usually happens when a spate of cool weather followed by warm trips some buds' internal switch as if winter's come and gone. Buds that are nutrient deficient may be more prone to out-of-season bloom. If this happens to your lilac, wisteria, azalea, forsythia, quince, cherry or other spring bloomer, relax. Enjoy the show. Most of the plant's buds are still on schedule

Train and clip wisteria to induce bloom: It's a two year process.

Year one

Early spring before the vine leafs out. Select some young branches. Extend them horizontally along a wall, fence, top of a trellis or arbor.

Form a "T" or several widely spaced levels, each with a horizontally extended arm.

Restrain the chosen limbs with loose ties or clips to hold them in horizontal positions.

In July, cut back all side branches that have grown up from the trained "arms." Leave only the bases of the strongest side limbs -- stubs about two inches long. The horizontal arms and their side-stubs will now be in full sun as they become woody.

Year two

In **early spring**, clear the arms of all whippy, unbranched, upward-seeking growth. Once again, **leave only sturdy stubs**.

At **midsummer, clip back** new growth that's sprouted from the horizontal arms.

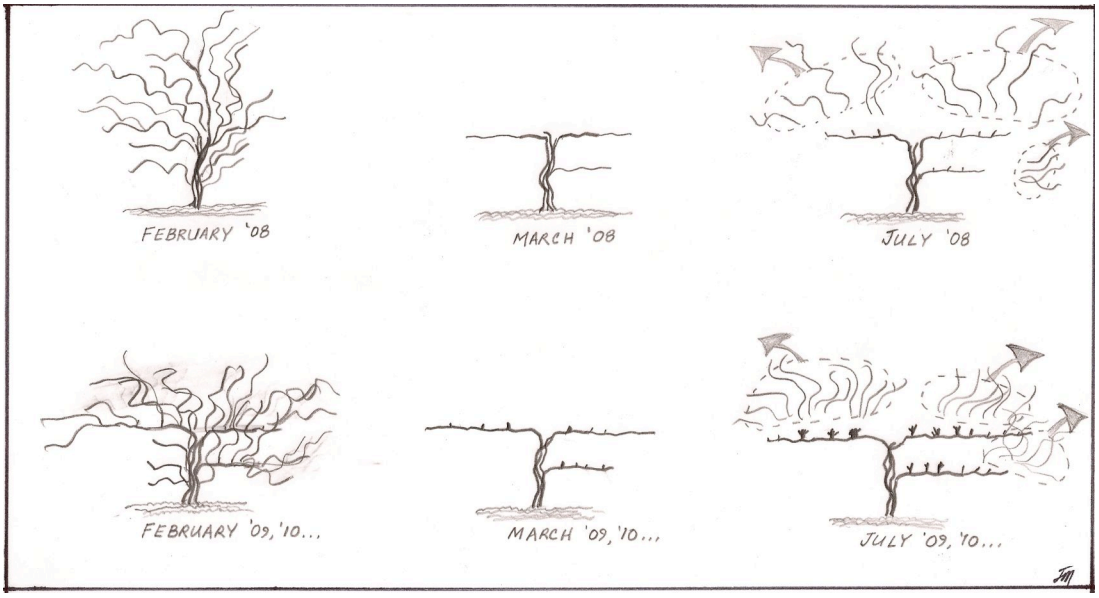
In the **second half of year two** or three, those side **stubs will develop buds** that are squatter and plumper than the leaf-only buds on unbranched growth (see pictures). Congratulations. You've persuaded those stubs to become flowering spurs. The plump buds are shoots that will produce flower and then leaf the next spring.

Later years

Continue to **prune each spring and midsummer**. This will keep the vine small and full of bloom. It will also improve its floral show because the blooms that dangle from the spurs each May will not be obscured by non-flowering shoots.

Able to leap tall buildings!

Even if your vine blooms without inducement, it is a good strategy to **regularly prune** big species such as **wisteria**, **trumpet vine** (*Campsis radicans*) and **silver fleece vine** (*Polygonum aubertii*). That's because few of us can afford to let these plants find their own level. They can climb more than 70 feet, overwhelming shrubs, trees and even buildings, smothering, crushing and toppling as they grow.



Milorganite fertilizer... good for a garden, great for Milwaukee

"My landscaper raves about the benefits of **Milorganite**," says Kathy. "Do you use it? If so, **how much, when, on what?** I learned nothing about Milorganite in my Master Gardener classes so I am skeptical. Also , I live on pure sand. What would you do when planting?"

I do **use Milorganite when it fits a garden's needs**, Kathy. It's one of many products that is **slow release** and carbon-rich, so it can improve the soil's structure as it provides nutrients. I may use it when a lab test says a soil needs nitrogen and a bit of phosphorus but has adequate potassium, since Milorganite (5-2-0 or **6-2-0**) provides five- to six percent nitrogen and two percent phosphorus but no potassium. It's also a good choice when a soil's structure is poor, in which case it can benefit from added **organic matter**.

