



# The Washtenaw Gardener

Volume 18, Number 1 January - February, 2010

<http://www.ewashtenaw.org/government/departments/extension/>

## Washtenaw County Master Gardener Newsletter

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### Winter Composting Janet Kavanagh (MG 2004)

One bitterly cold night last January, our 2 Golden Retrievers were at the back fence, raising the roof. When the barking went a bit long for neighborliness, I went to investigate. They seemed incensed that “their” compost bin, just beyond the fence, was being raided! My flashlight picked out a rather large possum, who paused for only a moment in the beam before blithely returning to stuffing himself with the fresh vegetable scraps I had layered on earlier in the day.

Now my primary intention is not to serve as a wildlife salad bar, but as a diehard composter, I can’t bear to throw away anything that can nicely decompose. Once winter set in there aren’t many outdoor compostables to worry about for a few months. But unlike the bears, we continue to cook and eat all winter. What to do with the food scraps? There are a few basic options to choose from - continue to build your pile, store food scrap in buckets outside, start a worm composting bin inside, or take a break from composting and minimize your food waste. Having no room for worms, and an aversion to a messy backyard, I prefer to continue with the pile, as long as the snow isn’t too deep to make it to the bin. It helps to have your compost bin close to the house, or be willing to shovel the long path out to it.

Although the decomposition process slows down in cooler weather, compost piles can keep working all

year long. Bacteria and molds in your pile can survive winter’s cold. To prolong their active life over the winter, they will need warmth, food, air, and moisture. Although more challenging, with a little extra effort you can optimize your composting in winter months and welcome spring with a productive, healthy compost pile.

#### **In Late Fall...**

Empty the compost bin. Since decomposition slows considerably in the winter, the contents won’t shrink very fast and the bin can get overfilled in the process. Harvest finished compost from your pile to make room for your winter additions. Use the finished compost in your garden, as winter mulch, or store it in a dry place for the spring.

Think about size. In order to compost successfully all winter long you need to make sure that your system stays microbially active. A frozen or barely thawed pile won’t do you much good. Keeping it warm and active will require a critical mass of material – typically at least 1 cubic yard. In colder areas like Michigan, bigger definitely is better.

Stockpile the “browns”. Scraps from our kitchens are primarily the “greens” in compost. You’ll also need to collect a balancing supply of brown or dry materials. Set up a second container, such as a covered garbage can or chicken wire pen next to your compost bin. Before the heavy snows arrive, fill the container with “dry browns” – leaves, twigs, sod and dry dead plants from the garden to use throughout the winter. If you run out of these in late winter you can substitute strips of corrugated cardboard or shredded newspaper.

#### **During the winter...**

Layering. When frost sets in, pile 12 or more inches of dry browns in the compost pile, leaving a hole in the middle for your food

scraps. Each time you put in food scraps, cover them with two to three inches of browns. Repeat as the hole gets filled.

Transform your kitchen compost bucket. To reduce cold winter trips to your bin, start a pre-compost bucket. Use a larger bucket or trash can than you would in summer, but make sure you can lift it when full! To prevent odors, layer kitchen scraps with indoor browns such as shredded newspaper, paper grocery bags, paper towel cores, or strips of corrugated cardboard.

Careful feeding. In all composting, layering nitrogen rich greens (kitchen scraps, manure, fresh garden waste) with carbon browns (dead leaves, straw, newspaper) ensures the right ratio of carbon to nitrogen, helps aerate and provides adequate drainage in the pile. A well balanced carbon to nitrogen ratio is between 20:1 and 40:1. This balance will support microbial heating – nitrogen sources provide the “flame” for heat, and carbon rich materials act as “fuel” for microbes to consume, creating heat in the process. The carbon rich materials are also good bulking agents, promoting sufficient air flow.

Reduce particle size. The cold weather slows down the compost process. Smaller particle sizes of materials provide more surface area to speed decomposition. Set up a cutting board for compost and chop up your food scraps before putting them in the bin. Leaves can be shredded with a lawn mower or trimmer. Run your newspapers through a paper shredder.

