

What the Groundhog Won't Tell: Gardening Myths & Legends:

I. "Tact" -- generational gold

A. Those things only long experience and informed observation can teach

- How many lifetimes of **tuned-in gardening** did it take to determine:
 "When elm leaves are as big as a shilling,
 plant kidney beans if to plant 'em you're willing
 When elm leaves are as big as a penny,
 You *must* plant kidney beans if you mean to have any."
- Or: "When oak puts on its gosling grey 'tis time to sow barley night or day."
- Or:
 Japanese beetles emerge as chicory and Queen Anne's lace come into bloom

B. Defined by the third and fourth generation and beyond:

Leopold Blaschka (1857 - 1929), maker with his son Rudolf of the incredible glass flower collection at Harvard University:

"Many people think that we have some secret apparatus by which we can squeeze glass suddenly into these forms, but it is not so. **We have tact.** My son Rudolf has more than I have, because he is my son, and tact increases in every generation. The only way to become a glass modeler of skill, I have often said to people, is to get a good great-grandfather who loved glass; then he is to have a son with like tastes; he is to be your grandfather. He in turn will have a son who must, as your father, be passionately fond of glass. You, as his son, can then try your hand, and it is your own fault if you do not succeed. But, if you do not have such ancestors, it is not your fault. My grandfather was the most widely-known glassmaker in Bohemia and he lived to be 83 years of age. My father was about as old, and Rudolf hopes that my hand will be steady for many years yet. I am now between sixty and seventy and very young; am I not, Rudolf?"

C. Overly solitary in our gardens, harried in life, what have we lost?

- Who shadowed Luther Burbank?
- Shocking corn
- Predicting insects
- Neem oil and other botanical preparations
- Long term practical solutions for really tough soil and weed conditions

II. What do YOU know from previous generations?

A. My garden mentor told/showed me _____

B. We always said _____

Why don't these things jump to mind? How to recall them?

Note: Nothing new under the sun. Consider:

- April showers bring May flowers.
- The bee doth love the sweetest flower, so doth the blossom the April shower.
- Thunder on All Fools Day brings good crops of corn and hay.

C. Interpreting the old wisdom

1. Boil it down and **glean the value**. For example: "Plant **rosemary** near cabbage, beans, carrots and sage. Deters cabbage moth, bean beetle, and carrot fly."
 - Involves several plants - be sure you have positive I.D.
 - Offers pest deterrence
 - Understand deter ≠ exclude, as resistance ≠ immunity. Partial protection.
 - Do you need to deter those pests? When? How will you know them?
 - If plant is deterrent by mere presence:
 - Might be an oil/vapor (scent), color or by-product that is deterrent.
 - Healthiest plant would probably have strongest effect.
2. **Understand context** and times
 - Shaker's (great gardeners) didn't mulch, except winter mulch on tender plants.
 - ...thought "clean garden, clean mind", mulch untidy, preferred to hoe.
 - Colonial times: Apple trees pruned high ...to permit sheep to graze.
 - Woad plant undesirable? ...Queen Elizabeth I banned woad within 8 miles of her palaces because of its disagreeable odor while fermenting as dye.
 - Re: rosemary as deterrent: ...users had no Bt, no garlic oil?
3. Recognize **mistakes are made** in every generation. As examples:
 - "A spaniel, a woman and a walnut tree,
the more they're beaten, the better they be."
 - "When planting trees, shorten the tops to match the roots."
 - "If you want parsley to be curled or crinkled, bruise the seed, or when it comes up roll small weights on it, or else jump up and down and tread it with your feet."
(from 1563 gardening book)
 - Some genetically engineered crops now produce their own Bt...
 - Some mistakes made on purpose. Oh how these can persist!
 - "Dig or plant peony only by light of the moon to avoid being seen by woodpeckers -- if woodpecker saw you'd be struck blind."
 - "If an eagle flew by while you gather hellebore you'll die that year.
 - Such stories created and spread by herb diggers (rhizotomoi, ancient Greek plant seekers for temples of Asclepias)... to protect their business!
 - Persisted into Middle Ages when monks prescribed prayer while gathering.
4. **Keep up** on new scientific findings
 - Eye open for studies involving rosemary or its oil, or mulch, or pruning...

