



November 8, 2014

Dear Friends,

Here is the 82nd issue of our weekly gardening newsletter for Houston, the Gulf Coast and beyond. This is a project of The Lazy Gardener, Brenda Beust Smith, John Ferguson and Mark Bowen (both John and Mark are with Nature's Way Resources). We also have a great supporting cast of contributing writers and technical specialists who will chime in and tweak away regularly. We would love to keep receiving your input on this newsletter . . . comments . . . suggestions . . . questions. . . Email your thoughts to: lazygardenerandfriends@gmail.com. Thanks so much for your interest.

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Among flower branches ideal for forcing are forsythia, redbuds, mock orange (Philadelphus/English dogwood) and Carolina jessamine. (That's my late La Marne antique rose blooming with my mock orange. She had to be over 40 years old when she just suddenly died one day. I still miss her.)

BLOOM, BRANCH, BLOOM! AND SHARE GARDEN GAFFES

BY BRENDA BEUST SMITH

Last week's column, [Forced Bulbs Make Welcome Holiday Gifts](#), brought a query from Naime in Friendswood who wanted to know if I'd ever heard of forcing branches to bloom.

Sure have. This is done a lot more "up nawth" than here. They have such prolonged periods of grey skies and miserable weather that forcing branches to bloom is one way of getting an indoor jump on spring color.

No reason we can't do it too . . . much earlier, of course, than they do. Our spring bloomers are often ready to burst out in January.

The trick is to be aware, so you can cut these branches and quickly bring them indoor for forcing. A great way to chase the gloom off a cold wet winter's day.



More potential branch-forcing plants include, left to right, camellias, wild honeysuckle, bridal wreath (spirea) and azaleas

In late December, January or February (depends on our winter), watch for buds to appear on azaleas, bridal wreath, camellias, Carolina jessamine, dogwood, forsythia, hawthorns, honeysuckle, pink magnolias, mock orange (English dogwood), quince, redbud, wisteria and fruit trees. They may appear earlier than usual after a mild winter.

Cut a few branches, a foot or more in length, as soon as you see well-formed buds. Cut more than you think you'll need as some might not work. Always use sharp shears and cut stems flush with a main stalk to prevent stubs.

Using the shears or a sharp knife, split the cut end upwards one to four inches. Some folks use a hammer to smush the ends. Stick the cut ends immediately in warm water in a wide bowl. Warmth makes them think spring is here.

The extra inches are so you can take another inch off the split stems while they're still underwater. This keeps air from entering the cut end. Air will block water uptake. Remove any buds or twigs that will be underwater in the final forcing vase or jar. The container should be heavy and use one deep enough to provide stability for the length and weight of your stems.

Set in a warm spot (not close to a window). Keep the water fresh, ideally changing it every few days. A few drops of hydrogen peroxide or a bit of floral preservative in the water will speed blooming. Once flowers appear, use the branches in arrangements.

To prolong both forced bulb and branch blooms, keep them in good light but out of direct sunlight and away from heating vents. Don't overwater potted bulbs. At night, move containers onto a cool floor. Mist the foliage frequently with fresh water.

Some folks use a small, recirculating fountain near indoor plants to replace the humidity lost by central heating and air conditioning. The soothing sound is a nice complement to the beautiful colors and (if you're lucky) fragrance of the flowers.

LET'S LAUGH AT OUR GROSS GARDENING GAFFES

My Uncle Henry, who knows how much I love clever writing, sent me this fabulous insult quote:

"He had delusions of adequacy." - Walter Kerr

Don't you love it? I wracked my brain in vain trying to think of a way to work it into my column. Finally turned to one of the best writers I know, who insists I quit using (abusing?) her name and asked her for some suggestions. She wrote back that Walter Kerr must have been referring to . . .

