



GREEN EARTH: CONSERVATION / GARDENING

Waste and Conservation. In a society that is out of control with waste, the time has come in this XXI century to begin to conserve, recycle and convert waste into energy. While President Obama's long awaited focus on renewable energy can operate at the national level, there is much that the average person can do to make this country clean, healthy, less wasteful and subsequently more efficient. In your home you can begin by using more efficient forms of saving electricity and water. Use fluorescent light bulbs that not only lower your electrical power used but last longer. There are increasingly more types that are being created. They cost a bit more but they will save you money in the long run. Use appliances that have the energy star. Any time you buy a new appliance, make sure it has the highest rating for conserving energy. The same is true for your air conditioner and heater unit. Use shower heads and toilets that use half the amount of water. Keep your faucets from leaking. A leaky faucet in one month will use up to 500 gallons of water. When you brush your teeth do not keep the water running: five minutes will waste 20 gallons. Energize your home by retrofitting your windows to triple pane windows, making sure that your doors are equally insulated from either heat or cold. Double or triple your attic/roof insulation using moreover a reflective screen. Use sun screens to filter radiating heat during the summer. Turn off lights when you leave the room. Use ceiling fans to lower your temperature during the summer months. And of course, recycle all cans, bottles, paper and plastics including your corks from your wine bottles. Take your old computers, TV's etc to a recycling center. Good will offers this service in some areas. As new programs are being introduced via Washington, check you're your city for rebates not only for the aforementioned but also for solar panel installation. The City of Austin, Texas for example will give you \$13.500 to help cover the costs for residential solar installation. This is renewable energy that will go to the grid and one that will lower your bills 40% for each unit installed. If you live in the prairie, mountains or coastal areas, wind energy is another important source for the near future.

Outside of your home, there is much that you can do to conserve not only water but the natural habitat of your area. To date, more water is wasted by companies that water until it runs out to the street. But home owners also waste water in their yards equally. You can conserve water outside by

switching from sprayers to drip systems. When you spray, much water is lost to condensation. When the water drips under the ground it maintains its wet state. Not only is a drip system more efficient but it saves you time and money. You can set a computer type of clock control to water whatever days are most important depending on the time of the year. Remember, your plants or garden will like the coolest temperatures to be watered. This is usually around three or four in the morning. In this planet, all living forms are dependent on the ecosystem. If we do not respect the earth, we will have to pay for the imbalances that we create. Just eliminating the habitat of bees can have disastrous consequences to the growth of fruit trees and a host of other plants. Having a large lawn with just grass destroys the natural habitat of birds, bees, butterflies and beneficial insects. It also adds significantly to your water bill. The National Wildlife Federation has some good tips on what you can do to create a natural habitat for your area. Begin by planting trees and shrubs throughout your yard. Diversify the type of flower plants not only for color but for the type of birds and butterflies it will attract. Most important is to educate yourself on encroaching foreign plants that eradicate the native species of your area. Your State Agricultural agency should have a list of plants that are invasive to your native plants. When you plant trees, plant the native species for your area. You will find that they will attract the right kind of wildlife and will be more drought resistant.

In terms of water conservation, take rainwater from your roof via a good gutter system that will in turn be captured into rain barrels (for small gardens) or a large tank that can be used not only for plants but for showering or drinking water (with a reverse osmosis purification system). Shortages in water are being predicted globally in the near future. In the yard there will always be dead leaves to pick up. Instead of disposing them to waste dumps, use them for compost. There is no better compost. Your local stores have compost that is often laced with harmful chemicals. There are a number of ways to create compost. You need a hole or containing area, some soil, organic material (unused vegetable cuts etc) and water. Cover and stir from time to time. Nature will do the rest. In months, you will have rich organic black soil.

When you go grocery shopping, always take your green reusable bag. This will save not only trees being cut but also plastic being wasted in your City dump. Read labels at your local grocery store. Stay away from cans if possible. They contain bisphenol A which has been connected to neurological problems and tumors. They are particularly harmful to the unborn, babies, and the elderly. It is also found in plastic bottles. Look at the base of the bottle (e.g drinking bottled water) there will be a triangle and within it a number. If the number is higher than four, stay away from it. Never place plastic in the microwave oven. Use oven cookware. Research has shown that bottled water left out in the sun released bisphenol A. Write to the FDA and demand that all cans and plastic bottles be free of this and other harmful chemicals.

Remember to continue reading this column. We will be adding material each month. HAPPY AND INSIGHTFULY READING, Arnoldo Carlos Vento,PHD



GARDENING 101: THE COUNTRY GIRL IN THE URBAN JUNGLE

Eagle Feather Research Institute is happy to feature a very insightful webpage featuring Renee Studebaker from Austin, Texas. What follows are photos, recipes, tips on gardening and other useful information relative to your garden. For additional information search google at americanstates.com and look for Renee's roots.



Renee's Roots

If there's a gardening gene, Renee Studebaker has got it. How else to explain her ongoing (and often compulsive) efforts to turn every square inch of her overgrown Central Austin yard (one block from Interstate 35) into something more habitable and sustainable for wildlife (and humans)? It's not her first Austin garden, but hopefully it will be her best.

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Garden Bloggers Bloom Day

By **Renee Studebaker** | Sunday, February 15, 2009, 10:03 PM

What a strange winter. No rain to speak of until the last couple of weeks. And no hard freezes (at least not in my neighborhood). In the garden, bugs that should be dead aren't. Perennials that should have frozen haven't.

I have one salvia, an Indigo Spires, that has not stopped blooming since I pruned it hard in September. But another patch of Indigo Spires about three feet away got nipped by a light frost in December. I'm beginning to think that some parts of my garden should be reclassified as zone 9 instead of 8b.

But enough fussing about the weather. This is Garden Bloggers Bloom Day (created by [Carol at May Dreams Gardens](#)), so it's time to focus on what's looking good in the garden, to photograph the plants that are happy and blooming. (The not so happy plants can be dealt with on another day.)

So, here's what was blooming in my garden at about 8 this morning:

Redbud
tree



Winter honeysuckle



Coral honeysuckle



Crossvine (This native vine will be a solid mass of blooms by the first week of March)



Blackfoot Daisy (I'm so glad these little guys are still alive. I have to work a lot of crushed granite into my hard clay soil to keep them well-drained and happy enough to return each spring.)



Peach abutilon (I have four different abutilons and I can count on blooms almost year



round from each one.)



Mexican honeysuckle

Also blooming (but not pictured): autumn sage, lion's tale, rosemary, phlox, pincushion flower, spring bouquet viburnum, potato vine, purple oxalis, bulbine, shrimp plant, indigo spires

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Last-minute Valentine's Day gift ideas for the beloved gardener in your life

By Renee Studebaker | Friday, February 13, 2009, 05:18 PM

It happens to the best of us — good intentions get swallowed up by the demands of a busy week, and the next thing you know it's Valentine's Day and you haven't got a thing to give to your sweetie. Not to worry. Valentine's Day isn't over till it's over. And most stores are open until 5 or 6 on Saturday. So take a deep breath and consider a few last minute options for the gardener you love:

Seeds of Love (Cost: About \$10. Where to find: Central Market, Wheatsville Co-Op, Callahans, or your favorite nursery) — Buy several packets of flower seeds and bundle them together with a red ribbon. Write a short romantic note on a small square of paper — something about how you want to plant the seeds of a long and happy life together. Or maybe suggest that you and your sweetheart use the seeds to sow a love garden. Poke a hole in your love note and attach it to one end of the ribbon. Choose flowers with passionate names like Love Lies Bleeding, Love in a Mist, Passionflower, Braveheart, or Adonis. (Make sure that whatever you choose for your love garden is a good fit for our growing zone, 8a or 8b; most local stores and nurseries stock only seeds that will do ok in our area, but double check if you're not familiar with the flower).

A Rose Bush that Blooms Again and Again — and Again. (Cost: about \$15 to \$40, depending on size. Where to find it: most local nurseries and big garden retail stores) — Who would dare turn down a dozen fresh cut roses for Valentine's Day? No one I know. But for something a little different, why not give your significant other the whole rose bush instead? The Knock Out rose is easy to grow, resistant to disease, and blooms almost year round. Many of Austin's garden bloggers have been raving about this rose for years. (Check these posts on [Digging](#) and [Transplantable Rose](#)). I've resisted planting roses because I think of them as being too fussy and demanding. Also, I usually concentrate my gardening energies on plants that either feed me or feed the wildlife. But all the gorgeous Knock Outs I've seen and the raves I've read about how carefree they are have convinced me that I should try at least one. Joe, are you reading this? Is anyone who knows Joe reading this? Let me repeat. I would love to have a Knock Out rose bush. A red one. Not pink.