III. Traditional wisdom covers every important facet of gardening

(Remember: These are pass-alongs, maybe not fact. See IV.)

A. Timing

1. Fertilizer:

- For **corn** -- when 8-10" high (halfway to your knee) and when first silks show.
- Using **manure** -- best done in fall for root crops, flowers, woodies; early spring for vegetables, flowers.
- Apply 50-100 tons of manure per acre, a **3" layer**.

What the Groundhog Won't Tell, Page 2

©1999 - 2012 Janet Macunovich & Steven Nikkila

www.GardenAtoZ.com (248) 681-7850 info@GardenAtoZ.com

- Feed your doves and spread ashes among their dung.
- Topdress **asparagus** in March with manure and salt.

2. Planting:

- **During the light of the moon** -- from new moon to full -- plant flowers and vegetables that bear above-ground crops.
- **During the dark of the moon** -- from full moon to new -- plant those that bear below ground crops.
- Best to sow or transplant when the moon is in a water sign (Cancer, Scorpio, Pisces). (Dates: Old Farmer's Almanac or moon-sign calendar.)
- Best to weed, do pest control and plow when the moon is in Aries, Gemini, Leo, Sagittarius or Aquarius.
- Graft "take" and sprouting of new growth after pruning is encouraged during a waxing moon, discouraged during wane.
- Always exceptions (from Tusser, 500 Points of Husbandry):
Sow peas and beans in the wane of the moon
Who soweth them sooner, he soweth too soon,
that they with the planet may rest and rise,
and flourish with bearing most plentiful-wise
- **Transplant before a rain.** (Perhaps even better if done one to two days following a rain when soil has again become workable.)

3. Harvest:

- Harvest a plant when the sky is ruled by the planet which governs that plant. The more angular -- straight above-- the governing planet is, the better. Angelica is governed by Leo so harvest it when the sun is in Leo.
- Harvest herbs before flower. (Full flavor from oil/flower yet cutting early enough that the plant can regrow without excessive chance of winterkill.)
- Apples supposedly "shrimp up" if picked during a waning moon.

B. Technique, from basics of the craft to high level artistry

1. Planting ("He who plants trees loves others than himself.):

- If good apples you would have, then leaves must go into the grave. (Devonshire: Plant in fall when leaves are falling and incorporate leaves into planting hole. Or, if leaves don't drop naturally in autumn but remain on the tree to wither, the next year's apple harvest will be poor.)
- Better to **plant woodies in fall** than in early spring thaw:
Set trees All-Hallow tide and command them to prosper,
Set trees at Candlemas and entreat them to grow.
- In setting trees: "be sure to **set that side south** that was south before.
- Set **cabbages** at midday, first putting the top into very cold water.
- Plant **vines** on southern and western brick walls to cool wall in summer. Deciduous vines leafless in winter, let sun warm a building.

2. Fertilizing and soil improvement

- Use **chicken manure for vegetables**, cow or horse manure for flowers and woodies. (Lower N for perennial species -- correct!)
- "Deep, dry, light and rich are the essential requisites of a good soil; and if not so naturally, it should be made so." Shakers: add manure and compost at least once a year.

3. Pruning and training

- "Go thou and like an executioner cut off the heads of too fast growing sprays." (Shakespeare, Richard II)
- Elder stakes are said to last longer in the ground than iron.
- Make the vine poor and it will make you rich (**Prune hard.**)
Or: "Short boughs, long vintage."
- When **heading back** a tree limb, cut to just above a side branch that is no less than 1/3 the diameter of the severed limb at that point.

4. Weeding

- "...sweet flowers are slow and weeds make haste." (Shakespeare, Richard III)
- **One year's weeds, seven year's seeds.**
- Hoe your cabbages in the morning.
- Sow buckwheat late July or early August -- a living mulch, turned under in fall.
- Throw all weeds that have not gone to seed into the hog pen, where they will rapidly be converted into manure. (Note all facts -- *not gone to seed.*)
- **Weeding a seedling bed** -- cut the weeds, don't pull as pulling can injure desirable plants' roots. Let a man wearing two or three pairs of old woolen socks do the work, to make his tread light on the seedlings.
- Hoeing peas, draw the soil toward the stem.
- Eradicating **wild garlic** ("ramps"): the very best way to kill it is to turn in the hogs without rings in their noses.
- Eradicating field **bindweed**: one of the most persistent of weeds: Doesn't quit sending up vines until the "man" (the underground storage root) is exhausted, perhaps three years. Attend it every week through one growing season, pulling out all young vines. The next year there will be fewer, but don't let those set many leaves. A single pulling in the third year may end the patch.

