



Johnson County Master Gardener

THYMES

February 2021

MG Steering Committee Meeting

Wednesday, Feb. 10, 7 P.M.; virtual meeting via Zoom. Interested MGs are invited to participate—contact Shannon for instructions!

Thymes Deadline

Information/articles for the Thymes should be sent to Melissa Serenda at msserenda@gmail.com or Doug Geraets at: dougrph@aol.com.

Please send news, volunteer opportunities, stories, pictures, gardening book reviews, etc., for the March issue by **Friday, February 26**.

Growing Tomatoes Inside the House

BY LINDA DIGGELMANN

At the beginning of Nov., I sadly picked the last crop of my tasty cherry tomatoes from the potted tomato plant I had moved into the sunroom when the weather was getting too cold for the plant outside. This tomato plant thrived living on our south facing deck during the summer. It is quite sturdy and survived being tipped over a few times by wind—next year I will use a heavier pot. I looked forward to harvesting the cherry tomatoes for my salads.

When I picked the last tomato, I wondered if I could start a tomato plant from a cutting and get fresh tomatoes during the winter. Around Nov. 20, I took five 7-inch cuttings from the tips of the newest, leafy, actively growing stems that were still left on the fading plant. Lower leaves were removed from the main stem of the cuttings. I elected to put the cuttings into water rather than soil so I could see the roots forming. The rooting containers were set in

the sun of a south facing window. The water level in the container was monitored and replenished as needed to keep the cutting's lower stem continually immersed in water.

Within two weeks, tiny roots appeared at the place of the cut forming a fibrous root system. The next roots to form emerged from the little bumps you see on the tomato stem. These bumps, stem primordia (which are composed of very simple tissue), are the beginning of a new root node which will develop when in the presence of water or if the plant should lose contact with its existing root system. Planting your tomato plant deeper will encourage these primordia bumps to grow and provide a larger root system for the plant.



On Dec. 21, each cutting was planted in the garden mix I use in my raised beds and put back in the southern window. One cutting had a very small tomato which I removed so the plant's energy could be provided to root growth. Two other cuttings have tiny, yellow flowers forming which were also removed. After Christmas weekend, I will put the pots of tomatoes under grow lights.



Due to a reduction in the amount of sunlight received in our southern windows, I decided on Dec. 26 it was time to set up a grow light and get the tomato plants under it. There are blooms forming on the plant on the far right. These plants seemed determined to start blooming. You may wonder where this grow light is located. It

is hanging from a lower rod in one of our closets since I cannot setup my usual grow light area in the



house due to construction. In the back of the tomato plants are some cuttings I took from one of my coral bell plants. They are also doing well.

Jan. 21, 2021



Overall, these plants are thriving despite a few challenges. For starters, our granddaughter overwatered the plants so they were growing in mud for a few days. Next, when the plants were living in the closet and were all bent over, one of them got stepped on and destroyed. Finally, a little swarm of white flies appeared and took over. They are gone now thanks to an organic spray. Guess I should check the houseplants for flies!

The plants got too big for the closet space so they now live on the bottom shelf of the rack I use to start seedlings. Each vine is supported by a string that ties a pot to the grid above it. The idea is to add more strings between each shelf as the tomato plants grow through the grids of the shelf and wrap the vine around the string. The drape is closed so I could get a good photo. Generally, the plants have both ambient and bulb lighting. The plants looks like they have good support system but another challenge looms. In March, I will either have to get another rack to use for my seedlings or end the experiment with the tomato plants. Decisions, decisions...

Next task to learn: How do you pollinate indoor tomato plants? I will keep you posted on the progress of this experiment.

Project GREEN Second Sunday Forum

On Sunday, Feb. 14 at 2 P.M., grab your sweetheart and tune into our special Valentine's Day presentation by a favorite Project GREEN Forum speaker, [Dr. Donald Lewis](#), whose timely topic is *Love and Sex in the Garden*. Register on the ICPL website under Adult events on the Calendar.