A Good Book About Native Plants (Cost: about \$30. Where to find it: most local bookstores) — How could a plant book possibly be romantic, you might wonder. Well,

here's how this gift works for Valentine's Day: First, you pick out a book that your true love doesn't already have. One possibility: The recently released "Remarkable Plants of Texas: Uncommon Accounts of our Uncommon Natives," by local naturalist and free-lance writer Matt Turner. This is a fascinating book that the average Austin garden geek is sure to enjoy. Lots of odd little facts and bits of folklore about dozens of familiar natives. (For example: the roots of the trouser-snagging greenbriar vine (*Smilax* spp.) can be harvested, mashed and turned into an edible flour or meal, and the Cherokee and Choctaw were two of the Native American tribes known to use this bramble plant for food.) Next, you write a little love note on a card and place it inside the book. Say something like: "My dearest xxx, some weekend soon, let's plan a getaway to a bed and breakfast in the Hill Country. Just you and me. We'll have a simple dinner under a starlit sky. In the morning, we'll make love on a blanket in the woods. And finally, in the afternoon, we'll find a cozy spot for napping and reading (and that's why I'm giving you this book.)"

One more thing. If you really love your gardener, you'll offer to take a walk with him or her during your getaway weekend so the two of you can try to spot some of the plants mentioned in the book.

Gardening 101: Tomato seedlings seem happy in their little recycled coffee cup pots

By [Renee Studebaker](#) | Thursday, February 5, 2009, 05:24 PM



Is it just me, or do these cherokee purple seedlings look like singers in a choir? Limbs reaching, faces turned toward the light. Ok, maybe a stretch.

But it's not a stretch to say that every time I look at how healthy and happy these little guys are, I feel like singing. (Not to worry though, I'm not planning to add audio to this post).

In an earlier [Gardening 101](#), I described the basics for starting vegetables indoors from seeds. And at the time, I wrote that I would revisit the topic when I got my planting station up and running. So here it is:



Here's what you're looking at in the above photo: A vintage kitchen cart from a junk store; 2 shop lights with 40 watt incandescent bulbs for heat; 1 fluorescent shop light for light without heat attached to a lightweight chain for raising and lowering; two cups with seedlings situated about 2 inches under the fluorescent light; a cookie sheet covered with sheet of wax paper; sawed off paper coffee cups full of moist seed starting mix; a heating pad under the cookie sheet set on low.

Soon, I plan to upgrade my setup to include a seed heating mat. It's a safer and more efficient heating method. With a seed heating mat, I won't need the extra warmth of the 40 watt bulbs.

Here's a closeup of the cups that contain freshly planted tomato seeds, including cherokee purple, beefsteak, yellow pear, and brandywine. I'm expecting them to start sprouting any day now. (The singing purple cherokee seedlings were test cases to make sure my setup had adequate heat for germinating and light for putting on new growth.)



Are you starting seeds for your spring garden? Let me know how it's going.

Renee Studebaker photos/American-Statesman

Gardening 101: A recipe for growing your own gourmet salad

By [Renee Studebaker](#) | Sunday, February 1, 2009, 12:16 PM

A co-worker has informed me that my quick and easy [bed for growing vegetables](#) doesn't sound quick or easy to her.

Thanks for the feedback, K. I think you may be right. I'm a pretty hardcore DIY-er when it comes to garden projects, so to me, a no-dig layered bed seems fairly simple and not too back-wrenching compared to a lot of other tough "oh my gawd I can't believe I'm doing this" garden projects I've tackled over the years.

So, K., this post is for you. Let me know if it's quick and easy enough.



Gourmet Salad Container Garden

1 galvanized metal tub (10.5 gallon)

1 bag good quality organic garden soil

Small rocks and/or broken pottery pieces (enough to fill a standard size bucket halfway)

2 or 3 big handfuls of dead leaves

1 Swiss chard transplant

3 spinach transplants

1 raddichio transplant

2 buttercrunch lettuce transplants

1 fennel transplant (a variety that produces a bulb)

6-8 onion transplants

1 red leaf lettuce transplant

1 red pac choi transplant

12 seeds from a packet of French Breakfast radishes

Mulch (about a bucket full of pine needles, crushed dead leaves, or shredded cedar)

Liquid seaweed

Liquid fish emulsion



Poke a bunch of holes in the bottom of the tub. A nail and hammer will do the job. Or even better, a punch and a hammer. Spread rocks evenly on bottom of tub. Cover with leaves. Pour in bag of soil (leave a couple of inches at top for a layer of mulch).



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Remove the fennel plant from its plastic pot and, using your hands or a trowel, make a hole (about the same width and depth as the pot it came out of) in the tub of soil about 2 or 3 inches from the inside edge of the tub. Set the plant gently in the hole. Do the same thing with each plant, leaving a few inches of space between each plant. Save some space in the front for your radish seeds. Drop seeds on top of the soil and cover lightly with 1/4-1/2 inch of additional soil. (The French Breakfast radishes, a fast-maturing heat tolerant variety, will be ready to pull and slice in your salad in about 25 days.) Using a pencil or thin stick, poke holes about 1 to 1 1/2 inches deep to plant onions. (Leave the green tops of the onions sticking out above the soil)

Carefully place small amounts of mulch between plants. Leave a 1-inch ring of unmulched space around each plant. Water gently with diluted liquid seaweed (1 tablespoon to a gallon of water). Set your tub in a spot that gets at least 6 hours of direct sun. Check your tub every day or so to make sure it isn't drying out. Keep it evenly moist but not soggy. After a week or so, when the plants are settled into their new home and starting to put on new growth, feed them with a teaspoon of liquid fish emulsion and a teaspoon of liquid seaweed mixed into your watering can. Thereafter, continue adding a teaspoon of liquid seaweed to your watering can once a week.

To harvest, use scissors to trim leaves off of each plant as you need them. Spinach and lettuce will continue to produce new leaves until the weather warms up; then they will start to **bolt** and produce seed instead of leaves. That's when it's time to harvest the last leaves and pull the plants and toss them into your compost pile.

When you harvest leaves from your container plants, be careful not to cut the stems too close to the base of the plants — leave a little bit of stem sticking up. This trimming technique is called **"cut and come again."**

As chard matures, it develops a bulbous base that is drought and heat resistant, so it will continue to produce new leaves through spring and often well into summer. (Cook

chard exactly as you would spinach. It's tasty lightly sauteed in a bit of olive oil and chopped garlic.)

While you're waiting for your fennel bulb to mature, pinch a few leaves now and then to add a mild anise flavor to homemade vinaigrettes, baked fish, or breads. Don't be surprised if you notice a brightly colored caterpillar munching on your fennel. It's the favorite food of the swallowtail, so even if you don't like the taste of fennel, planting at least one is an easy way to attract these beautiful butterflies to your yard.

Notes: Approximate cost for this container garden: \$60, including container, plants, and soil. I bought a new tub for this project at Zinger hardware store for about \$25. You can also find them at other hardware stores, or at the big box stores. (And sometimes you can find good used metal tubs at garage sales or junk shops; see note below)

I bought all the vegetable plants at Shoal Creek Nursery, which has a really big selection of vegetable transplants in stock right now. You should be able to find a good assortment of vegetable transplants at just about any nursery you visit because everyone is stocking up for the busy spring season.

The soil I used is Hill Country mix from The Natural Gardener. I buy it by the 1/2-yard because I use a lot of it when I'm building new beds, and it's cheaper that way. However, one bag of the Natural Gardener's Lady Bug Hill Country soil, which usually costs around \$8.50, would be enough for this container project. You can find it at most locally owned nurseries around town, and also at Callihan's.

With a little more time, effort and patience, you can create a fine container garden for a lot less money than I spent on the gourmet salad project. In my backyard, I have a galvanized metal tub overflowing with oregano. I paid \$5 for the tub at a garage sale and \$1.99 for the one oregano plant that eventually (in about 2 years) took over the pot. The soil in the tub is a mix of homemade compost and top soil piled on top of dead leaves.

Renee Studebaker photos/American-Statesman

Gardening 101: Sowing seeds in the winter garden

By **Renee Studebaker** | Sunday, January 25, 2009, 06:05 PM



The challenges of gardening in Austin provide lots of fodder for grumpy garden bloggers — hard clay soil or hard rocky soil (both alkaline), scorching hot summers with high humidity, wimpy winters that don't kill the bugs, marauding critters, endless drought followed by endless flooding, and so on.

But here's something I'll never complain about — I can walk out to my garden right now, in late January, and choose from Swiss chard (in the photo above), lettuce, radishes, spinach, kohlrabi, mustard greens, and baby bok choy for my next meal. And after I've picked what I want, because our winters are so mild I can turn around and plant more, and keep the homegrown goodies comin' right into early spring, when it's time to plant summer crops.

So, if you're ready to sow seeds in your winter garden, here are some tips to help you get started:

— Prepare the soil. To have a successful vegetable garden in the Austin area, you pretty much have to resign yourself to digging in tons of organic matter before each

planting season, or building a raised bed of fertile soil that you've hauled in from somewhere else. (The raised bed will still require periodic amendments to keep it fertile because most vegetables are heavy feeders). If you haven't prepared your soil yet, refer to my previous [101 post](#) on how to build a vegetable bed.