5. Dividing, renewing

- **Chives** -- divide annually, setting bulbs 6" apart.

6. Pest control

- The **most effective method** of ridding your garden of bugs is to visit your vines several times a day and destroy the bugs with your fingers.
- **Girdling** by rabbits and mice -- if found soon after, mound up with soil, or apply a generous clay loam plaster to keep it from drying. Where damage is extensive, graft twigs from the tree - chiseling up from the wound and down from the wound, then inserting twigs to bridge the gap.
- Dip **aphid**-infested twig ends into tobacco water.
- Check the undersides of **squash** leaves for insect eggs in August.
- **Cucumber beetles** can be checked by sprinkling plants while wet with a composition of rye flour, ashes and plaster in equal quantities, thoroughly mixed. Water saturated with cow-dung is also said to be a good remedy.
- To beat **root maggots** -- pour old fermented urine, salt water or weak lye around the root zone. Or scatter wood ashes. And never put root crops into the same ground as previous year.
- Shakers believe bad effluvium came from plants into air, must be dissipated. So **keep plants thinned**, and keep weeds down. (We know now how important good air circulation is as disease prevention!)

7. Harvest

- September's windfall apples are full of worms, usually. They should be picked up and all those not fit for cider or vinegar, fed to the hogs.

C. Synergistic effects

- Don't plant **fennel** near other herbs and vegetables (Ruins flavor?) (I wish I'd heard the saying, "Sowing fennel is sowing sorrow" years ago!).
- Plant **thyme or mint** near cabbage and tomatoes, deters cabbage moth.
- Plant chervil with **radishes**.
- Plant chives with **carrot**.
- Plant **lovage** here and there to improve health and flavor of other vegetables.
- Plant borage with tomatoes, squash or strawberries, deters tomato **hornworm**.
- Plant **dill** with cabbages, keep away from carrot.
- Plant **basil** with tomatoes, repels mosquitoes and flies.
- Keep **sage** away from cucumbers.
- Plant **summer savory** near beans and onion to improve growth and flavor.
- **Dandelion** nearby, fruits ripen faster. (Flowers emit natural ripener, ethylene?)
- Elderberry leaves deter **moles**.

D. Advice based on phenology

- If the bramble blooms early in June, an early harvest can be expected.
- If the oak is out before the ash
 'twill be a summer of wet and splash
 If the ash is out before the oak
 'twill be a summer of fire and smoke.
 (Hmmm. This from Kentucky: If oak's before ash you'll get only a splash, if ash before oak you may expect a soak.)
- When the sloe tree is as white as a sheet, sow your **barley**, be it wet or dry. (Sloe is the plum, or a blackhaw viburnum -- blooms late April early May.)
- Elm leaf as big as a mouse's ear, then to sow barley, never fear.
 Or: Upon St. David's Day, put your barley into the clay.
- You must look for **grass** on top of the oak. (Means grass doesn't grow well until the oak begins to leaf out.)
- When elder berries ripen, sow **wheat**. (Fall crops)
- Sow **beans and peas** on David and Chad, be the weather good or bad.
- They that sow their **corn** in May, may come weeping away,
 They that go in June may come back with a merry tune.
- Stop cutting **asparagus** when peas become plenty.
- Plant **corn** when oak leaves are the size of a squirrel's (mouse's) ear.
- Look for **morels** when lilacs bloom.
- Treat for **bronze birch borer** when *Spiraea x vanhouttei* finishes bloom.
- Cover cabbages/kales when *Forsythia* blooms (**cabbage moths** appear)
- Check for first **tent caterpillars** when saucer magnolia blooms.
- Check for **black vine weevil** damage when *Hydrangea arborescens* blooms

E. Weather and time

1. Especially **upcoming winters**, onset of spring, quality of harvest:

- About **woolly bear caterpillar** (*Pyrrharctica isabella*, the Isabella tiger moth) -- it's the number of red-brown band segments at the caterpillar's middle that are counted to predict winter. Fewer segments, harsher winter. (Dr. C. H. Curran curator of

insects, NYC Museum of Natural History, counted bands for more than ten years. Found some consistency but not conclusive.)