Keep in the heat. Don't turn the pile! Turning the pile in the winter is not necessary, and will result in a loss of valuable heat from the middle of the pile.

Insulation. Insulating your bin or building a wind break will protect it from the harsh winter winds and cold. While the outside of your bin may freeze, the inside can still “cook.” You can provide extra insulation by surrounding your bin with bags of leaves or straw/hay bales. You could even make a temporary winter system by simply stacking straw bales to form the “walls” of your bin, then filling it with waste materials.

Other options involve creating walls by lining the inside of your bin with corrugated cardboard, plastic sheeting or tarps, then building a similar outer wall around the bin to create a space to stuff with insulation. Examples of insulation options include leaves, hay or dry grass. Also a great use for recycled styrofoam chunks from holiday gifts. Later in the winter, snow makes a supplemental layer of insulation when piled around 3 sides of your bin. Another great source of insulation is the earth itself. Digging a compost pit in the ground or into the side of a hill can be effective and easy. It will also help to create a thick layer of bedding over the top of your composting mass. Try covering the bin or pit with a tarp or plastic sheeting, topped with a thick layer of

loose straw or leaves.

### In the spring...

Even if your pile does freeze over the winter, it will reactivate once it thaws. In the spring, turn and water as you normally would. If your pile is excessively wet due to the spring thaw, turn it and add more browns to soak up the moisture.

Hopefully these extra steps will make a difference come springtime. And, even if it doesn't result in completely finished compost, at least you have saved space in the landfill. Whatever you decide to do, remember that an average family can compost 400 to 600 pounds of organics per year...minus the possum's share ☺

### The Saga of the Rain Barrel Janet Fisher, MG 2006

Last spring, I decided that this year I would finally put up a rain barrel. I had already addressed two of the four downspouts around our house by attaching flexible hoses to the outlets and running them to trenches that channel the water into miniature creeks. I planted swamp milkweed and other wetland wildflowers along my little creeks and the roof runoff has happily trickled through ever since.

But I wanted rain barrels for the two downspouts on the other side of the house. For one thing, there is no convenient discharge location nearby for a traditional rain garden, and I would have had to dig a very long channel indeed to do the creek thing. Also that's the side of the house without easy water, the hose spigots having been installed far away and around complicated corners. A rain barrel would solve the problem by capturing the rain and storing it where it would be handy to use for watering.

Once decided, it should have been a simple matter to buy rain barrels and set them up. But the rain barrel prices in local stores and online gave me pause and a delay ensued while I investigated options. Fortunately, I learned that Matthaei Botanical Gardens sells rain barrel kits at reasonable cost. I would have to assemble the barrel myself but I was told it was easy and that the kit came with all necessary parts and instructions. How hard could it be? Still, to play it safe I decided to start with just one kit.

The kit included a recycled food-grade plastic 55-gallon drum, a sheet of directions, and a small zipper bag full of parts. I brought it all home full of confidence and ambition. But by then it was May, and finally warm, and everything in the yard needed doing. I put the kit in the



garage and promised myself I'd work on it as soon as I finished the urgent garden tasks. First I needed to plant the annuals, divide the perennials, prune the bushes, put in the vegetable garden, turn the compost pile. And so it went all summer and fall.

Just before Thanksgiving, on a gray afternoon with the temperature dropping fast, I realized what would happen if I didn't get the rain barrel kit out of the garage. The car wouldn't fit in, which means that I would be scraping snow off the windshield at 6 am in order to drive to work. Suddenly motivation kicked in for real. Finishing the rain barrel had become the most urgent task.

I would like to say that after all those months the assembly really was a snap, and in many ways it was. All you had to do to put the kit together was saw a piece out of the barrel top and cover it with a piece of screen, drill a couple of holes, and install the water spigot and the overflow valve. But the truth is that my little Sunday project turned into a typical Sunday project meaning it took all afternoon instead of an hour. The hard part wasn't the assembly but rather the preparation – the trip to the hardware store to get the right drill bit, leveling the ground where the rain barrel would sit, building a sturdy platform for it to sit on.