— For best results, follow the [Vegetable Garden Planting Guide](#) posted by the Texas AgriLife Extension office. When you consult this guide, you'll find that right now is a great time to direct sow seeds for spinach, Swiss chard, lettuce, carrots, mustard greens, snap and snow peas, shallots, beets and parsley. (If you want to get more into the hows and whys of seed germination, check out this helpful guide [on optimum soil temperatures for successful germination.](#))

— Seeds germinate best in fine-textured soil that contains [humus](#) (the stuff that's left after organic matter has decayed) If you're a hardcore DIY-er, try topping your planting row or square with a 1-inch layer of 1 part sifted compost, 1 part sifted leaf mold and 2 parts sifted top soil. You can build your own [sifting device out of scrap lumber and hardware cloth](#), or purchase one for around \$20.

If the idea of scrap lumber and soil sifting makes you groan, you can buy a bag of Back to Nature fine cotton bur compost with peat and humus (or something comparable) and mix it with a good bagged topsoil in equal amounts. Make narrow, shallow (1x1 inch) trenches in your garden soil and then fill with compost/topsoil mixture. Plant your seeds in the trench.

OR ... if your vegetable bed is already full of good fertile soil that's soft and crumbly from decayed organic matter, you can get a pretty good germination rate by just sprinkling seeds on the surface of your bed and covering them lightly with soil; or for larger seeds, pushing them gently into the soil to the recommended depth.)

— Follow instructions on the outside (and inside) of seed packages for recommended seed depths and spacing. When in doubt, plant shallower.

— After planting, water your seeds gently with a weak solution of liquid seaweed.

— Check your seed bed regularly to make sure the soil stays moist, but not soggy, until the seeds sprout.

— When your seedlings are about two inches tall, thin according to the instructions on your seed packet.

— When your plants are about 3 inches tall, mulch with at least an inch of chopped leaves, pine needles or straw.

— Plant seeds in small batches, staggered a couple of weeks apart, so you don't have to harvest and eat everything all at once.

— Try this: Designate one or more small areas in your garden as a baby leaf lettuce bed. Plant seeds in a 1X2 foot rectangle or a circle (or some other shape if you're feeling creative). Don't thin the seedlings. When the lettuce plants are about 4 or 5 inches tall, harvest baby leaves for salads by trimming the tops of the plants with scissors or garden shears, leaving the roots and about an inch of stem on each plant. Water the little lettuce stumps with a weak solution of liquid seaweed and liquid fish emulsion. In a few weeks, you can harvest another round of baby leaves off the same plants. You can use this same trimming technique for baby spinach leaves.

Here's a photo of one of my spinach patches, just before I trimmed the tops off:



Renee Studebaker photos/American-Statesman

Garden Bloggers Bloom Day post. Finally. A day late

By [Renee Studebaker](#) | Friday, January 16, 2009, 10:36 PM

I rushed out to the garden early Thursday morning and was pleased to find quite a few blooms. More than expected, especially considering IT'S JANUARY and we've been IN A SEVERE DROUGHT for the past year.

That's one of the things I love about Garden Bloggers Bloom Day, created by [Carol of May Dreams Gardens](#). On (or close to) the 15th of the month, I have a reason to go out and look for the good things in my garden, the things worth taking pictures of and

sharing with others. The plants that have died (or the ones that wish they were dead) — well, I don't take pictures of them.

So, a day late (some weeks are just too busy!), here are some of the blooms I found in my garden for Bloom Day January, 2009:

I'm guessing this aloe bloom managed to survive the recent cold snap because he's sheltered by a potato vine.



I love these little pink phlox blooms. I'm surprised they didn't get zapped by the freeze. Could be that this bed, which is south of the shed, has its own little micro-climate.



Another bloom I'm surprised to see this time of year — Indigo spires. This bed isn't protected from the north wind, but apparently the cold nights haven't been cold enough



to take it down.

This isn't a bloom, but to me, it's just as welcome. I was afraid the loquat trees wouldn't be able to set fruit because of the freezing nights we had in November and December.

I've got five loquat trees, and three of them are now loaded with baby fruits. I've got my



fingers crossed ...

I probably shouldn't post another bloom from this little evergreen mallow (known as a tree mallow), because I just posted one last month. But I couldn't resist. At least this is a different bloom — although it is on the same plant. I'm loving this mallow so much that I recently bought a second one (at Barton Springs Nursery).



This Meyer lemon is in a container parked in a back room. It is covered top to bottom in blooms — I bet it was dosed with some kind of high-powered fertilizer before I bought it last week. I plan to set it out this weekend in a protected place in my yard. It's my first citrus tree to chance in the ground. I'm so looking forward to having my own

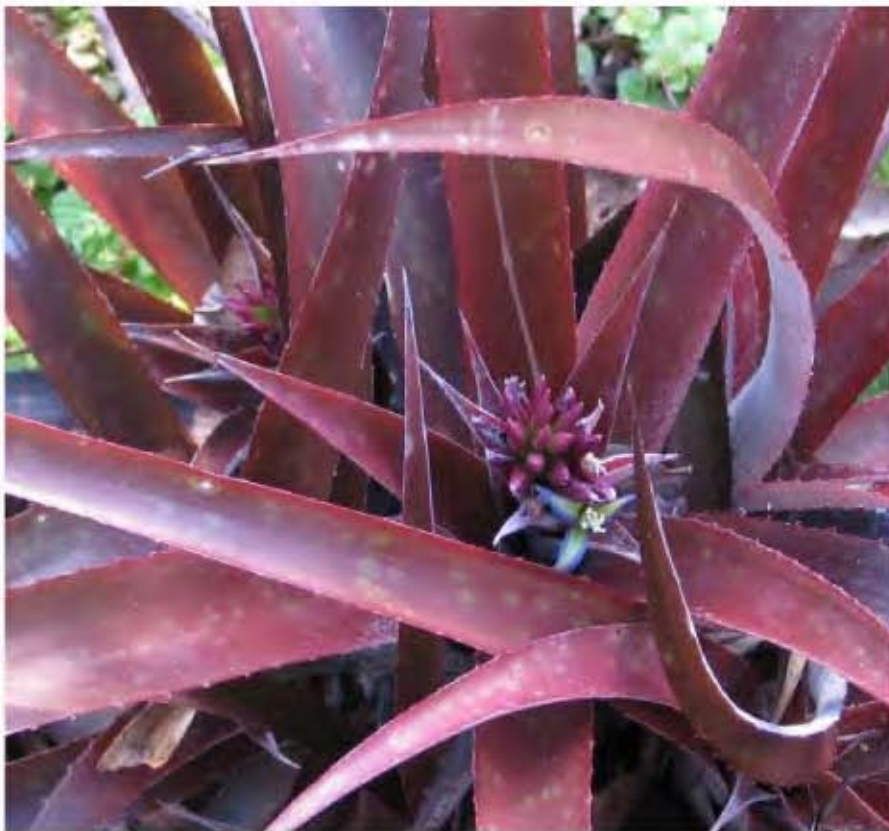
yummy

Meyers'

lemons!



This plant was an impulse buy last year at the Natural Gardener. It's drought tolerant, and will take cold temps down to 20. It will also tolerate high heat and part shade. All that I remember, but what I can't remember is the plant's name. Do you know this plant? So far I'm liking it a lot.



I posted a photo recently of the Marilyn's Choice abutilon in bloom. Here's another abutilon I'm also enjoying this winter.



And finally, winter vegetables are thriving in my garden right now — I'm harvesting kohlrabi, mustard greens, fennel, lettuces and baby bok choi. Another edible I've got high hopes for is just now blooming — the sugar snap pea.



Note to gardeners in the midwest and the north: I wish I could give you a few days of mild sunny winter weather in exchange for a few days of snow.

Happy Bloom Day!

Renee Studebaker photos/American-Statesman

Squirrel tacos anyone?

By **Renee Studebaker** | Tuesday, January 13, 2009, 09:27 PM



You've probably heard that squirrel meat is all the rage in Great Britain. (In case you haven't, check out the New York Times [story](#). If I were a gray squirrel living in the UK, I'd be looking for a way to high-tail it to the States, to someplace like Austin, where I could be safe and live an easy carefree life — racing around tree trunks, stealing birdseed and homegrown tomatoes, and chewing holes in attics.

In Austin, there would be no need to worry about hunters or chefs tracking me down and turning me into a pate or [a fricassee](#). Am I right?

Well, depends.

Austin is home to a lot of committed vegetarians and vegans. And a lot of animal lovers who, if forced to choose, would probably cook and eat an old shoe before they'd consider cooking and eating a cute little squirrel.

On the other hand (foot? paw?), by many accounts, squirrel meat is quite tasty (think dark meat chicken). And if you're a socially-conscious meat-eater, you can't get much more local or free-range than a squirrel. And hey, they're sustainable, too.

Should Austin squirrels be worried? Could critter cuisine catch on here? We certainly have plenty of squirrels in town. I emailed American-Statesman outdoors writer Mike Leggett, to see what he had to say on the subject. According to Leggett, some Austinites are not at all squeamish about hunting and eating squirrels.

"I hunt them every year," he says. "They're our New Year's Day accompaniment to cabbage and black-eyed peas. I've eaten them since I was a baby. And they're actually quite good for you — low cholesterol and fat, no parasites. Tastes closest to chicken thigh, though I don't like that comparison. It tastes like squirrel. "

(Ok, before I go any further, it's true confession time. I've eaten squirrel. Several times. During my early childhood visits to my grandparents' farm in the Piney Woods of Southwest Arkansas, where it was considered a seasonal treat. From what I can remember, it was pretty good. Haven't eaten it since then. Now on with the story.)