- **Onions' skin** very thin, mild winter's coming in, Onion's skin thick and tough, coming winter's cold and rough.
- Distance of wasps nests above ground, thickness of corn husks, abundance of **hawthorn** (haws) flowers, are other supposed predictors of winter cold.
- Hawthorn, again. Per the Scots, "Many haws, many snaws."
- Many nits, many pits. (A **heavy nut crop** signaling a cold winter, with many dead people to be buried.)
- If the **groundhog** sees his shadow on February 2 he'll duck back down and we'll have six more weeks of winter.
- **Spring** has not arrived until you can set your foot on twelve daisies.
- A **green Christmas** brings a heavy harvest. (Rutlandshire)
- Plenty of **ladybirds**, plenty of hops.

2. **Rain** is always worth predicting:

- Avoid an ash it contains the flash (O.E. reference to lightning-prone trees.)
- If **marigold** flowers aren't open by 7 a.m., expect thunder or rain that day.
- Watch pimpernel, the morning glory family or **clover** -- if the leaves are full out, the weather will be fine. If the leaves shut up, get out your coat.

3. Need to know **time of day**?

- **Goatsbeard** (*Tragopogon dubius*) opens at sunrise, closes at noon.
- **Chicory** opens at eight, closes at 4 p.m.
- **Dandelion** is the "peasant's clock" (flower opens very early in the a.m.)

4. Or the **temperature**? (From the June, 1931 "Boy's Life" magazine)

- **Grasshoppers** are loudest at 95°, unable to chirp below 62°
- **Crickets** tell the temperature
house cricket: chirps/14 seconds + 40 = degrees F
tree cricket: chirps/minute divided by 4 + 40 = degrees F
- At 40°F all insects are silent
- 85°F is the best for **bee** work, they're gentle then; below 70° the bees are irritable.

F. Fun and philosophy

- Plant rue near sage to protect the sage against toads.
- Rue grows best if stolen (Elizabethan England)
- Where rosemary flourishes, the lady rules.
- Corn is most perfect the day after the raccoons get it.
- If you would have a lovely garden, you should live a lovely life.

G. Superstition

- **Parsley** seed "travels to the devil and back nine times before germinating." It's unlucky to transplant it. Where it thrives, the missus is master of the house.
- If **marjoram** grows on a tomb the person buried there is happy (ancient Greece).
- **Trees** are venerated. In many cultures, evil spirits could be dispersed by pushing affected children through holes/clefts in trees or through the division below grown-together branches. ("Church" from kirk, from Quercus/oak -- from the Druids!)
- Superstition or dry humor: By Danish tradition, don't approach a thorn tree at night.

- In Greek tradition, certain trees have wandering specters, souls. Making offerings of wine poured at the base, is a good thing to do to appease them.
- "A **cherry** year, a merry year."
- **Honesty** thrives in the honest person's garden.
- Finding a *five* leaf **clover** is *bad* luck.
- Putting the first parings of a child's fingernails beneath a tree is good luck.
- Wearing **violets** around your neck prevents intoxication but encourages fleas to move into the house.

IV. How to remember, test and share the knowledge

A. Almost always worth testing a pass-along tip

- For **peas**, St. Patrick's day (March 17) planting is traditional in many areas. (But... Peas need two months of 70 degrees or less to do best, and ripen their crop based on average daily temperature. Later sowings may catch up with and bear at same time as earlier. So staggered pea plantings may not worth the effort in short-spring regions. Instead, plant different varieties.)
- We know now that if ethylene gas (a by-product of ripening plant tissues in some plants) is near stored gladiolus corms and **potato** tubers, these will sprout again sooner -- after less cold period. Ethylene may be the key in this tip from the Shakers: Cucumbers should be stored in a box just to fit them and buried in dry sand. There should be no hay or moss in the box with them or they will turn yellow. If no hay or moss, they will be as fresh and green two weeks later as if just picked.

B. Discipline required, a scientific approach

1. Wrote Shaker Franklin Barber of New Lebanon in 1843

"Dunged one row of celery with rotted horse dung, another with rotted vegetable manure. Result: Vegetable appears best."