". . . a common condition among city gardeners, methinks. Samples from my past:

** Planting a little bitty tree next to the house only having it grow up and threaten to raise the foundation*

** Planting shallots in a bed and ignoring 'em, only to have them jump out of their confines and populate the entire lawn (I'm remembering my husband coming in from mowing with big onion tears streaming down his cheeks.)"*

I can add two of my own:

** Transplanting goldenrod out of the field into my garden. 40 years later, it's still popping up in the garden because seed spread to our surrounding woods.*

** Planting a coral vine under the carport eaves. The prolific stems have broken through the mesh opening to the garage attic. I won't go up there for a billion dollars. I'm sure it's a huge mass of dead, decaying vines and all the critters that love such gunk.*

Have you made any gross gardening gaffes? Do share!

WALLER COUNTY FRUIT TREE SALE EXTENDED

The demand for fruit trees has been so high, the big Waller County Master Gardener and Extension Leadership Advisory Board sale has been extended to Dec. 18. Orders for pecan, Japanese persimmon, fig, lemon, grapefruit, orange, lime, peach, plum, nectarine, apple and pear trees must be placed in person at the Waller County Extension Office, 846 - 6th St, in Hempstead. Details: 979-826-7651 or waller-agrilife.org

JOHN'S CORNER



ORGANIC FERTILIZERS AND NUTRIENTS - 16

MOLASSES

Many gardeners do not know about the benefits of using molasses as part of their fertility, insect, disease and weed control. Molasses is used for a lot of things from animal food to a food additive for humans. Molasses contains many forms of sugar that provide energy (16 calories per teaspoon) for the microbes in the soil and much more. Molasses can be a very cost effective tool for gardeners.

There are many grades or types of molasses available on the market of which the price and benefits vary greatly. Molasses is made from either sugarcane or sugar beets and along the Gulf Coast. Sugarcane is the most common. The refining of these plants produces different grades that we call; first molasses (mild or Barbados), second molasses (dark, sulfured and un-sulfured molasses, third molasses (blackstrap) and feed grade molasses.

For gardeners un-sulfured Blackstrap molasses is the best as it is the most nutritionally dense form of molasses. During processing the simple sugars have been removed to make first and second molasses. As a result the complex sugars, other carbohydrates and nutrients are left and the original nutrients have become concentrated.

In addition to the carbohydrates (carbon compounds that relate to energy), it is rich in sulfur, potash, iron and micronutrients (trace minerals). As a result it stimulates the growth of microbes and plants.

Molasses also has an interesting property in that it functions as a chelating agent which means it can help convert nutrients in the soil that are chemically unavailable into a form that makes it easier for microbes and plants to absorb. Microbes feed on the sugars in molasses. One strain of bacteria is the *Azotobacter* that is found in a good compost and in healthy soils. This bacteria can fix nitrogen without the need for a root of a legume as long as it has a good energy source such as the complex sugar and other carbohydrates in molasses. Dr. Louis Thompson found that *Azotobacter* could fix the equivalent of 1,000 pounds of nitrogen per acre from the air in ten weeks if given diluted molasses solutions regularly. This is one of the reasons why many gardeners get a rapid green-up to their turf grass after applying a good compost and molasses.

If dilute solutions of molasses can cause microbes to fix nitrogen, what happens if we apply strong (concentrated) solutions of molasses?

We know from soil microbiology that bacteria grow rapidly on simple sugars to the exclusion of fungus until the sugar concentrations become very high. Many organisms cannot grow in a high concentration of sugar. This is why sugar can be used as a preservative. Hence if we apply too much molasses at one time we can have problems as the molasses supplies a lot of carbon (C) for the bacteria. As a result for the bacteria to grow rapidly they use a lot of nitrogen (N) as they are the most nitrogen rich life form on earth with a 5:1 C:N ratio. They are so effective at tying up nitrogen (and other nutrients) that plant growth can be reduced or even stopped outright. When plants compete with bacteria for nitrogen in the soil....the bacteria always wins, hence plants can be killed due to a lack of nitrogen. This is why some gardeners use a concentrated molasses solution to pour on weeds as it can kill them. I have had several folks tell me that strong solutions are effective on nut grass (nutsedge) when applied directly to the plant. (Note: I have never tried this technique but would like to hear from anyone whom has had success in controlling nut grass).