I've always heard that fox squirrels (the kind we have running around in Central Austin) aren't as tasty as the gray squirrels in the woods of Arkansas and East Texas. So I asked Leggett about that:

"Fox squirrels, except the young ones, are usually tougher and harder to eat," says Leggett. "But old gray squirrels, or cat squirrels as we call them, are just as tough. The pressure cooker takes care of that. Kind of forces moisture into the meat. Pull it off the bones and you can't tell the difference."

Fox squirrels in Central Austin would be good to eat, Leggett says, as long as they're cooked right. "I know people who have pellet rifles who are shooting those squirrels in their yards and eating them now."

Well, I guess that's one way to save on the grocery bill. But before you go running outside with a pellet gun or a trap, be warned: It's a violation of game law. I talked to a couple of guys from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to get the lowdown and the law on squirrels:

"Air guns and pellet guns are illegal for game animals and game birds," says Chris Lena, a spokesman for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Trapping game animals and game birds is also prohibited, he says. If you want to hunt squirrel, you must have a valid hunting license, landowner permission, and use a legal firearm, and be outside the city limits. You might also need a hunter education certification.

What if you cornered a squirrel in your yard because he was stealing all your tomatoes. Could you legally relocate him to your kitchen? Vernon Bevill, Program Director for Small Game and Habitat Assessment, says, "Moving a problem critter from one place to another is not recommended."

" The only way you could legally relocate the squirrel," says Lena, "would be to know of a private landowner who would give you permission to release the squirrel onto their property, preferably in the country. It is illegal to release a squirrel or nuisance animal on city, county, state or federal property."

(For more info on Texas game laws and regulations, visit the [Texas Department of Wildlife](#).)

All that said, both Lena and Bevill agree with Leggett that squirrels are good eatin.' If you want to decide for yourself, here are few of Leggett's favorite squirrel recipes:

— Squirrel and dumplings: Just like chicken and dumplings, pressure cook the squirrel, take off bone, use broth and add dumplings.

—Smothered squirrel: Mother's favorite. Brown squirrels, put into pressure cooker with onion and a little water, pressure cook for tenderness for 15 minutes and it makes its own gravy. Cook in the oven for several hours if you don't have a pressure cooker.

— Squirrel mulligan: Potatoes, whole kernel corn, onion and lots of black pepper. Again, pressure cooking is best because it's fast and tenderizes the squirrel. Pressure cook the squirrel and onion for 15 minutes. Release steam, add cubed potatoes. Then 3 to 5 minutes of pressure, or low heat for 15-20 minutes, and you're done. ("I cooked this for some city kids a few days after Jan. 1 and they loved it," says Leggett. "And they knew what they were eating.")

"(Squirrel) is great food that people overlook," says Leggett. "I hear them called tree rats and such and that (makes me mad) because they're so much more than that. Smart animals, too."

Gardening 101: Starting vegetable seeds indoors

By [Renee Studebaker](#) | Saturday, January 10, 2009, 09:39 AM

New seeds for 2009 are starting to show up in Austin area nurseries and garden stores. If you want to try your hand at growing tomatoes (or other warm weather crops) from seed, now's the time to choose your varieties and set up a small growing station in your home so you can grow healthy transplants for spring planting in the garden.

For best results in your vegetable garden, follow a recommended sowing and transplanting schedule. The [Texas Agrilife Extension](#) has sowing and planting charts that tell you when it's best to sow seeds and plant transplants in our area. For example, for tomatoes, you should plan to sow your seeds indoors in late January, six to eight weeks before it's time to transplant outdoors in early to mid March.

There are several approaches you can take to start your own seeds, and some of them cost more than others. Try this simple approach first. If you really get into it, you can always go out and buy more seed starting and growing equipment later.

— Choose about a dozen small containers, similar in size. Yogurt or cottage cheese containers work well. Even better are leftover paper cups from your favorite coffee house (I don't know about you, but I always have several latte cups rolling around the floor of my truck). Nice thing about the paper cups — after you set out your transplants you can compost the cups. Slice the cup in half with a really sharp knife so it's not so tall. Poke a few drainage holes in the bottom of each container.

— Buy a package of organic seed starting mix at your local nursery or garden store. Most mixes include some combination of peat moss, perlite, vermiculite, sand and compost. (Don't use potting soil — it's too heavy) Thoroughly moisten a portion of the starting mix in a bowl. Fill each container with moistened starting mix, and set your containers close together on a tray or a cookie sheet.

— Set up your growing area: You'll need a small table or 2-shelf kitchen cart, a fluorescent shop light that you can hang over your seedlings, and a seed growing mat. (A mat is not absolutely necessary, but it works great for seeds that need warm soil to germinate. You can sometimes get enough warmth to germinate your seeds by setting them on top of your fridge. Or huddle your seed pots under a lamp with an incandescent bulb, which puts off a surprising amount of heat.)

—Read the instructions on the seed packet. (I know, I know, reading instructions is no fun, but you'll save yourself grief later if you do, because different plants have different germination requirements)

—Plant your seeds. Press three or four seeds into each pot and cover lightly with moistened seed-starting mix. (When in doubt, shallower planting of seeds is better than deeper.)

— After your potted seeds germinate, remove them from the heat source and place them under the shop light (about two inches from the light). Turn off the light before you go to bed at night, and turn it back on first thing in the morning. Make sure to water your little plants often enough that they stay a little moist, but not soggy. Don't let them stand in water. And don't use icy cold water; room temp water is best. (Even better is rainwater).

— After your plants put on a couple of leaves, start feeding them every now and then with a tiny bit of liquid seaweed and fish emulsion mixed into your watering can. (If your seed-starting mix already contains fertilizer, just use the seaweed and omit the fish emulsion.)

— When your seedlings are about an inch tall, thin them to one plant per pot. The easiest way to do this is to use tiny scissors to snip the tops off at the soil line.

— Keep your seedlings cool. Most seedlings grow better if they're kept in a cool part of your home. A daytime temp of 60-70 degrees is ideal; at night 50-60 degrees is good. Plants grown in warmer environments grow a little faster but often become spindly. Your goal is to grow stocky little seedlings that are strong and healthy enough to withstand the shock of being transplanted into your garden in early spring.

— Harden your seedlings. When it's about time to transplant your seedlings outdoors, set aside about five or six days to harden them first. Seedlings that have been living the good life in your home under your constant care need to be gradually introduced to direct sun, wind, temperature fluctuations, etc. First, set your seedlings outside in a location where they get bright, but indirect light for an hour or two in the morning, and then bring them back inside. Do that for a day or two. Then, leave them outside for about five or six hours in that same spot with indirect sunlight. On the next day, give them one hour of direct morning sunlight, then move them to the indirect light area for the rest of the day. Finally, leave them outside in an area where they get a couple hours of direct morning sun and afternoon shade for a couple of days. After that they're ready to plant. The ideal planting day is partly cloudy. A hot, sunny day might cook your little transplants.

As soon as I get my seed planting station set up (hopefully later this week), I'll add a couple of photos to this post.

Also, in the next day or so, look for a Gardening 101 on seeds you can plant right now in the garden — including lettuce, spinach and swiss chard.

Happy gardening!

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Happy gardening!

Got cabbage? Try this Asian chopped salad

By **Renee Studebaker** | Sunday, January 4, 2009, 05:50 PM



I hadn't planned to buy cabbage. But when the farmer hollered out "How about THIS cabbage?" I turned to look. When he said, "How about it for \$2," I stopped. It was the finest cabbage I'd ever seen. And it weighed almost 7 lbs! How could I resist?

(It was almost closing time at the downtown Austin Farmers' Market, and farmers were starting to pack up. I'm guessing this farmer was lowering his prices because he didn't feel like hauling those heavy cabbages back home again.)

Well, anyway, that's why I decided to make a chopped salad today. Also, it was a good way to use up the rest of the radishes, cauliflower and kohlrabi from last week's farmers market visit. If I'd had some celery, I would have added that, too. But I digress. Here's the recipe. (These amounts are estimates, so taste as you go and adjust to your liking)

Asian Chopped Salad with Peanut Sesame Dressing

Salad

2 cups chopped cabbage

1/2 cup coarsely chopped cauliflower

4 green onions, chopped (white and green parts)

3-4 red radishes, halved and sliced thin

1 kohlrabi, peeled, quartered and sliced thin

1 large carrot cut into small curls (use a vegetable peeler)

1/2 cup sunflower sprouts

Dressing:

1/4 cup peanutbutter (smooth or crunchy)

1/4 cup rice vinegar

1/8 cup white wine vinegar

1 tablespoon amber agave syrup

1 clove garlic, smashed and chopped fine

3 tablespoons chopped cilantro

1/4 teaspoon ginger, chopped fine

1 serrano pepper, chopped fine (red is best, but green is fine)

2 tablespoons water

3 tablespoons tamari

1-2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil

3 tablespoons sesame seeds, toasted (in dry skillet over medium heat; stir often)

Make dressing first and set aside so flavors can mellow and meld while you make the salad.