And:

"Sowed an experiment bed of seed of all kinds, of the growth of 1938 (5 years previous), to see which will germinate."

2. **Plan, control and record** the procedure

- Reproduce all the variables (did Grandma always wear same color?)
- Establish a control
 - Same plants in two places, some beyond rosemary's area of influence
- **Keep records**
 - How many insects/how much (% of total) leaf damage, when?
 - Plant by plant -- how far does rosemary influence stretch?
- Analyze records for significant findings
 - Not just one year but many, each year with controls and records
- **Publish what you learn!**
 - Janet passes on her parents report, verified:
 - "One gallon of water can supply one tomato plant for three-four days."

C. Things you might need to know, to interpret some of the old saws:

1. **Midsummer** day (St. John's Day) is June 24, halfway between planting & harvest.
2. The "**dog days**" are the 40 days from July 3 to August 11.
3. The **harvest moon** usually occurs in September, but it is always the full moon closest to the autumnal equinox. (If the harvest moon occurs in October, the September full moon is called a corn moon.)

4. Each **full moon** has a traditional name. January's full moon is called the wolf moon; February's, the snow moon; March's, the worm moon; April's, the pink moon; May's, the flower moon; June's, the strawberry moon; July's, the buck moon; August's, the sturgeon moon; September's, the harvest moon; October's, the hunter moon; November's the beaver moon; December's, the cold moon.
5. Warm spell mid October sometimes called **Indian summer** but more traditionally refers to a warm spell between Nov. 11 and Nov. 20.
6. **Candlemas Day** is in February, a church Holy Day.
7. Select a calendar that shows the moon phase.
8. Gardening **by the moon, 2009**. Example advice, from www.farmersalmanac.com
 - May 1: Most favorable for corn, cotton, okra, beans, peppers, eggplant, and other above ground crops. Plant seed beds and flower gardens.
 - May 2-6: Barren period. Kill pests, cultivate, take a short vacation.
 - May 7-8: Excellent for planting corn, beans, peppers, other above ground crops.
 - May 9-11: Plant carrots, beets, onions, turnips, and other root crops at this time.
 - May 12-13: Do no planting at this time.

D. Let's keep developing our own pass-along tips:

- Horsetail or scouring rush, dried, covered in water, boiled 20 minutes, cooled and strained, is an effective **fungicide**. (We now know it contains silica to strengthen the other plants' cell walls against infection.)
- Gardening is good for you:
 - Digging trenches burns as many **calories** per minute as cross country skiing at a steady walk.
 - Mowing** lawns burns the same calories per minute as horseback riding at a trot.
 - Hoeing** burns as many calories per minute as weight training.
 - Weeding** burns as many calories per minute as table tennis.

V. Some printed sources of traditional wisdom

All about Weeds; Edwin Rollin Spencer; 1940, 1968; Dover Publications, NY

Coincide: The Orton System of Pest Management; Donald A. Orton; 2007 edition:

\$44 (\$49, Canada) to Dennis W. Jamieson, 723 Dawes Ave., Wheaton, IL 60189-6587
630-668-8597 www.laborofloveconservatory.com

Magic Gardens; Rosetta E. Clarkson; 1939; MacMillan

Roses Love Garlic; Louise Riotte, GardenWay

Science in the Garden; Dr. F.W. West; 1941; Quinn & Boder Co.; Rahway, N.J.

Simples, Superstition and Solace: Plant Material Used in Colonial Living; Compiled by the Rounds committee of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of Connecticut; 1970; Connecticut Printers, Inc., Hartford

The Country Gardener's Almanac; Martin Lawrence; 1979; Main Street Press; Pittstown, NJ

The Folklore of Plants; T. F. Thiselton-Dyer; 1889; Chatts & Wyndrus; Piccadilly, London

The Foxfire Books, especially the first ("The Foxfire Book") and volumes 4 (includes a section devoted to gardening), 2 and 3 (sections on wild food plants); edited by Eliot Wigginton; volumes published from 1972 through at least 1991 by various publishers

The Old Farmer's Almanac (in print or www.farmersalmanac.com)

www.panplanet.com

The Shaker Herb and Garden Book; Rita Buchanan; 1996; Houghton-Mifflin