

Plant Lovers Almanac

For: February 22, 2014

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The melt before this winter's next chapter has arrived. What next? My mother-in-law Margaret asked what was The Great Jimangi's seasonal prognostication for the future? I confidently predict that if March comes, April shall surely follow. Furthermore, we shall surely be exhausted come April 1. See below for why.

Despite many inconveniences, we must admit that the soft snows of late were lovely. Snow makes evergreens even more lovely, with their icing and little dollops of powder propped up on the twigs. Blue sky days, sycamores and London planetrees against that sky; priceless. Olympian beauty.

Seed catalogues and garden plans for the upcoming seasons truly seem reasonable now as the calendar turns its pages. Spring Training begins for more than just MLB. For plant lovers and landscapers, now is the time to begin reminding ourselves of what makes for sustainable gardens and landscapes for years to come. Here is the first of a few quick hints I have featured in recent programs for the green industry and Master Gardeners that we shall discuss in upcoming Almanacs.

Soil is all important. A key mantra fellow Extension agent Joe Boggs (Hamilton County) and I have repeated is the importance of understanding the interaction of the physical, chemical, and, biological components of soil and its importance in root health. The physical components of soil involved in soil texture are large particles (sand), medium size particles (silt) and the smallest particles (clay). The best soils for plant growth related to availability of water, oxygen, and nutrients are combinations of all three that are termed loams.

We often hear that clay in soils is bad, but this is not so unless clay is in such a high percentage that water drainage is poor with subsequent lack of oxygen availability resulting in poor root metabolism. Sand is often heralded for its drainage qualities, but soils high in the percentage of sand require more frequent irrigations and are lower in fertility because macronutrients and micronutrients needed by plants do not adhere as well to sand. Again, fortunate the gardener with that can be proud of their lovely loooooam.

Soil chemistry comes into play in many ways, including the issue of soil pH, which refers to the relative acidity or alkalinity of soil. Neutral pH is 7, soil is more acid below 7, and more alkaline above 7. An important fact is that plants differ in their tolerance to soil pH. Acid-loving plants such as rhododendron, river birch, white pine, and pachysandra do best in more acid soils, while some plants thrive in or are more tolerant of more alkaline soils such as alfalfa, green beans and arrowwood viburnum. Turfgrass generally thrives in pH approaching neutral while most woody landscape plants thrive in more acid conditions. This is why lime is added to lawns since it makes soil more alkaline; this may not be optimal if that turf shares soil with acid-loving woody plants.

Biological aspects of soil play a role in many ways, from transforming soil minerals into forms plants can use to the critical aspect of soil structure. Though some microorganisms such as fungi and bacteria can be plant pathogens that infect plants many others do the work of necessary decomposition of organic matter and also play the role of "microbial glue", creating soil aggregates or "peds" which affect soil drainage and oxygen availability. Peds are what makes a soil crumbly, with the microbial glue working on organic matter in the soil to create larger

aggregations with larger pore space between peds and thus better drainage characteristics for the soil. For most soils, adding composted organic matter results in healthier roots and thus healthier plants. There are really not many other short-cuts to better soil, unless you move or move large amounts of soil. Organic matters.

So, get down with the soil, man. Brown is the real green (thumb). As conservationist Carol Williams writes of the overall life of the soil: “*An agricultural adage says the tiny animals that live below the surface of a healthy pasture weigh more than the cows grazing above it*”. The farmer and poet Wendell Berry writes of soil transformations, “*If a healthy soil is full of death, it is also full of life: worms, fungi, microorganisms of all kinds... Given only the health of the soil, nothing that dies is dead very long.*”.

The Last Name That Plant Contest. The pictured plant for our last contest on February 8 (my brother’s birthday!) was spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*). It is a lovely early spring bloomer with intensely sun-drenched chartreuse flowers that emerge before its leaves and almost any other forest foliage, and jam-worthy orange to crimson fruits. Dan Knorr was the first with the correct identification and won the prize of *Seeing Flowers: Discover the Hidden Life of Flowers* by Robert Llewellyn and Teri Dunn Chace.

The New Name That Plant Contest. Snowdrops? Nahh. Though this may be the week for them to arise. Crocus, not yet. Lilja Rogers refrain of “*First the howling winds awoke us, then the rains came down to soak us; now before the mind can focus – Crocus*” is not yet to be. How about an evergreen conifer such as douglasfir with its cones adorned with cool-looking winged seeds? Or pawpaw, our state native fruit tree, with its chocolate dark, lima bean-shaped seeds?

No, our Mystery Plant this time will be another native fruit, this one in the Rosaceae family, with interesting sepal-bracketed fruits that yield an excellent jelly. Learn it now and you will be well-prepared for the College of Wooster’s Arbor Day celebration this April when they plant this small tree and serve some of its jelly, prepared by the aptly named Lois Rose of Cleveland. The first to e-mail or text me this morning (all winners thus far have logged in no later than mid-morning) will get a copy of Aldo Leopold’s conservationist classic, *A Sand County Almanac*. E-mail is Chatfield,1@osu.edu. Phone is 330-466-0270.

To end for now, here is William Butler Yeats: “*All that we did/ all that we have said or sang/Must come from contact with the soil.*”

Oh, yes, why will we be so exhausted on April 1? We will have just completed a 31 day March!