Mix all dressing ingredients together except sesame seed. Press spoon against side of mixing bowl to better blend the ingredients (Or you can throw everything into a processor (except cilantro).

Combine all salad ingredients in salad bowl. Pour half the dressing into salad and toss. Top salad with toasted sesame seeds and garnish with a few sprigs of cilantro. Pass extra dressing at the table.

Note: If dressing seems too thick, add a little more tamari or water.

Variations: Garnish finished salad with tangerine or orange slices (peeled). Use daikon instead of red radishes. Substitute chopped red cabbage for cauliflower or kohlrabi. Top with chopped dry roasted peanuts instead of sesame seeds. Top salad with cubed leftover chicken or baked tofu. Instead of salad, serve the dressing on soba noodles and top with toasted sesame seeds and chopped green onions.

Renee Studebaker photo/American-Statesman

Gardening 101: A no-dig bed for growing vegetables

By Renee Studebaker | Friday, January 2, 2009, 08:44 PM

I love gardening in my no-dig layered beds. Of all the gardening methods I've tried in my twenty something years of living and gardening in Austin, it's the one that grows the most, best-tasting vegetables with the least amount of labor.

Some gardeners always [double-dig](#). Others take the [square-foot](#) approach. And still others prefer tilling. While I definitely see the merits of the double-digging and square-foot gardening methods, I can say with certainty that I will never again use a tiller.

So, if you're ready to take the plunge and start growing some of your food in your own backyard (or front yard for that matter), try this recipe:

— Choose an area in your yard that gets at about 6 hours of direct sunlight. If you're a newbie, start small. A 2 ft. X 5 ft. bed is big enough. It doesn't matter if the spot is covered in weeds or lawn grass. Map out a shape you like, rectangle, circle, polygon, whatever. Make it narrow enough that you can reach across it, or if you want a wider plot, plan to leave a walking path down the middle.

— Lay down sheets of newspaper (6-8 pages deep, B&W pages only) or plain cardboard (single layer, overlapping edges). Wet down the paper or cardboard with the water hose. (If you have a thick lawn of bermuda grass, which can be hard to smother, use thick pieces of overlapping cardboard instead of newspaper)

— Pile dead leaves (or a mix of leaves, straw and grass clippings) 5-6 inches thick on top of the paper. Spray with water until thoroughly damp.

— Spread about 2 inches of coarse cotton bur compost (or other high quality compost) onto the leaves. (Back to Nature makes a great coarse cotton bur compost)

— Spread a thin layer of decomposed granite on top of the compost. (Just toss a few shovelfuls over the top of the compost, 1/4 inch or less). The granite provides minerals your plants will need to be healthy and productive. (You can buy it by the bag at most nurseries, or bag it yourself at The Natural Gardener or Austin Custom Stone for a price break.)

— Spread a thin layer (less than 1/4 inch) of well composted manure. (I like to use composted chicken manure made by Back to Nature, available at Barton Springs Nursery)

— Top with 2 inches of good quality garden soil. (I usually use Natural Gardener's Hill Country Garden Soil)

— Spread 1-2 inches of mulch on top of the bed. (I like to use pine needles — available in bales from The Natural Gardener — but you can also use more leaves, straw, or chipped cedar)

— Water thoroughly, and let the bed sit for at least a week (or up to 2 months if possible) before planting. The longer it sits, the better. As the organic materials break down, with the help of earthworms and micro-organisms, your bed will shrink a little in size and become increasingly more fertile. If you plant right after you build the bed, your plants may need a little supplemental feeding for the first few weeks. Give them a boost at planting time by watering with a weak solution of liquid seaweed mixed with compost tea (or fish emulsion).

This layering method is similar to [sheet composting](#), which is similar to [Lasagna gardening](#), which is similar to the [Ruth Stout method](#).

No matter what you call it, a raised, layered bed works for planting seeds or starter plants. To plant seeds, drop seeds on top of the soil, spaced according to packet directions. Cover them with a thin layer of extra fine garden soil (check seed packet for recommended seed depth). Water gently with weak solution of liquid seaweed; take care not to uncover or dislodge seeds. Check every day or so to make sure soil remains moist (but not soggy) until seeds sprout. **Note:** In the areas of your bed where you're planting seeds, hold off on mulch until your plants are at least a few inches tall.

To plant starter plants, open up a small hole in your layered bed just slightly wider than the root ball of the plant. Toss a handful of garden soil into the hole and mix it around lightly with your fingers before placing the plant in the hole. Once it's in, pull some of the surrounding soil around your plant so it's snug in the hole. Water immediately with a weak solution of liquid seaweed and compost tea (or fish emulsion). Once a week thereafter, spray plants with a weak solution of liquid seaweed.

You can edge your bed with limestone bricks, stacked flagstones, cedar boards, or whatever you like. Just don't use treated wood, which might leave chemical residues in your soil.

Gardening 101: A series of tips and how-tos

By Renee Studebaker | Saturday, December 27, 2008, 08:49 AM

I have received a number of requests for more blog posts geared to beginning gardeners. So today, I'm creating a special category called Gardening 101. Each week I'll post a short how-to or a seasonal tip. Topics will include soil, perennials (native and adapted), vegetables, herbs, design basics, wildlife habitats, trees, shrubs and bugs (the good ones and the not-so-good ones).

If you'd like help with a particular garden problem, just leave me a comment or e-mail me at rstudebaker@statesman.com. I may not be able to get to your request right away, but I'll add it to my list of topics to cover in the 101 series.

Today's tip is an easy one: Dead leaves are your friends. Do not blow them away with a noisy, air-polluting machine.

Leaves, when mixed with other yard clippings, a little dirt and vegetables scraps, make great compost. Homemade compost is like gold to organic gardeners. It feeds earthworms and other tiny beneficial soil critters and microbes. The happier all the tiny critters and microbes are, the healthier the soil will be. Plants grown in healthy soil full of happy well-fed critters are more resistant to diseases and pests. Healthy soil is the key to a successful organic garden, whether you're growing herbs and flowers or vegetables.

If you don't already have a compost pile, use your leaves to get one started. If you don't have a lot of leaves, ask your neighbors if you can have theirs. (Several of my non-gardening neighbors are happy to hand over their bags of leaves.)

There are several different approaches you can take to make your own compost, and I'll talk about all of them in a later post. For now, just to get something started, pile up your leaves (whole or mulched) in an out of the way corner of your yard. Top the pile

with a few shovelfuls of dirt from your yard or a bit of composted manure (you can buy composted turkey or chicken manure at most of Austin's nurseries.) Next, water the pile, enough to moisten the leaves and the dirt but not so much that it gets soggy.

Okay, that's it for today. Relax and have another slice of Aunt Martha's pumpkin bread.

Good bye, tomatoes (sigh)

By [Renee Studebaker](#) | Monday, December 22, 2008, 10:23 AM

The long good-bye is over. I picked all the green tomatoes last night and let the plants freeze.



It wasn't an easy decision. I hate being without homegrown tomatoes. Have you ever played the 10-foods-you'd-want-if-you-were-stranded-on-a-desert-island game? Homegrown tomatoes are at the top of my list. (A few other items from my list: red wine, olive oil, Parmigiano Reggiano, spinach, eggs, dark chocolate.)

But back to the tomato plants... I decided to let them go for a couple of reasons: The bed they were growing in needs a few months of downtime before spring planting, and I was getting tired of wrapping and unwrapping them every time there was a chance of frost. And besides, homegrown tomatoes in January is just weird. I'm a compulsive gardener, but not that compulsive.

Renee Studebaker photo/American-Statesman

Last-minute shoppers, don't forget your green bags

By Renee Studebaker | Saturday, December 20, 2008, 11:15 AM



Before you race out the door for last-minute shopping chores today, grab a few H.E.B. green bags and toss them in the car. Whether you're headed to the liquor store for Aunt Sarah's favorite margarita fixins' or to Home Depot for yet another string of lights, you're going to need bags.

And here's something you may not know about H.E.B.'s 99-cent reusable bags: 5 cents from the sale of each bag goes into a fund that H.E.B. is using to help support local recycling projects. These "Green Bag Grants," totaling \$50,000, were recently distributed to several groups in Austin, including the Austin Discovery School, which plans to use their \$2,000 grant to pay for a rainwater and irrigation system for the school's [Junior Master Gardener](#) program. Discovery School students learn the basics of planning, growing and maintaining vegetable gardens.

Thanks, H.E.B., for helping to support a great program for budding gardeners.

Garden Bloggers' Bloom Day

By Renee Studebaker | Monday, December 15, 2008, 11:20 PM

“Wintry mix” is the forecast for tonight’s weather. Freezing rain, sleet, snow, and so on. And here’s the worst part for gardeners: below freezing temps all night long. Brrrr. Maybe not the best time for me to start participating in the monthly [Garden Bloggers’ Bloom Day](#). Luckily, I managed to photograph a few blooms late yesterday afternoon and early this morning — just ahead of the coldest part of the cold front. Many of these plants won’t be much to look at by this time tomorrow.