Many gardeners attest that applying molasses to their vegetables and fruit trees increases the flavor, fragrance and perceived sweetness.

On a side note, several researchers have found that molasses can be an effective pest control. A few years ago I was down in Needville at a farm supply company and there was a big 5,000 gallon tank in the parking area. I asked what it was and was told it was molasses for the cotton farmers. Molasses has been used since 1900 for helping control boll weevils.

For many chewing insects and caterpillars 1-2 tablespoon molasses in one quart water, one drop soap or other surfactant and shake well then spray the plants with the solution. Molasses solutions have been found to deter or kill numerous insects. Several mechanisms or modes of action have been proposed as to why it works. We have known for decades that plants with a high "Brix" index (measure of sugar concentration in plant sap) are naturally more pest resistant than the same species with a low Brix index. One mode is that an insect cannot digest the sugars on the leaf when they eat it. Bacteria then produce gasses that expand in the digestive tract of the insect that builds up pressure

which ruptures their digestive system that leads to insect death. For other insects the sugars in the molasses ferment into alcohol which then kills the insect. The third method is that the molasses causes a microbial explosion in the soil which then attack eggs and larval stages of some insects killing them.

Molasses can be used to kill other insects (e.g. grasshoppers) by using it in a trap. Just fill a jar half-way with a molasses solution and set it in the ground. Insects are attracted to the smell then fall in and are killed. This is similar to how beer traps get rid of slugs and snails.

Other researchers have found that fire ants do not like molasses. If applied to an area the ants will leave, *IF* they have an untreated area to move to. Concoctions of compost tea, orange oil and molasses have been found to kill fire ant mounds through several methods of action. However, unless one makes it themselves, it is not cost effective to purchase commercial products.

Scientists at the USDA-ARS (Agricultural Research Service) has found that compost, molasses and anaerobic soil disinfection (ASD) in soil saturated with water and covered with a plastic tarp was as effective as methyl bromide in reducing pathogens, pests and controlling weeds (Agricultural Research, March, 2011).

DRY MOLASSES - Dry Molasses is just molasses that has been sprayed on a grain residue carrier like ground soy or corn meal. It makes it easy to spread and use. It is often used to get fire ants to leave an area or help green up a lawn. Costs a little more than using liquid molasses, diluting it and spraying.

Other Uses:

Some folks mix molasses with alfalfa or cottonseed meal and let steep in water for a few days. They then apply to the soil as a liquid fertilizer.

For home composters it is often difficult to get the compost pile to heat up enough to kill weed seeds and pathogens. Hence one can add molasses to compost piles to cause increased heating and speed the rate of decomposition. It can be applied at the rate of 1/4 cup per 25 square feet of pile surface) or 1/4 cup per gallon of water to apply to pile. The larger the pile the more one need to apply.

Another common use for molasses is in making compost tea. The complex sugars and carbohydrates provide food for the microbes to grow rapidly and increase in density in the tea.

SUMMARY:

We are just beginning to understand the benefits of molasses and how it works. However, Molasses is a multi-purpose product for any serious gardener. It is easy to apply, safe for children and pets, inexpensive to use and has many benefits.

PROS:

- good source of carbon and trace elements
- inexpensive and readily available in most areas
- easily digested by soil microbes to make nutrients available
- stimulates microbial growth
- may function as a chelating agent increasing fertilizer efficacy
- good feedstock for earthworms in small amounts
- good ingredient for compost tea
- increases sweetness and flavor of some vegetables and fruits
- increase plant health (disease and pest resistance)
- increases leaf color for many species
- accelerates thatch breakdown

CONS:

- too much can injure or kill a plant
- nutrient content and density varies
- feed grade molasses often has preservatives, fungal inhibitors, and even antibiotics and extra sulfur to kill bacteria and fungus respectively
- may be sticky and messy if one gets it on them
- most grocery store molasses products do not work well
- low cost brands may be heavily diluted and one is just buying water
- sulfured molasses may cause problems

WEEKLY GARDENING EVENTS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALENDAR

Gardening events only. Events listed are in Houston unless otherwise noted.