Sand always benefits from additional organic matter. Add it regularly to turn shifty, dry soil into crumbly rich stuff. When I work in a sandy garden I add compost every time I dig, use carbon-rich fertilizers twice a year (early spring and mid- to late fall) and mulch with pine bark and other materials that add long-lasting, moisture retentive, structure-building lignin as they decompose.

How much fertilizer I use depends on how much nitrogen I want to add. The normal perennial bed can benefit from one to two pounds of nitrogen each year for 1,000 square feet -- that's 20 to 40 pounds of a 5% nitrogen product such as Milorganite for a bed that's 20' x 50', or **two to four pounds for each 10' x 10' area**.

The name Milorganite is a reference to "Milwaukee organic nitrogen," because it comes from that city's sewage sludge. For over 90 years, Milwaukee's wastewater treatment plant has been sifting sludge, drying it, heat treating it to kill bacteria, grinding it into pellets and packaging it. The result -- Milorganite -- has been questioned and tested enough that I'm comfortable using it. However, I don't handle it with my bare hands and do avoid using it during the heat of summer when its odor, like that of many organic-source products, lingers longer.

Master Gardener texts may not mention Milorganite specifically but they do cover this class of fertilizer* and give it good marks. The benefits of using it apply to most carbon-rich products.

*For an extensive list of such products' nutrient values in simple chart form, copy this URL to your browser: http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/nursery/short/2003_short_course/organic-fertilizers.html

Will experts ever agree about when to fertilize?!

Tom's heard that one should, "**Not fertilize after August 15** so new growth won't be killed off in winter." Yet he's also read recently in Michigan Gardener magazine that we should **fertilize trees and shrubs in fall**. He asks, "**Which is right**/wrong?"

They're both right, Tom. Don't hold your breath waiting for one simple set of rules for fertilizing. This is chemistry we're talking about, with living things involved to boot and a medium -- soil -- so complex scientists spend lifetimes looking into any of its details.

In late summer, it's right to hold off on water soluble, quick release sources of nitrogen. At that time of year natural nitrogen levels are falling and plants are reading those levels as one of their "get ready for winter" cues. To re-stoke the soil's nitrogen bank is to chance confusing some plants.

It's also perfectly right to follow Nature's lead and **apply slow release organic-source fertilizers in fall**. What falls in autumn, including animal matter, rots slowly but surely and becomes available to plants by the beginning of the following season. In a study several years ago* fall-applied slow release nitrogen was being taken up by plants' roots within a week and kept being absorbed all winter, without negative effect. Most of the nitrogen that was applied, however, became bound in soil microbes within two weeks of being spread. They're banked there and become quickly available to roots in April.

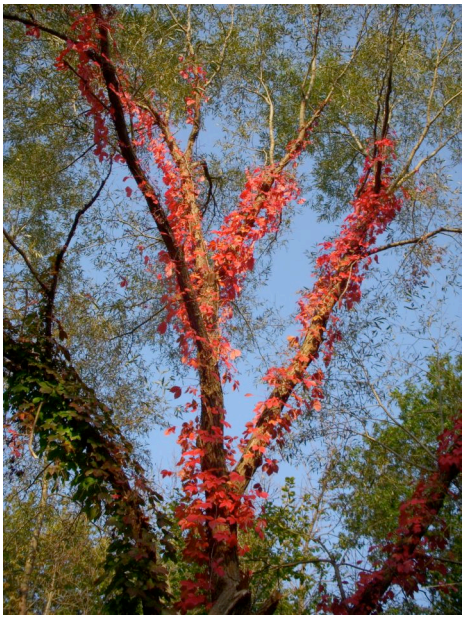
*For more, copy this URL to your browser: http://www.esajournals.org/doi/abs/10.1890/0012-9658%282006%2987%5B1256%3AFONIRF%5D2.0.CO%3B2?prevSearch=null&searchHistoryKey=

The 45mph garden: When the shoulder's blazing away

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

This is the time of year when colors can change overnight. It can be startling to watchers of the roadside verge, who seek others of like mind to ask "Did you see that red thing on Route 4? What *is* that?!"

One of the fastest early shows comes from **Virginia creeper** (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*). It's a vine that's native all over the eastern U.S. and southeastern Canada, tough to keep in bounds in a formal garden but worthwhile in naturalized areas for its value as shelter and food to many birds and small mammals. If you can spare the time to trim it twice a year, it makes a great groundcover in any shaded garden.



Virginia creeper does no harm to the trunk of a tree it climbs, but can be trouble if it overtops small or weak trees, shading them out.
Count the leaves of a woodland vine from a distance, to distinguish benign species like this from that other native vine that can blaze red in fall -- poison ivy. Poison ivy has three leaflets, while Virginia creeper has five. This fact is featured in Virginia creeper's scientific name *Parthenocissus quinquefolia*.