Abutilon: (“Marilyn’s Choice.” My choice, too, if I could have only one abutilon)



Yellow tropical milkweed:



Pincushion flower:





Phlox:

:



Shrimp plant



Lavender:

:



Yellow bulbine



Forsythia sage

Loquat: (The little honey bee on these buds didn't move when I poked the branch. I'm guessing the sudden freezing winds of the cold front sent him into shock. Hope he's not dead.)





Plumbago:

Papyrus: (It's doing something here; not sure it's a bloom though.)



Tree mallow: (I love this shrub!)





Potato vine: (Just after sunset)

Salvia: (Several varieties of salvia are blooming, including indigo spires, red velvet autumn sage, and the “Henry Duburg Sage,” below.)



Thanks to [Carol](#) of May Dreams Garden for starting Garden Bloggers' Bloom Day. It's a lovely way to see what's in bloom each month in gardens around the country.

It's beginning to look a lot like tomatoes will last until Christmas

By [Renee Studebaker](#) | Sunday, December 14, 2008, 09:29 PM



These juliet tomatoes are fresh from the front-yard garden. Just picked them today.

Last week when the weather forecasters were predicting a hard freeze along with snow and sleet, I considered picking all the green tomatoes from the front and back yard plants. Glad I didn't, because while the winter storm brought sleet and even (wow!) snow, the temps hovered just above the freezing mark.

So the tomato plants made it another week. But here's something really strange. One of the plants in the front yard bed, a mystery volunteer, has set fruit in the past week. Check it out:



Another cold front is blowing in Monday morning, but a hard freeze is not predicted. We'll see. Maybe I'll have homegrown tomatoes on Christmas day. What a fine present that would be.

(Top photo by Joe Stafford/American-Statesman; bottom photo by Renee Studebaker/American-Statesman)

Winter storm leaves icy trail on vegetable garden

By [Renee Studebaker](#) | Wednesday, December 10, 2008, 11:20 AM



Here's a snow dappled kohlrabi plant. Or maybe the white stuff is sleet. Whatever it is, the kohlrabi doesn't seem to mind.



It's hard to see in this late-night photo shot through bird netting, but this tomato is being pelted by sleet.



A slight accumulation of snow and ice on one of the few remaining leaves on the fig tree.

Wow. What a night!

Pepper and tomatoes still thriving in freaky winter

By **Renee Studebaker** | Tuesday, December 9, 2008, 04:57 PM



I picked these beauties from the yard this morning. Could be my last tomatoes and peppers for the year if the cold front that's blowing in tonight is cold enough. I'm hoping the freezing weather will miss me again. I've still got some big fat green tomatoes on the vine.

My yard is often 2 or 3 degrees warmer than the official Camp Mabry temp, and as much as 5 degrees warmer than the Austin-Bergstrom Airport temp.

National Weather service says there's a slight chance for snow by Wednesday morning in the Austin area. We'll see. I'm ready with sheets and [plankets](#) just in case.

Renee Studebaker photo/American-Statesman

By **Renee Studebaker** | Saturday, December 6, 2008, 09:37 AM

If you're buying a gift for the special gardener in your life (for Christmas or Hanukkah or Kwanzaa or Winter Solstice or Whatever), you've got an easy task ahead of you. There are truck loads of possibilities in every price range (even free).

Following is a working list of gift ideas for gardeners. (As I come across new ideas while I'm out and about, I'll add to the list, so check back every so often to see what's new. Also check out Robin Chotzinoff's great list of gift ideas in today's American-Statesman (on the Life and Arts cover) or at statesman.com/gardening

Satsuma tree — I tasted my first satsuma this week when a co-worker brought in a bag to share. WOW. Sweet, easy to peel, beautiful color. A fruit tree is truly a gift that keeps on giving. These trees are usually a little easier to find in the spring, but

recently, I've seen a few for sale at Breed and Company and Great Outdoors. Big box stores like Lowe's and Home Depot sometimes have them, too. Best to call first. Price range: \$35-\$50. (Another good citrus choice for Austin is a Meyers lemon tree.)

Planket — To keep that satsuma (or other frost tender citrus tree) warm when temps dip below freezing, try this cool new covering created by a local company, Brainchild, Inc. It comes in several different sizes and is available [online](#) or at Home Depot. Price range: \$10-\$25.

Kitchen compost crock — I've been needing one of these for a long time. I collect kitchen scraps in a big stainless steel bowl that sits next to my sink. Not very pretty, but it gets the job done. I'm definitely ready to upgrade to a stainless steel or glass crock. Price range: \$20-\$75. Available online and at most department stores and kitchen stores.

Trimmer — I love Corona's heavy duty trimming and pruning tools. They're a little more expensive than other brands, but they can be resharpened, so if cared for properly, they last almost forever. The forged thinning shear (one of my favorites for light trimming jobs) would make a fine stocking stuffer. Price: Usually around \$25. Available online or at your favorite hardware store or local nursery.

Leaves — Good sustainable gardening requires a ton of these. If your trees don't produce enough to keep the compost pile (and the gardener at your house) happy, consider asking your non-gardening neighbors if you can have their fallen leaves. A few big compostable paper bags of dead leaves will bring a smile to the face of any organic gardener. Make a ribbon out of garden twine or plant ties. Price: Free, unless your neighbors are the enterprising types.

Support a good cause — Help support the good work of The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center by buying a gift from the center's gift shop. How about a Wildflower Center shopping tote? The bright red 17" X 15" Duralite bag folds neatly into a 3.5" X 8" size. Price: \$4.95. Or maybe a 2009 Wildflower wall calendar. Thirteen closeups of North American wildflowers, with generous writing space and text by Wildflower Center staff. Price: \$13.99. Also available at your favorite local book store.

Happy shopping.

Fall heirloom tomatoes growing where my front lawn used to be

By [Renee Studebaker](#) | Tuesday, December 2, 2008, 10:58 AM



Here are a few purple cherokees (and a juliet for scale) I picked from the front yard garden. I'm glad I decided to give the purple cherokees a try — they've become my new favorite. Great taste, productive, and beautiful. And the best part? I'm saving seed so I can grow them again in the spring in the backyard bed.

I don't miss my front lawn one bit. It never produced anything edible, except maybe [grubs](#), which in some parts of the world are considered quite tasty raw or roasted. I've never tasted a grub, but I'm pretty sure it wouldn't stand a chance in a taste test against a homegrown heirloom tomato.

What else can I do with all these winter greens?

By [Renee Studebaker](#) | Saturday, November 29, 2008, 12:47 PM



A friend told me the other day she was growing tired of eating winter greens sauteed in olive oil and garlic and was looking for other simple ways to prepare the swiss chard, collards, and mustard greens that are arriving weekly in her [CSA](#) farm basket.

Sounds like a blog topic to me. So, this is for you D., and for anyone else out there who's staring at a big pile of greens and wondering what to do next.

For assistance, I emailed Carol Ann Sayle of [Boggy Creek Farm](#) to find out how she and her family like to prepare winter greens. She came back with a couple of simple ideas that I'm definitely going to try:

Carol Ann on winter greens: "We love greens, and always have. All are good chopped into bite-sized pieces and added during the final moments to sauteed meat, soups, pasta, etc. We like to wilt the greens (preserving most of the nutrients) by adding them at the last minute so they just barely cook. (As opposed to dumping the greens into boiling water with fat back!)"

"Greens with Meat: Last night, I cooked, in an iron skillet, stove top, over low heat, two of Loncito Cartwright's grass-fed lamb "shoulder steaks" in butter and sea salt combined with thinly sliced, very new (harvested that day) white Kennebec potatoes. Once each side of the steaks and the potatoes was browned, I flipped them over to caramelize the other side. After the meat was cooked to taste and the potatoes were tender, I added chopped baby bok Choi (Mei Qing Choi) and turned them over and over with the potatoes, until the bok Choi leaves were wilted. It was divine. The potatoes and the greens picked up the flavor of the meat. The bok Choi, however, still had crunch in its stems. Just about any greens, especially kale, would be excellent cooked the same way.

“Brussels (Sprouts) Greens Wraps: Grab a bunch of Brussels greens by the stems. Plunge them into simmering water and blanch for 3-4 minutes, until dark green and pliable but not falling apart. Remove from water using tongs and allow to cool on the counter. Cut off the stems and eat them while you work. Lay a leaf on the counter and fill with a couple of tablespoons of preferred stuffing (cooked rice, cooked or raw veggies, cheese, cooked meat, rehydrated dried fruit, etc). Roll up the leaf. The wraps may be eaten at room temperature or reheated in a skillet slicked with olive oil. Other wide leaves, such as collards, or the outer leaves of cabbage may be used as wraps.”

This blog is making me hungry. Thanks, Carol Ann.

If you're looking to buy fresh local greens, Carol Ann and Larry Butler have a good variety to choose from for sale Wednesdays and Saturdays (9 to 1) at their farm stand, including: four kales (Dinosaur, Siberian, White Russian, Red Russian); Mustards (Arugula, Curly Mustard, Rapini/Broc Raab); Collards; Brussels greens (the leaves of Brussels sprouts); broccoli greens (the leaves of the broccoli plant) cauliflower greens; and baby bok choy.