I finished just as it got too dark outside to see. The rain barrel looks fabulous and I can't wait to use it. But I will probably hold off until spring. Some people say it's fine to leave a rain barrel connected all winter but I don't want to take a chance. So for now I have the rain barrel safely stored upside down and the old downspout re-attached. I'll set things up again in March or so to collect the first spring rain.

**Master Gardener Tote Bags**

Master Gardener Canvas Tote bags are for sale at a cost of \$15 each. The bag has the Master Gardener logo and "Master Gardener Volunteer" printed on one side. The bag, which has a zipper closure across the top, is large enough to hold the Master Gardener Manual. There is a bag on display at the MSU Office for viewing. Stop by the MSU office to purchase yours.



**Master Gardener Alumni Association of Washtenaw County News**

The Master Gardener Alumni Association of Washtenaw County meetings are held on the third Tuesday of the month, September through May, starting at 7 p.m. in the basement conference room of the County building at 705 N. Zeeb Rd. Annual dues are \$20 and may be paid at any meeting or mailed to the MGAAWC Treasurer. (See application form elsewhere in the newsletter.)

Please reserve the following dates for MGAAWC meetings. As we went to press, details were not available for speakers and topics, but will be announced via email as soon as possible.

- Jan 19, 7pm - TBA
- Feb 16, 7pm - TBA
- March 16, 7pm - TBA
- April 20, 6:30pm – The annual potluck, business meeting and officer elections.
- May 18, 7pm - TBA

This year we will be electing our President and Secretary to two-year terms. Kathie Mahn is retiring after four very successful years as President. If you would like to nominate yourself or someone else for President or Secretary of MGAAWC, please contact Bob Bricault or Cindy Fischer.



**Master Gardening Clothes Available for Purchase**

You now can order items from a line of Master Gardener Clothing, including T-shirts, sweatshirts, denim shirts, polo shirts, fleece vests and hoodies – both pullover and zip front. The clothing is offered in a variety of colors. Payment will need to be made at the time of the order. Prices range from \$9.50 to around \$35. Orders will be placed on a monthly basis. If you have questions, please contact Cindy at 734-222-3948

**Winter Farming – in Virtual Reality**

Janet Kavanagh (MG 2004)

The scene in front of me is a perfect array of color. Iridescent ducks waddling among the brown and white chickens; a small black cat hovering near the cows for a hint of milking time. Glorious brights in the near bursting ripe strawberries, bell peppers and eggplant. Avocado trees heavy with fruit, and bright sugar maples dripping with syrup. Hang on a minute? What wrong with this picture – how could it be in one place and time? Because it's on my computer screen....



It always feels like such a long stretch from late November's last harvest until the first seed catalogs start arriving in February. They remind me of my childhood's Sears Christmas Wish

Book experience – I can spend hours flipping and fantasizing and making lists. But the months between can be a pretty grey and dry spell for my gardening imagination. Until I found Farmville.

I'm not typically a computer game player, but recently have found some that might satisfy that Michigan winter longing for garden interaction. I've used Facebook online for a while, but only recently have been introduced to the application game Farmville. It's a cartoon based strategy game, where your virtual farmer (avatar) raises crops, trees and livestock for game cash and experience points. As you gain experience, you progress through levels that give access to expanded crop choices, animals, decorations and buildings to outfit your farm. If you have Facebook friends who play Farmville, they can become your farm neighbors – you can swap gifts and help each other out with tasks like scaring away the gophers, weeding and fertilizing. I'm surprised how addictive it has become. I can't wait until the next level to be able to grow different crops. And the seasonal seed and decoration options will appeal to the pack rat in all of us. But I'm not alone - Farmville has a growing group of over 56 million users.



If you aren't a Facebook user, there are many other similar games available. I was shocked by how large the field is – perhaps because I'm a newbie gamer. Virtual Farming isn't a new concept – the Maxis Sim games series published SimFarm in 1993, and as an older game, it is available for free download online. With advances in programming and graphics, this one will function better if you have an older computer – it doesn't seem to play well with Windows XP or Vista. The graphics are certainly more basic than newer games, but there is more detail and strategy in your work as the farmer.