This week in Janet's garden
Grow with me! this week I will:

Check on the roots of new trees and shrubs as I weed and dig in the beds. If it's been in the ground more than a month, it should have inches of new root radiating out from the planted root ball. If it has grown roots only in a circle around the ball or concentrated at one point from the tips of tightly entwined older roots, it's better to disturb it now and release the roots than to allow that stunting growth habit to continue.

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Lift dahlias and cannas that will be stored in a root cellar. I'll set them on screens to air dry in the shaded-but-warm garage for several days. This helps the skin of the tubers to "cure" -- develop a hardness that is rot resistant.

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Save seeds of some special plants I like to share. Every year I learn a few more things about which to keep for spring sowing, which to sow right away. I'm away to Ohio's Master Gardener conference on October 4 so I hope some of you will take seed-saving notes you can share with me (and I'll pass them on here!) at the class by Michigan Natural Features Inventory Naturalist Suzan Campbell. It's "Native Plant Seed Collection, Identification and Propagation" on Detroit's Belle Isle at the Nature Zoo, 10 a.m. - 12:30 p.m. October 4. $30. Call the Detroit Garden Center, (313) 259-6363, for details or to register .

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Bring in the last tomatoes, wrap them in paper and bag them. That will trap gases emanating from the seeds, hormones that stimulate the flesh to ripen. In cool weather the gas doesn't accumulate to levels that can finish the reddening but when the tomatoes are warmer and enveloped the chemical changes can continue in the house.

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Rejoice in being among those who look at the natural world as I pass through it. So many pass through but don't see what's all around -- too stressed, some say. Yet what marvelous stress relief it is to see and appreciate the beauty and delight in noticing changes day to day... and even better, to have firiends like you with which to exchange reports and share enthusiasm.

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

Grins: To the thought of cinnamon-scented roses. Recent studies highlight cinnamon as a potent fungicide. How long before rosarians, always keen to find better and more natural ways to control diseases that prey on the queen of the garden, begin applying cinnamon oil to rose foliage as a black spot preventive measure?

Grow-ans: To essential tools that break just before the end of the growing season. Days to go, no time to waste and the job so tough without that tool! Yet it's also quite the challenge to find a replacement spade, tire for a wheelbarrow or blade for a mower when garden supplies are being nudged from store shelves to make way for Halloween costumes and holiday decorations.

Who's Janet?

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

In this, she's had the help of many good and generous friends in the green industries who host her presentations and workshops and even develop complementary classes of their own. One of those friends is Lou Mascolo (pictured at left) owner of Gardenviews store in Northville. Lou has a great eye for garden accessories,' says Janet. "Many local gardens are brighter because he chooses the best to stock his shop and also because he's so generous in hosting educational opportunities -- such as the presentation I'm making there on November 1." Email questions to her at JMaxGarden@aol.com.

"If you love to accessorize your garden you will probably enjoy Lou's newsletter. It brims over with his warm charm and fashion savvy. Sign up for it at www.gardenviews.biz."
Photo ©2008 Steven Nikkila

Places to catch Janet in-person:

Tuesday, September 30, 6:00 - 9:00 p.m., "**Flower Gardening.**" This segment of the Wayne County Michigan State University Extension Master Gardener training is presented by Janet at the Extension facility on Venoy Road in Wayne, Michigan. It's open to current students and also alumni of the program. Contact your Master Gardener Coordinator for details.

Saturday, October 4, 2008, "**Ohio State University Extension Master Gardener Conference.**" A whole day and a great line-up of topics, including Janet's descriptions of "Cutting back the rambunctious garden," "Doubling Up Perennials" and "The Collector: Engaging harmony from intriguing diversity," and "Mixed Borders." In Warren, Ohio at Kent State University, Trumbull campus. Open to Ohio State Master Gardeners and friends. For a description of the conference and registration information, check the website* or call Steve Hudkins at the OSU Extension (330-637-3530).
*Paste www.ohiomastergardener.com to your browser bar.

Thursday, October 9, 4:00 - 7:00 p.m., "Garden by Janet - Bring your gloves and tools!" At a Farmington Hills garden, we're dividing perennials. Come learn a thing or two, try your hand at splitting the species you've hesitated to tackle, and bring your own divisions to share if you like. Free to my newsletter readers. Email or call Janet (JMaxGarden@aol.com or 248-681-7850) for details and to reserve a spot in this limited-space workshop.

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

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

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

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

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 to either watch or work with me. I hope you'll don your gloves and join in it's the best value for the time.

At **gardens I tend through my business, Perennial Favorites:** I've worked for many years with some of my clients, who trust me with their landscapes plus understand my enthusiasm for teaching. They open their gardens to let me help you practice "how to." When my work may interest to you and the situation allows on-lookers, I invite you in.

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

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