The bunches of greens cost \$3 per bunch, except for arugula, which is \$2.50, and bok choy , which is \$3.50.

Right now in my garden, Swiss chard (green and red varieties) is coming on strong, as well as red and purple mustard greens, baby bok choy and pac choy. Like Carol Ann, I throw greens into all sorts of dishes, but here are a few of my favorites:

White Bean Soup with Swiss Chard and Butternut Squash

2 1/2 cups of dry white beans

1 cup roasted butternut squash (peeled and cubed)

1 sweet onion, chopped

1/2 cup chopped celery

1/4 cup chopped sweet red pepper

Swiss chard, enough to make 1 cup after sauteeing

1/2 cup grated Parmesan reggiano

1 1/2 cups chicken or vegetable broth

Enough water to presoak and cook beans

1-2 teaspoons fresh thyme leaves

2 bay leaves

1/4 teaspoon ground cayenne pepper

Salt and black pepper to taste

1 large clove garlic (or 2 small), smashed and chopped

2-3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

1 teaspoon soy sauce

In a soup pot, cover presoaked beans with water and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low, add broth and cook covered until beans are almost tender.

While beans are cooking, prepare squash and other ingredients as follows: Peel, seed and cube squash. Spread on baking sheet and drizzle with olive oil and salt. Roast in 375 degree oven until tender and lightly browned. When done set aside. In a wok or iron skillet, sautee celery, onion, stems of swiss chard, and red pepper in olive oil until almost tender, then add coarsely chopped chard leaves and garlic and sautee for 3-5 more minutes, or until greens are wilted. Remove from heat and set aside. When beans are almost tender, stir in squash and sauteed vegetables, half of cheese and continue cooking on low heat until beans are soft (if more broth desired, add water). Taste and adjust seasoning if needed. Sprinkle on remaining cheese and serve.

Variations — Add 1/2 cup peeled, cubed, roasted sweet potato. — Add 1 chopped red hot pepper to vegetable sautee if you like your soup spicy.

Crustless Swiss Chard Quiche

Enough coarsely chopped chard to make 3/4 cup after cooking (About 2 cups of tightly packed raw chard is about right)

1/4 sweet red bell pepper

1/4 cup chopped yellow onion

1/2 cup grated parmesano reggiano cheese

2 tablespoons chive cream cheese (I use locally made Full Quiver, available at Wheatsville Co-Op)

1/2 cup grated swiss cheese

5 eggs (fresh from the farm or farmers' market if possible)

1 1/4 cup whole milk

1/2 cup goat's milk (Water Oak Farms is tasty, available at Wheatsville)

1 clove garlic, smashed and chopped

Salt and pepper to taste

Pinch of cayenne pepper

Olive oil for sauteeing

1 teaspoon butter

2 teaspoons whole wheat pastry flour

Heat wok or skillet, drizzle in olive oil and sautee red pepper and onion on medium high heat for a few minutes. Add chard and garlic and cook for a few more minutes, then reduce heat to medium and cook until greens are wilted and stems are tender/crisp. Drain well, then pat and squeeze with towel to absorb any liquids remaining. Set aside. In a mixing bowl, whisk together eggs, milks, cream cheese, salt and pepper. Smear butter on bottom and sides of a 10 inch, deep-dish, glass pie pan and coat lightly and evenly with flour. Sprinkle half of Parmesan cheese evenly in bottom of pie pan. Next, spoon sauteed vegetables evenly on top of cheese. Sprinkle half of Swiss cheese on top of vegetables. Then gently pour in egg mixture. Spread rest of Swiss cheese and Parmesan cheese on top. Bake in 350 degree oven until quiche is firm and lightly browned on top, about 40 minutes.

(Really decadent) Wilted greens with bacon

In an iron skillet, cook 5 or 6 strips of good quality bacon until crisp (I like apple smoked from Pederson's Farm). Remove bacon and place on newspaper or towel to drain. Pour off most of the bacon grease, but keep about a tablespoon or two in the pan to cook the greens. Reheat pan over medium high flame and add coarsely chopped, well washed, mustard greens, collard greens, Swiss chard or a mix, stirring often until greens are wilted, but stem parts are still crisp/tender. (Stand back a bit

because it's going to sizzle and pop.) Turn onto a plate and top with crumbled bacon. Salt and pepper to taste and serve immediately.

Note: To make this dish a little less decadent, cook the greens in half olive oil and half bacon drippings. Or, if you're really being good, all olive oil.

If you've got a favorite winter greens recipe you'd like to share, please email me at rstudebaker@statesman.com. I'll add your recipe to this posting.

Renee Studebaker photo/American-Statesman

Planting it month-to-month

Follow our garden calendar to know
when to prune, seed and weed this year

By Skip Richter

SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN STATESMAN

Make 2009 the year of the garden by following these simple steps. For more gardening advice, visit travis-tx.tamu.edu.

January

Plant bare-root nursery stock, especially roses, pecans and fruit trees, and woody ornamental trees, shrubs and vines.

Plant asparagus and artichoke crowns, onion transplants, broccoli, cabbage, chard, cauliflower, lettuce, arugula, beets, collards, kale, leeks, kohlrabi, carrots, turnips and cool-season peas.

Sow seeds of annual flowers and vegetables indoors for March transplanting to the garden. Petunias, begonias and impatiens should be sown in early January. Warm-temperature plants such as tomatoes, peppers, marigolds and periwinkles should be sown in late January or early February.

Mow fallen leaves so they will decompose into the lawn, or rake and gather to use in future for surface mulch.

Prune oaks and other landscape trees. Seal cuts on oaks immediately with a pruning sealer.

Prune dormant shrubs. Wait to prune spring flowering shrubs such as Texas mountain laurel and azaleas that only bloom once a year, until after they bloom.

Apply dormant oil sprays to plants suffering from a scale infestation.

Prepare soil and beds for planting spring and summer annuals and perennials. Mix in 1 to 2 inches of compost to improve the soil in the beds.

Apply one to two cups of fertilizer per 100 square feet of bed area to established beds of winter flowering annuals, including snapdragon, calendula, viola and pansy.

Move established shrubs and young trees to another location in the landscape while they are dormant.

Check junipers and other narrow-leaf evergreens for bagworm pouches.

February

Plant bare-root woody ornamental plants. Shear back liriope to 3 inches to 4 inches high and cut cast iron plant back to near the ground.

Plant potatoes, asparagus and artichoke crowns, onion transplants, broccoli, cabbage, chard, cauliflower, lettuce, arugula, beets, collards, kale, leeks, kohlrabi, chard, carrots, radish, turnips, and cool season peas.

Prune rose bushes now through early March. Remove dead, dying and weak canes. Leave four to eight healthy branches, and remove approximately one-half of the top growth and height of the plant.

Select and plant container-grown roses to fill bare spots in garden.

Prune roses that continue to bloom throughout the growing season. Delay pruning those that only bloom in spring until after they bloom.

Finish sowing flower and vegetable seeds indoors for planting outside next month. Transplant into small pots when they have their third true leaf (not counting the initial two 'seed leaves').

Begin planting gladiolus bulbs.

Dormant oil spray can still be applied up until a plant's buds begin to emerge.

Fertilize and prune fruit and nut trees.

Sow seeds of spring and summer flowers in properly-prepared flower beds.

Major tree pruning can continue if needed. Fertilize cool-season vegetables.

March

Plant warm-season vegetables, including green beans, corn, tomatoes, peppers.

See **CALENDAR**, back page

April



Now's the time to get your squash in the ground for a summer bounty.

Select caladium tubers. Keep in a warm, dry location until ready to plant. Soil temperature should be at least 70 degrees for best growth.

Plant warm-season vegetables including cantaloupe (muskmelon), okra, Southern peas, sweet potatoes, watermelon, green beans, corn, tomatoes, peppers, summer and winter squash, cucumber, amaranth, Malabar greens and eggplant.

Plant caladiums.

Fertilize lawns after you have mowed the grass (not weeds) twice. Avoid

summer and winter squash, cucumber and eggplant, starting in early to mid-March with the passing of our last average frost date.

Plant warm-season flowers. For limited garden areas, use containers on porch.

Prune evergreen hedges and topiaries to maintain dense foliage.

Prepare beds for planting warm-season flowers and vegetables. Mix in 1 to 2 inches of compost to improve the soil.

Maintain a 2-inch-to-4-inch-deep mulch of bark, leaves or other organic materials around shrubs and trees.

Beware of closeout sales on bare-root trees and shrubs. The chance of survival is low this late in the season. Best bets now are container-grown or balled-and-burlapped plants. Many trees and shrubs are damaged or killed each year by the careless application of weed killers, including those found in mixes of fertilizers and weed killers.

For color, try some of the following annuals as transplants: celosia, coreopsis, cosmos, cleome, marigold, petunias, phlox, plumbago, portulaca, rudbeckia, salvia, sweet alysum, sunflower, yellow bells and zinnias.

