

THE NATURAL GARDENER NEWSLETTER

The last half of February had wonderful weather didn't it. Spring was definitely in the air and I know that for myself I was really keen to get back out into the garden. It was such a pleasure to wander through my small oasis and see what was coming up. The crocus and daffodils were of course making their entrance but so were my hepaticas (almost ready to bloom!), ranunculus Brazen Hussy (don't you just love that name), the hellebores of course, one of my arisaemas and the cyclamen coum with their dainty pink flowers. Yes, I've definitely caught plant fever again, not that it ever went away. But now I can start indulging in it again. I hope you have had a chance to wander through your garden and discover what's happening out there. I know you will be pleasantly surprised. I'd love to hear what's emerging from winter sleep in your garden.

I am very pleased to announce that The Natural Gardener has new display shelves for the nursery. They were designed and built by Jake Fry of Smallworks and his team. I must say they look great. Best of all they have substantially increased the number of flats of plants that I will be able to carry in my tiny nursery. You know what that means; more special, unusual plants for you to discover. Please come by and take a look when you can.

This month I will be talking about composting, organic fertilizers, more new plants coming to the nursery, March classes, the plant of the month and of course the To Do List.

Enjoy!

Bob

"Gardening is a way of showing that you believe in tomorrow."

ORGANIC FERTILIZERS

One of the most important things you can do for your garden is to have a rich, well-drained soil. There is a useful saying amongst organic farmers: **FEED THE SOIL, NOT THE PLANTS**. By providing your plants with a nutrient rich soil you will have strong, healthy, beautiful plants. This is where organic fertilizer comes in. Because they are a natural based product and not a salt based chemical fertilizer they are better able to nurture the soil and the very important microorganisms that live in it. Over time the soil becomes literally teeming with beneficial microorganisms that create rich, fertile soil increasing plant health to an optimum level. Flowers bloom brighter, more brilliant, and last a lot longer. Fruits and vegetables are sweeter and more prolific. Bedding plants and perennials make the transition to the garden bed with minimal transplant shock, and the increased plant vitality helps to boost the plants natural ability to resist disease and pest infestations.

At The Natural Gardener we carry two kinds of organic fertilizers: Gaia Green Organic Fertilizer and Raingrow liquid concentrate organic fertilizer.

Gaia Green fertilizers are made in Revelstoke, BC and use only the best available organic ingredients in the make up of their fertilizer. At The Natural Gardener we carry the 2 kg pails of their 4-4-4 All Purpose Fertilizer, the 5-2-2- Veg Blend for vegetables, trees and shrubs, 2-8-4 Power Bloom for flowers, Glacial Rock Dust for important trace minerals and Bone Meal.

Raingrow Fertilizers are made in the Okanagan and are made from concentrated organic compost emulsion and a unique blend of natural plant extracts. The Natural Gardener carries their 4-2-3 All Purpose fertilizer and their 0-12-0 Bloom - A - Long Fertilizer for flower power.

MORE NEW PLANTS

Arisaema iyoanum var. Nakaianum

As you know I am a HUGE Arisaema fan and Nakaianum is one of the most dramatic. One of the rarest of the Arisaemas, found only along riverbanks in Japan's Shikoku Province, it reaches a height of 3 feet. Grow it in moist, well-drained soil in a part shade woodland setting. Truly stunning!



Cyrotmium caryotideum – Dwarf Fish Tail Holly Fern

This evergreen fern has very attractive fronds of shiny, leathery, deep green. It has a compact growth habit and is a great semi-shade lover for rockeries, fern gardens or containers. The tip segment is shaped like a fish tail.



Trachelospermum asiaticum elegans – Yellow Star Jasmine

The Yellow Star Jasmine is an evergreen, slow growing vine with attractive yellow flowers. It takes a while to get going but will eventually reach a height of 12 feet. It likes full sun and should be mulched in the winter.



Fabiana imbricata violacea

When you first see this small shrub you may think it is a type of heather but in fact it is related to the potato family. It needs good drainage & full sun to do best and grows well near the ocean. It reaches a height of about 3 feet but can be a bit sprawling.



Hebe “Clear Skies”

Hebe ‘Clear Skies’ forms a neat, dense, evergreen bush, growing to about 24 in tall. The leaves are lance-shaped and a silvery blue-green,. The flowers are blue-mauve and appear in late spring. In its first year I would mulch it well and give it a little protection from cold winds.