Events must be written in the format used below, specifically earmarked for publication in the Lazy Gardener & Friends Newsletter." Email to lazygardener@sbcglobal.net

Sat., Nov. 8: Fall Rose Show, 1:00-3:00pm, South Main Baptist Church, 4300 East Sam Houston Pkwy, Pasadena. Free. Houston Rose Society event. Details: www.houstonrose.org

Sat.-Sun, Nov. 8-9: Peckerwood Garden Open Weekend, 20559 FM 359 Road, Hempstead. Guided tours 10am & 1pm. (No children under 12). \$10. Plant sale 10am-3pm. Free. Details: peckerwoodgarden.org

Sun., Nov. 9: Tree ID for the Novice, 2pm- 5pm, Houston Arboretum & Nature Center, 4501 Woodway Drive. \$45. Details: www.houstonarboretum.org.

Mon, Nov. 10: Plusses and Minuses of Each Kind of Fruit Tree by Ray Sher, 6:30pm, Multi-Service Center, 1475 W. Gray. Free. Houston Urban Gardeners (HUG) event. Details: houstonurbangardeners.org

Wed., Nov.12: Herb Gardening for Home Use by Marilyn O'Connor, noon-2pm, Lunch Bunch, Mercer Botanic Gardens, 22306 Aldine-Westfield, Humble. Details/reservations: 281-443-8731

Thurs., Nov. 13: Healthier Rose Bushes Produce More Blooms by Ed Bradley, 7:30pm, St. Andrews Episcopal Church parish hall, 1819 Heights Blvd. Free. Houston Rose Society event. Details: www.houstonrose.org

Sat., Nov. 15: Edible Wild Plants, 9am-1pm, Houston Arboretum & Nature Center, 4501 Woodway Drive. \$65. Details: www.houstonarboretum.org

Sat, Nov 15: Urban Harvest's Fruit Tree Care. 9-11:30am. \$36. UH Central Campus, 4800 Calhoun, Oberholtzer Hall. Details: 713-880-5540 or www.urbanharvest.org

Sun., Nov. 16: Living Witnesses: Historic Trees of Texas by Ralph Yznaga, noon, Moody Mansion, 2618 Broadway St, Galveston. Moody Mansion Galveston Island Tree Conservancy Arbor Day Celebration Brunch. Tickets: galvestonislandtreeconservancy.org/sponsor-arbor-day-2014/

Sun., Nov, 16: Starting Seeds Indoors by Biddy Swiney, 1:30-3:30pm, Wabash Feed & Garden Store, 5701 Washington Ave. Free. Details: wabashfeed.com; 713-863-8322

Mon., Nov. 17: Building Healthy Soils Saves Money Now by John Ferguson. 2-3 p.m., Montgomery County Master Gardeners, 9020 Airport Road, Conroe TX <http://www.mcmga.com/>

Mon., Nov. 17, Open Garden Day, with Harris County Master Gardeners at Precinct 2. 8:30-11am, Genoa Friendship Garden, 1202 Genoa Red Bluff Rd. 9:30am: Educational Programs/ MG Q&A. Open garden/plant sale every Monday May-Oct. Free. Details: <https://hcmga.tamu.edu>

Tues., Nov. 18: Cool Season Color and Edibles by T. Polk, 10am, Knights of Columbus Hall, 702 Burney Road, Sugar Land. Sugar Land Garden Club event. Details: sugarlandgardenclub.org

Wed., Nov., 19: Flora of Costa Rica by Dick and Phyllis McEuen, 7:30pm, Multi Service Center, 1475 West Gray. Free. Houston Cactus & Succulent Society event. Details: <http://hcsstex.org/>