Divide existing clumps of fall-blooming perennials, such as chrysanthemums, autumn asters, Mexican marigold-mint, Mexican bush sage and physostegia (obedient plant).

Plant trees and shrubs if they are container grown or balled-and-burlapped.

Fertilize spring blooming shrubs.

Check plants for insect pests, including aphids and caterpillars. The presence of a pest doesn't always warrant a spray.

Prune spring-flowering shrubs soon after flowering. Keep the natural shape of the plant in mind as you prune, and avoid excessive cutting except where necessary to control size.

Fertilize roses with a turf-type fertilizer and water in well. Repeat every four to six weeks.

Remove spent flowers on annuals, trim back excessive growth and apply fertilizer.

Seeds of amaranthus, celosia, cosmos, marigold, portulaca, zinnia, and other warm-season annuals, can be sown directly in the beds. Keep seeded areas moist until seeds germinate.

Start weeding flower gardens. Mulch will discourage weed growth, and make weeds that do come through easier to pull.

May

Repot crowded houseplants. Move them to patio or under a large shade tree for summer.

Plant warm-season vegetables, including cantaloupe (muskmelon), okra, Southern peas, amaranth, Malabar greens, sweet potatoes, watermelon, and winter squash.

Fertilize vegetables and flowering annuals monthly.

Clean flower beds that have cool-season annuals; plant summer flowering annuals.

Mulch flower beds.

Continue to watch for aphids, thrips, red spider mites, caterpillars, white fly, leaf rollers and scale. Master gardeners at the Travis County Extension office can assist in identifying the pest and recommending an appropriate control option.

Complete pruning of spring-blooming shrubs and climbing roses.

Plant caladium bulbs.

Check lawn mower blade. Dull blades cause a brownish discoloration of the stems and leaves shortly after cutting.

Allow foliage of spring-flowering bulbs to mature and yellow before removing.

Pinch back the terminal growth on newly planted an-

nual and perennial plants. This will result in shorter, more compact, well-branched plants with more flowers.

Plant caladium tubers, impatiens, coleus, begonias, and pentas in shady areas.

June

Water lawn and garden thoroughly, preferably in the early morning hours, but not too frequently.

Plant warm-season vegetables.

Container plants and hanging baskets require more frequent watering and fertilizing.

Be on the look out for powdery mildew on crepe myrtle, zinnia, photinia, and euonymus, as well as many other plants. Contact your local extension office for assistance in identifying and controlling this and other diseases.

Harvest fresh vegetables often to insure continual production.

Keep summer weeds and grasses out of garden beds.

There is still time to plant colorful, heat-tolerate summer annuals. Be sure to water transplants as needed until roots become established.

Dig and divide crowded spring bulbs.

Select daylily varieties.

Fertilize roses every four to six weeks. Apply a high-nitrogen fertilizer immediately after a flush of bloom.

Re-blooming salvias, such as Gregg's Sage, should be pruned back periodically.

Fail-blooming perennials, such as Mexican marigold mint (*Tagetes lucida*), chrysanthemums, physostegia, and *Salvia leucantha*, should be sheared lightly during the summer to keep them compact, reducing the need for staking. Complete prior to September.

July

Water lawns and garden when needed, giving a thorough soaking rather than frequent

light sprinklings.

Plant warm season vegetables including corn, eggplant, peppers, tomatoes and summer squash beginning in late July.

Check the depth of mulch in planting beds. Replace or add when needed.

Keep a close check on recently planted landscape plants. Inadequate root system and drought can be damaging so water as needed to prevent moisture stress.

Check your lawn mower. You might want to raise the mower blade to a higher setting.

Check Junipers and marigolds for red spider mites.

Soak hanging baskets in a tub of water every few days in addition to the regular daily watering. Fertilize baskets but never apply fertilizer to dry plants.

Fertilize caladiums with a high nitrogen fertilizer, such as lawn fertilizer, and water thoroughly.

Sow seeds of snapdragons, dianthus, calendulas, and alyssum in flats for planting outside during mid-fall.

Don't allow plants with green fruit or berries to suffer from lack of moisture.

It is not too late to plant many warm-season annuals, such as marigolds, zinnias and periwinkle. They will require extra attention for the first few weeks but should provide color during late September, October and November.

August

A late pruning of rose bushes can be beneficial.

Water is the best summer fertilizer. Soak frequently, thoroughly and deeply.

Watch for chinch bugs in St. Augustine lawns.

Plant tomatoes, peppers, potatoes, green beans, cucumbers and summer squash.

September

Plant bluebonnet and other spring wildflowers. They germinate in early fall, develop good root systems, and then grow rapidly and bloom in spring when the weather warms.

Prepare beds for bulb planting next month. Add 1 inch to 2 inches of compost.

Establish a new compost pile to accommodate fall leaf accumulation.

Divide spring and early summer perennials including daffodils, bearded iris, Shasta and oxeye daisy, gaillardia, daylilies and iris. Discard the diseased or damaged material, and replant the rest to provide them more space to grow.

Late September marks the beginning of the brown patch season on St. Augustine lawns. Avoid excessive fertilizing and watering as this promotes the development of this disease.

Plant cool-season vegetables.

Rejuvenate heat-stressed geraniums and begonias by lightly pruning, fertilizing and watering.

Plant calendulas, snapdragons, stock, alyssum and nasturtiums.

Plant seeds of sweet peas, larkspur and poppies.

Replenish mulches around trees and shrubs.

October

Fertilize lawn early this month with fertilizer containing three numbers on the bag in a ratio of 3-1-2. Examples: 8-2-4 and 15-5-10. Divide first number into 100 for amount to apply per 1,000 square feet.

Plant cool season vegetables.

Christmas cactus can be made to flower by supplying 12 hours of uninterrupted darkness and cool nights (55 degrees.) for a few weeks. Keep in a sunny spot with nighttime temperatures below 65 degrees if possible and don't allow to dry out.

Place moth orchids (Phalaenopsis) outside for a few weeks when night temperatures drop into the 50s to initiate bloom bud formation. Then bring them in, and in winter, bloom shoots will emerge.

Plant spring, summer and fall flowering bulbs such as hyacinths, allium, snowflakes, daffodils, jonquils, narcissus, rain lilies, Dutch iris, ranunculus, ox-blood lilies, lycoris, grape hyacinth and amaryllis.

Refrigerate tulip and hyacinth bulbs now until mid- to late December before planting. The lower part of the refrigerator is best. Do not leave bulbs in airtight plastic bags.

Dig and store caladium tubers. Store in dry peat or perlite packed in boxes so that roots do not touch. Store in an area where the



Plant some bulbs now; others need refrigeration until mid-December.

temperature will not go below 55 degrees.

Purchase starter plants of pansies, violas, snapdragons, dianthus, dusty miller, cyclamen, flowering kale and cabbage for winter and spring color.

Check for aphids and caterpillars on fall flowers and leafy vegetables. Sprays of insecticidal soap (aphids) or B.t. (caterpillars) are effective, low-toxicity control options.

If twig girdlers have infested your trees, and many twigs and branches are dropping, make sure these are collected and destroyed, because the eggs are deposited in that portion of the branch that drops to the ground.

There is still time to divide and reset perennials such as phlox, violets, irises, day lilies, and shasta daisies.

Holly plants with a heavy set of fruit often suffer from a fertilizer deficiency. Applying a complete fertilizer late in October can be helpful, and will provide a head start next spring.

November

Plant woody ornamental plants so there is a good root system in preparation for the hot summer months.

Plant roses or prepare beds to be planted in December through February.

Purchase paperwhites, amaryllis or daffodil bulbs for indoor forcing.

Finish planting all spring flowering bulbs outdoors, except tulips and Dutch hyacinth.

Clean annual and perennial beds. Mix in an inch of compost to prepare the soil for spring planting. Apply a layer of mulch to deter winter weeds.

Remove dried fruit 'mummies' from fruit trees and pick up fallen fruit to decrease the incidence of diseases on next year's crop.

Large, almost mature, tomatoes can be picked just ahead of the first frost. Store in a cool dark area until ripe.

Don't get in a hurry to prune woody plants. Late December through February is usually the best time.

Reduce the fertilization of indoor plants through mid-March.

Continue to set out cool-season bedding plants, such as pansies, violas, stock, snapdragons and dianthus.

Prepare garden beds for spring planting. Work in any needed organic matter and have beds ready to plant.

This is the best time to move woody ornamentals from one place in the landscape to another. Cut the tops back at least one-third to one-half to compensate for the roots lost when digging the plant.

Clean and sharpen all hand tools and cover all metal parts with a light coat of oil to prevent rust before storing for the winter. A bucket of dry sand, plus a cup or two of oil, makes an excellent way to clean yard tools and prevent rust.

Begin a new compost pile using the abundant fall leaves.

December

Plant tulip and hyacinth bulbs that have been chilling in the refrigerator.

Apply dormant oil sprays to plants infested with scale. (Not within 30 hours of a freeze.)

Mow fallen leaves to encourage decomposition, or rake and gather for surface mulch.

Order difficult-to-find seeds now so you will be ready next month to start spring annuals.

Skip Richter is Travis County director of Texas AgriLife Extension Service.