By Googling 'farm games' or 'farming simulation games', you'll find numerous options. Some of the more basic versions can be played without charge online. Others are available for download for less than \$10, and offer a free trial period of an hour or more of game play before you purchase. I would recommend you take advantage of the free trials to find one that best suits your interests. Some have a limited number of tasks, can be a little repetitive, or have low quality graphics. The game objectives are varied - do you want to grow and develop a farm, compete with friends and family, or have a side line where your character farmer tackles challenges like fighting big agribusiness? Are you interested in character and action games, or just want to grow you own little plot in cyberspace? Is this for adult fun, or would you like it to appeal to your kids as a family activity?

I'm just beginning to try some of the downloadable games, so don't have any to recommend specifically. Googling 'farm game review' can be a good start for information on download sites, description, objectives and game pros and cons. [http://gamemile.com/game\\_review/ tags /48/2.date.down/Farming\\_games](http://gamemile.com/game_review/tags/48/2.date.down/Farming_games) alone has reviews and screenshots for more than 20 games.

I've found it's a great way to unwind at the end of a long chilly day, when you can't imagine hanging out in the backyard. So I'm donning my digital overalls and going to check on my grapes and chickens. If you do get hooked, look for tips and tricks online. You'll find there is definitely a large hidden world of farmers out there at their computers. Now if only we can teach them all to play in real dirt next spring.

**Have Fun!**

**TALES FROM THE HIVE**  
Richard Mendel (MG 2009)

This is a second introduction to this repeating column since we were having technical difficulties with the first email address. There is a concern for the health and welfare of honey bees in general and particularly in Washtenaw County where there is a viable and active agricultural base. Honey bees, in many cases directly and indirectly affect the success of that agricultural base and the general well being and success of the many backyard and hobbyists' vegetable, flower, herb or meditation gardens. Continuing with this newsletter we are going to maintain a question and answer column dedicated to honey bees and in some cases bees in general. The column will be titled "Tales from the Hive". The way it will work is there will be an email address [brescue@att.net](mailto:brescue@att.net) which would be the address where you would send any questions of general interest pertaining to bees and how they interface with agriculture, humans, animals and the environment. Please send your question to Richard at that email address. A number of questions that would be of interest to most persons will be selected and answered in the monthly newsletter. Some of the questions and answers may be short which means many can be published and some of the questions and answers may require a longer amount of space which means there would be less of them answered. The following are some of the questions and answers that have already been asked. This is what the column will normally look like when it is posted in the newsletter each month.

Robert W. (Q) I understand bumble bees are superior to honey bees in pollinating greenhouse tomatoes. Is that true?



Richard (A) Yes Robert that is true. Bumblebees are the most important insect pollinator of tomato, especially in greenhouses.

Bumble bees forage normally in greenhouses, and once released in a glass house, they quickly discover and work tomato flowers. Bumblebees do not fly against windows like honey bees and they are less likely to forage outside of the greenhouse when windows must be opened for temperature control. Bumblebees also work flowers when greenhouse temperatures are cool in winter and spring. Honey bees visit relatively few tomato flowers because they cannot sonicate the flowers thus making it difficult for them to collect the pollen.

Henry L. (Q) This summer I had a swarm of honey bees land in a tree in my back yard. It was a magnificent site and at the same time pretty scary since I didn't know what to do or who to call. Fortunately they were gone the next day. My neighbors and I still talk about it. What should I do if this happens again and they stay in the tree or on my shed for a number of days?

Richard (A) The simple answer is call the Hotline at 734-997-1819. We have a list of beekeepers by location that will come out and rescue the honey bee swarm or at the least, will advise you about what to do. If you are looking

for more assurance than that, then I am listing my number 734-660-8621 which I encourage you to call. I will know of someone in your area or at the least come and rescue them myself. There are no costs involved. **If you can determine that they are not honey bees than I suggest**



**calling a professional company for pest removal.**

According to the South East Michigan Beekeepers Association there were 123 swarms of honey bees rescued this past spring and summer by its members. Typical a swarm of honey bees are docile and will usually park somewhere as a temporary scouting spot before they move on to their new permanent home. Hopefully when you see them they are not at their new home, if they are, they can still be easily rescued. Beekeepers love capturing swarms as long as they haven't originated from their own hives.