Cotinus “Golden Spirit”

I’ve had this very attractive smokebush once before and then wasn’t able to get it for a while. Now it’s back and if you have a well-drained, sunny spot you need one of these. It has that wonderful golden foliage and then in the spring it turns different shades of red, orange and coral. I would prune it back hard every year to keep it as a rounded shrub.



Yummy!

Actaea (Cimicifuga) simplex “Black Negligee”

Black negligee is the latest in a fine line of ‘black’ actaea. It has deeply cut, lacy foliage and fragrant white flowers in mid-summer. It looks fantastic as a contrast plant in the border, especially planted near chartreuse coloured plants such as Sambucus Sutherlands Gold. The more sun it gets, the blacker the foliage becomes. It likes a fairly moist, well-drained soil.



Polygala chamaebuxus grandiflora

Polygala is an unusual, small but very attractive evergreen perennial that flowers in early spring. This low growing, thicket forming shrublet has thick deep green leaves at around one inch long held on short multi-branched stems. It prefers a more acid soil and part shade and is perfect for a shady part of the rock garden or in a container.



COMPOSTING

If you have the room a composter is a real necessity for your garden. Not only does it help to have a place to put all your garden & kitchen waste but it provides you with what I like to call 'Black Gold' for your soil. Compost adds trace minerals to your soil which provides nutrients to your plants and to all the wonderful microscopic animals and fungi that help to maintain a healthy soil. It also helps to keep it 'friable'. Friable means that you have a nice, crumbly, loose soil that will hold water but is also well drained. Just what you need for your plants to grow well and stay healthy. There are numerous types of composters you can have, from the old fashion open box made of wood or chicken wire that holds your garden waste to the plastic ones you can purchase from the city for \$25.00.

Building your own.

If you decide to build your own compost bin you can use wood or chicken wire on a wood frame. The ideal size is one cubic metre to maintain the correct heat to break down the green waste. It is very important that you put a layer of chicken wire on the ground to keep out rodents and other pests. It is also recommended that you have a lid on it to keep out rain and rodents although it isn't necessary.

Commercial Composter

You can get these from the city at the recycling depot at 377 West Kent Avenue in Vancouver. The cost is \$25.00 with proof of city residency. Once you get it home remember to put chicken wire underneath it to discourage rodents if there is no bottom.

9 Easy Steps to Composting:

1. Choose a flat, partly sunny area with good drainage
2. Create a 6-10cm base with straw, leaves or woody brush to help create good air circulation.
3. Alternate layers of green and brown material. Remember to chop up big pieces for faster decomposition
4. Whenever you add a food scrap layer top it off with a brown material layer.
5. Mix the compost every 1 to 2 weeks. This aerates the compost and gets it heating up again. You can use a compost aerator or ski pole or broom handle.
6. Only add moisture if the compost is very dry. It should feel like a wrung out dishwasher.
7. The pile will shrink as it breaks down so continue to keep adding green and brown material.
8. Compost is usually ready to use in 2-3 months although waiting 4-5 months is best.
9. Harvest your compost when the bottom and centre are decomposed. If you built your own, remove the top layers and remove the compost from the centre. If you bought one open the bottom door and remove the compost from there.

Green Materials

- Kitchen scraps
- Plant trimmings
- Grass clippings
- Coffee grounds and tea leaves
- Manure
- Large leafy weeds
- Rhubarb leaves
- Vegetables and fruits

Brown Materials

- Leaves
- Newsprint
- Cardboard
- Corn cobs
- Brown paper bags
- Straw
- Paper towels and napkins

You can also add eggshells and wood ash.

PLANT OF THE MONTH

Acer palmatum “Shishigashira” – Lion’s Head Maple

The lion’s head maple is a very popular and striking cultivar. It is a slow upright grower with dense tufts of crinkled deep green foliage on each branch, looking somewhat like the mane of a lion. The leaves are resistant to burning in full sun and develop a good golden yellow fall colour brushed with red-orange. It tends to be one of the latest Japanese maples to colour in the fall. Shishigashira makes a great container plant. When placed in the garden it has a sculptural feel that only improves with age.

Although they grow best in humus-rich, well-drained, fertile soil, Shishigashira grow well in most soils as long as they are not poorly draining or heavy clay. Water Shishigashira regularly for its first two growing seasons and during subsequent summer dry spells. Pruning is generally not required for this cultivar. Shishigashira grows well in part shade but has the best fall colour in full sun.