Thurs., Nov. 20: Native Seed & Plant Swap and Social, 7:30-9 pm, Houston Arboretum, 4501 Woodway. Free. Native Plant Society of Texas/Houston Chapter event. Details: www.npsot.org/houston

Thurs, Nov 20: Starting a Community or School Garden, Class 2. 6:30 - 9:00pm. 6:30-9pm. \$36. Urban Harvest, 2311 Canal St # 124. Details: 713-880-5540 or www.urbanharvest.org

Sat.-Sun., Nov. 22-23: Heritage Gardeners in Friendswood 48th Annual Christmas Home Tour, 1-5pm. \$10 pre-tour; \$15 tour day. One starting point: Marie Workman Garden Center, 112 West Spreading Oaks. Details: heritagegardener.org or 713-534-7662.

Sat.-Sun, Nov. 22:23: Peckerwood Garden Open Weekend, 20559 FM 359 Road, Hempstead. Guided tours 10am & 1pm. (No children under 12). \$10. Plant sale 10am-3pm. Free. Details: peckerwoodgarden.org

Tues., Nov. 25: Harris County Master Gardeners Open Garden Day, 9-11:30am; Protecting Plants in Winter: 10am adult workshop, children's activities. Free. AgrilLife Extension Office, 3033 Bear Creek Dr. Details: <https://hcmga.tamu.edu>

Sun., Nov 30: Landscaping with Texas Native Trees, Shrubs & Vines, 2pm-5pm, Houston Arboretum & Nature Center, 4501 Woodway Drive. \$45. Details: www.houstonarboretum.org.

Tues., Dec. 2: Harris County Vegetable Trials and Texas SuperStars Update by Skip Richter, noon, County Extension Office auditorium, 3033 Bear Creek Dr. Free. Harris County Master Gardener event. Details: <https://hcmga.tamu.edu/Public/pubP2.aspx>

Thurs., Dec. 4: Best Citrus Selections and Citrus Grafting by Dr. Ethan Natelson, 6:30pm sign-in, 7pm program, Harris County AgriLife Extension Service Auditorium, 3033 Bear Creek Drive. Free. Gulf Coast Fruit Study Group event. Details: Yvonne Gibbs at ambra1@att.net or www.gcfsg.weebly.com

Thurs., Dec.4: "All about Citrus Program" by The Gulf Coast Fruit Study Group, 6:30pm, County Extension Office Auditorium, 3033 Bear Creek Dr. Free. Info: ambra1@att.net.

Sat.-Sun., Dec 13-14: Winter Native Plant Sale, 9am-4pm, Houston Arboretum & Nature Center, 4501 Woodway Drive. Details: www.houstonarboretum.org.

Sat., Dec. 20: Edible Wild Plants, 9am-1pm, Houston Arboretum & Nature Center, 4501 Woodway Drive, Houston. \$65. Details: www.houstonarboretum.org

Sat., Jan. 31, 2015: Fruit Tree Sale by Harris County Master Gardeners. 9am-1pm, County Extension Office, 3033 Bear Creek Dr. Details: hcmga.tamu.edu/Public/pubSales.aspx

Mon., April 21 2015: What's Blooming in the Lazy Gardener's Garden by Brenda Beust Smith, 10am, Walden on Lake Houston Club House. Lake Houston Ladies Club event. Non-member reservations required: Carol Dandeneau. #832-671-4475

WANT YOUR EVENT IN THE LG&F CALENDAR? YOU HAVE TO SEND IT TO US!

EVENTS WILL NOT BE PICKED UP FROM OTHER NEWSLETTERS OR GENERAL MEDIA RELEASES.

Events submitted in the exact format used above will receive priority in inclusion in the calendar. Events NOT submitted in our format take longer to get published as someone has to reformat and retype them. Email to: lazygardener@sbcglobal.net

Need speakers for your group? Or tips on getting more publicity for events? Brenda's free booklets that might help: "[Lazy Gardener's Speakers List](#)" of area horticultural/environmental experts, and "[Lazy Gardener's Publicity Booklet](#)" (based on her 40+ years of her Houston Chronicle "Lazy Gardener" coverage of area events) Email specific requests to: lazygardener@sbcglobal.net. Please help us grow by informing all your membership of this weekly newsletter!