Sheila W. (Q) I am thinking of raising bees this spring and heard there is a group that will give me free bees. Who are they and how do I get my free bees?

Richard (A) Congratulations on considering raising your own bees. If you are not sure about your decision and are looking for support I want to mention that there is a new group of beginning beekeepers that meet at The University of Michigan Matthai Botanical Gardens once a month. It is a standing meeting on the second Tuesday of each month at 7:00 pm in Rm 125. The January meeting is entitled "So you want to be a beekeeper". I am the contact person for that group. There is no cost. On the free bees you are almost right. There is a group called HEIFER INTERNATIONAL which is a nonprofit humanitarian organization dedicated to ending hunger and poverty in caring for the earth. Since 1944, HEIFER has pursued this mission by providing livestock and training in environmentally sound agriculture to those with a genuine need. Recipients also agree to pass on the gift of one or more of their animals' offspring and training to others in need, creating an ever widening circle of hope. A gift is given in honor of the donor and it will help families enjoy improved nutrition, income for school, medicine and housing and a better way of life. H.I. provides livestock and training to families and communities around the world, giving them a way to raise themselves up from poverty. Consider that the greater gift is in giving. You may or may not be eligible to receive a free living bee hive and if not you may certainly be in a position to give one through this organization. For more information please go to [www.heifer.org](http://www.heifer.org).



**2009  
Master Gardener  
Awards**

**BASIC CERTIFICATE**

Dan Booker  
 Donna Conaway  
 Marta Diaz  
 Jill Katakowski Dohner  
 Eileen Donegan  
 Mary Higgins  
 Maurita Holland  
 Mike Janz  
 Erich Jensen  
 Pete Kappus  
 Theresa Kelsch  
 Carol Lively  
 Richard Mendel  
 Mary Ann Morris  
 Denise Neely  
 Yvonne Nelson  
 Lynda Norton  
 Nancy Quay  
 Christina Roselle  
 Graciela Rubalcava  
 Anita Sandretto  
 Barbara Saxton  
 Norman Scherr  
 Tristine Lee Smart  
 Candie Sorensen  
 Marion Spencer  
 Mary Lu Stone  
 Elizabeth Sweet  
 Eunice Tiller  
 Michael Towner  
 Mark VanBogelen  
 Susan Walters  
 Lisa Michelle Waud  
 Bonnie Winkelman  
 Susan Wynne

**ADVANCED CERTIFICATE**

Deanna Beyer  
 Merrill Crockett  
 Robert Devereaux  
 D.K. Donegan  
 Linda Duvall



**Adv. Certificate Continued**

Laurel Fields  
 Janet Fisher  
 John Hochstetler  
 Dianne McCagg  
 Richard Mendel  
 Sam Parise  
 Mary Robinson  
 Daniella Williams

**100 Hours**

Sara Bertsch  
 Deanna Beyer  
 Robert Devereaux  
 Marta Diaz  
 Laurel Fields  
 Cindy Fischer  
 Janet Fisher  
 Elizabeth Fodor  
 Lefiest Galimore  
 Carolyn McNamara  
 Amanda Nimke  
 Richard Mendel  
 Karen Moore  
 Nancy Quay  
 Liz Rother



Graciela Rubalcava  
 Anita Sandretto  
 Mary Lu Stone  
 Stan Towers  
 Michael Towner

**State Awards 250**

Susan Bryan—250  
 Carol Figarra—250  
 Sam Parise—250  
 Lisa Perschke—250  
 Peter Wilcox—250  
 Diane Willis - 250  
 Ron Carpinella—500  
 Madolyn Kaminski—500  
 Dennis Purcell—500

# January - February Calendar

## Washtenaw County Parks Program

Call 971-6337 for general information

### **Winter Bark and Buds Hike**

Sunday, January 3, 2-4 pm

On this hike, we'll learn how to ID trees and shrubs without the help of leaves!