Fall Colour of Acer “Shishigashira”
Stunning isn’t it!

MARCH CLASSES

There are two great classes for you to participate in this month. On Wednesday, March 12th Lyle Courtice of Harkaway Botanicals will be giving a talk on New Plants for the Shade in 2008. Lyle is a great speaker and extremely knowledgeable about his plants. It is from Lyle that I get some of my rarer or more unusual plants from so you know this talk is going to be fascinating. I wouldn’t miss this one.

On Wednesday, March 19th I will be giving a talk on Growing Native Plants in Your Garden. It is so easy to add native plants to your garden and you will be happy you did. I will be talking about the different plants that do best in your garden and will have them here at the nursery for you to see and maybe take home.

All classes are held here at The Natural Gardener and start at 7pm.

Here are the details on both classes.

March 12

New in the Shade for 2008

Instructor: **Lyle Courtice**, owner of Harkaway Botanicals

Let's go exploring plants from around the world. Get introduced to some exciting new "GEMS" for the woodland garden. Exotic, rare and unusual. Everything you need for that shady spot or shady pot. This is going to be an excellent lecture, you are not going to want to miss this one.

Cost: \$15.00

March 19

Growing Native Plants in Your Garden

Instructor: **Bob Tuckey**, owner of The Natural Gardener

Native plants add interest and texture to your garden and provide food and shelter for a wide variety of local birds and animals. Bob will talk about the types of plants that are available, how to integrate them into an existing bed and how to create a bed composed entirely of native plants. You'll even get to take a small plant home with you.

Cost: \$15.00

MARCH GARDENING TO DO LIST

- Prune winter flowering shrubs and vines after blooming
- Plant summer and fall blooming bulbs
- Spray for peach leaf curl, peach leaf blight and canker
- Dormant spray fruit trees and roses if you haven't already done so
- Plant ground covers
- Plant or repair lawns
- Plant grasses
- Plant roses
- Plant fruit trees
- Plant perennials
- Plant shrubs, trees and vines
- Plant warm season vegetables
- Continue any clean up that may have been interrupted by cold weather
- Start feeding your houseplants with an organic fertilizer
- Start feeding your trees, shrubs, perennials and vines with an organic fertilizer
- Look for interesting and unusual plants for your garden

It's time to start back in the garden. Getting some of these chores out of the way now will make for a much more enjoyable spring later. You'll have time to find those special plants you've been looking for and maybe join us for one of our garden tours.



Hepatica nobilis Stunning!

GARDEN TOURS

I love taking people on garden tours and sharing with them some of my favourite gardens to visit and learn from. This year I have some excellent garden tours in the works and there will be more information on them in April's newsletter. For now though, there is one tour already booked that I know you will enjoy: **Darts Hill Garden Park** in Surrey. I took a group of people there last March and we had an excellent guided tour of the gardens. This year we are going a little later in the season so there should be even more to look at and experience. Here is the information:

Darts Hill Garden Park Tour

Darts Hill Garden Park is a unique legacy that was donated to the citizens of the City of Surrey by Edwin and Francisca Darts. It consists of 7.5 acres of horticultural richness without equal in North America for its variety of rare and precious plants, shrubs and trees, having been developed over the past 55 years.

Date: Saturday, April 12th
Time: 10:00am to Noon
Cost: \$5.00 plus the cost of gas

I have booked for 12 people so far and if there is still space I can add more. So don't delay in booking. We will meet at The Natural Gardener at 9:00 am and arrive at the Gardens for our 10:00am start. We will car pool and if you are interested in driving please let me know. We should be back at the store by 1:00pm.

This is a beautiful, historical garden and a well informed guided tour. I hope you can make it.

I am also hoping to lead a tour to Free Spirit Nursery this spring and there will be tours to Lisa O'Donnell and Susan Koelink's gardens in June.



The Natural Gardener is celebrating its 5th anniversary next month and heading into its 6th spring season and I am still as excited as ever with the new plants I'm bringing in and with the old favourites we will be carrying. It is also so inspiring when you come to the store ready to get back into your gardens and reconnect with your plants. It's what I love about having this store and it's what I love about writing the newsletter.

Happy Gardening!

Bob