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ABOUT US

BRENDA BEUST SMITH

WE KNOW HER BEST AS THE LAZY GARDENER . . .

. . . but Brenda Beust Smith is also:

- * a national award-winning writer & editor
- * a nationally-published writer & photographer
- * a national horticultural speaker
- * a former Houston Chronicle reporter

When the Chronicle discontinued Brenda's 45-year-old "Lazy Gardener" print column a couple of years ago, it ranked as the longest-running, continuously-published local newspaper column in the Greater Houston area.

Brenda's gradual sideways step from Chronicle reporter into gardening writing led first to an 18-year series of when-to-do-what Lazy Gardener Calendars, then to her *Lazy Gardener's Guide* book and now to her *Lazy Gardener's Guide* on CD (which retails for \$20. However, \$5 of every sale is returned to the sponsoring group at her speaking engagements).

A Harris County Master Gardener, Brenda has served on the boards of many Greater Houston area horticulture organizations and has hosted local radio and TV shows, most notably a 10+-year Lazy Gardener run on HoustonPBS (Ch. 8) and her call-in "EcoGardening" show on KPFT-FM.

Brenda recently ended her decades-long stint as Production Manager of the Garden Club of America's **BULLETIN** magazine. Although still an active horticulture lecturer and broad-based freelance writer, Brenda's main focus now is **THE LAZY GARDENER & FRIENDS HOUSTON GARDEN NEWSLETTER** with John Ferguson and Mark Bowen of Nature's Way Resources.

A native of New Orleans and graduate of St. Agnes Academy and the University of Houston, Brenda lives in Aldine and is married to the now retired Aldine High School Coach Bill Smith. They have one son, Blake.

Regarding this newsletter, Brenda is the lead writer, originator of it and the daily inspiration for it. We so appreciate the way she has made gardening such a fun way to celebrate life together for such a long time.

JOHN FERGUSON

John is a native Houstonian and has over 27 years of business experience. He owns Nature's Way Resources, a composting company that specializes in high quality compost, mulch, and soil mixes. He holds a MS degree in Physics and Geology and is a licensed Soil Scientist in Texas.

John has won many awards in horticulture and environmental issues. He represents the composting industry on the Houston-Galveston Area Council for solid waste. His personal garden has been featured in several horticultural books and "Better Homes and Gardens" magazine. His business has been recognized in the Wall Street Journal for the quality and value of their products. He is a member of the Physics Honor Society and many other professional societies. John is the co-author of the book *Organic Management for the Professional*.

For this newsletter, John contributes articles regularly and is responsible for publishing it.

MARK BOWEN

Mark is a native Houstonian, a horticulturist, certified permaculturist and organic specialist with a background in garden design, land restoration and organic project management. He is currently the general manager of Nature's Way Resources. Mark is also the co-author of the book *Habitat Gardening for Houston and Southeast Texas*, the author of the book *Naturalistic Landscaping for the Gulf Coast*, co-author of the *Bayou Planting Guide* and contributing landscape designer for the book *Landscaping Homes: Texas*.

With respect to this newsletter, Mark serves as a co-editor and article contributor.

MARY BOWEN

Mary is a realtor with Coldwell Banker and an avid volunteer with the Montgomery County Animal Shelter.

With respect to the newsletter, Mary came up with the idea for the Garden Tails column and co-writes it. Mary is

the newest addition to our group of contributors. We will expand her bio as we go.

PABLO HERNANDEZ

Pablo Hernandez is the special projects coordinator for Nature's Way Resources. His realm of responsibilities include: serving as a webmaster, IT support, technical problem solving/troubleshooting, metrics management, quality control, and he is a certified compost facility operator.

Pablo helps this newsletter happen from a technical support standpoint.



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