**Burns-Stokes Preserve**

### **Annual Winter Hike & Potluck**

Sunday, January 10, 10 am—2 pm

Come enjoy a morning hike in some of the prettiest woods in Washtenaw County. This year's hike will focus on the pine forest habitat of the area. Afterwards, we'll gather to share some food around the fire.

**Park Lyndon South, East Lot**

**Note:** cabin is a 5 min. uphill hike from parking lot (driving to cabin is possible with special request)

### **Winter Woods Walk at County Farm Park**

Saturday, January 30, 2 to 4 pm

First of four seasonal hikes here in 2010! Come experience a winter afternoon in the outdoors—we'll learn about some plants and animals that live in this lovely woodlot as we explore on and off trails!

**County Farm Park, Medford Lot Entrance**

### **February Wetland Hike**

Sunday, February 21, 2-4 pm.

On this walk, we'll explore one of the wet "kettle" areas of the park. Join us for a fire in the fireplace afterwards.

Wear waterproof boots—water and/or ice may be under foot!

**Park Lyndon North**

## Hidden Lake Gardens

### **Focus on Ferns**

Saturday, January 30, 10 am to 12 pm

Ferns are an important part of our native ecosystem. With such great diversity in range, habit, sizes and forms, many ferns can be used as handsome additions to our gardens and landscapes. Join Dr. Jim Wilkins, for a look at some of our most common ferns. Learn to identify ferns by important characteristics. Discussions on the life cycle of ferns, propagation techniques and ornamental characteristics of many native and non-native ferns.

**Cost \$18/\$16 Friends of HLG**

**Pre-registration is required call (517)431-2060**

### **Winter Tree Identification**

Saturday, February 27, 10 am to 12 pm

Experience the beauty of Hidden Lake Gardens in winter. Join Karen Gentry, horticulturist and Hidden Lake Gardens Education Coordinator, for a winter walk through the gardens. Bud shape, leaf scars, tree bark and other botanical features will be used for tree identification. A Winter Tree Finder booklet will be given to all participants to take home. Dress for the weather.

**Cost \$18/\$16 Friends of HLG**

**Pre-registration is required call (517) 431-2060**

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## Master Gardener Alumni Association of Washtenaw County Membership Enrollment Sept. 2009 thru August 2010

**(Please Print Clearly)**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ MG Year completion \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: MI Zip \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: (day) \_\_\_\_\_ (evening) \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Check this box if this is an email change

**New items:**

**Gardening interests:**

**Please Circle: Yes / No** to include personal information in Alumni Membership Directory

**Mail enrollment with a check  
for \$20 dues, payable to:**

**Master Gardener Alumni  
Association or MGAA  
c/o Pat Belluci  
5312 Fox Ridge Ct  
Ann Arbor, MI 48103**

6960

Michigan State University  
Washtenaw County MSU Extension  
705 N. Zeeb Rd.  
P.O. Box 8645  
Ann Arbor, MI 48107-8645

**TIME SENSITIVE MATERIAL ENCLOSED  
PLEASE DELIVER PROMPTLY**



**Office Hours:** 8 a.m. — 6 p.m., Monday—Thursday, CLOSED Friday

Washtenaw County MSU Extension.....	734-997-1678
Fax.....	734-222-3990
Bob Bricault, Horticulture Agent.....	734-222-3826
Cindy Fischer, Master Gardener Coordinator .....	734-222-3948
Garden Hotline.....	734-997-1819
E-mail:.....	msuextension@ewashtenaw.org
County website:.....	www.eWashtenaw.org
State website:.....	web1.msue.msu.edu/mastergardener

*Robert J. Bricault, Jr.*

Robert J. Bricault, Jr.  
Extension Educator,  
Horticulture & Natural Resources

**This newsletter is a publication of  
the Washtenaw County/MSU  
Extension Master Gardener  
program.**

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