Although we think of our gardens as peaceful places, look closely and you'll see a fair bit of rowdy behavior—sex! Plants have sex (through pollination) to reproduce, that is, to produce seeds. Plants are stationary, rooted in place, and unable to travel to a potential mate (and no “Tinder” for plants). Instead, many plants use intermediaries to accomplish the essential, sometimes promiscuous, process of sexual reproduction. Enter the pollinators! Dr. Lewis will help us examine the common pollinators in Iowa, their identification, challenges, and preservation.

Dr. Lewis, a professor and extension entomologist in the Department of Entomology at Iowa State University, is responsible for outreach education on insect pest management in turfgrass, trees and shrubs, fruit, vegetables, and households. He provides problem-solving identification and information to Iowans through the [ISU Plant and Insect Diagnostic Clinic](#), and teaches two online introductory entomology courses for ISU students. Dr. Lewis is also a frequent guest on “[Horticulture Friday](#)” with [Charity Nebbe](#) on Iowa Public Radio.

JCMG CE Sunday Program Feb. 28



JCMGs will offer another virtual continuing education program on **Sunday, Feb. 28**, from **1:30–2:30 P.M.** with **Linn County Master Gardener Jo Dillon** presenting *Attracting Pollinators to Your Garden*. She will provide gardeners with suggestions how to please the bees and butterflies. Our lives on planet Earth are intertwined with many creatures, including pollinators like bees and butterflies. But pollinators and their habitats are disappearing. Learn about what is happening to pollinators, what steps are being taken to protect pollinators, and how gardeners can provide much-needed habitat.

There is no cost to attend JCMG Continuing Education programs. The sessions are open to the public. Master Gardeners from surrounding counties who have completed their initial educational training are invited to participate. Interested Master Gardeners can register for the program by contacting Shannon Bielickie by email at bielicke@iastate.edu or by phone at 337-2145. Registered participants will be able to ask presenters questions using the Chat feature in Zoom during the presentation. City Channel 4 will live-stream the presentation and videotape for rebroadcast. The series will also be hosted on the JCMG Facebook page and videotaped for replay on JCMG YouTube. Check CC4 for rebroadcast times.

To Lawn or Not to Lawn? ...That is The Question

BY LINDA SCHREIBER

Perhaps you're a turfgrass lover who enjoys grooming your lawn as a place for kids to play or just a beautiful entrance to your property. If mowing is the only activity, maybe it's time to think about attracting pollinators that are in decline and managing your lawn more sustainably.

How about replacing all or a portion of your lawn. Instead of grass, consider a **groundcover** that spreads but does not grow tall and doesn't need mowing or maintenance. Groundcovers work well on slopes, angles and narrow strips—like a driveway. Consider using [Iowa native groundcovers](#); [groundcovers for sunny areas](#).

Ornamental grasses have many wonderful characteristics—low maintenance, drought-resistant, few pests or disease problems, don't require fertilizers and grow in most soils. Grasses add architecture to the landscape with different textures, heights and growing habits. Maintenance requires cutting the foliage back once a year, typically in the spring. Consider planting [native Iowa ornamental grasses](#).



Think of a **garden island or a border** along the driveway or sidewalk—replace a portion of your lawn with shrubs, grasses, flowers and/or edible plants. Start small—perhaps a 4-foot by 4-foot section. In subsequent years, divide and add new plants.

Garden with a theme? Native gardens are among the best choices regardless of what you choose to plant—flowers, shrubs, trees, ornamental grasses, vines or groundcovers. Your new area will create a sense of place and reflect the beauty and character of Iowa.

[Pollinator, wildlife gardens](#) incorporate a variety of plants that bloom throughout the season. Add [Iowa native plants](#) to provide nectar



and pollen, berries and seeds, and offer bird nesting sites.

A conservation landscape improves water quality and wildlife habitat.

A rain garden is suitable for areas where you want to slow rainwater runoff and increase water infiltration



into the soil. Communities sometimes offer rebates or tax credit incentives to offset the cost of implementing approved [stormwater management projects](#).

Creating an edible landscape is another alternative—a raised bed or in-ground garden will provide options to grow your vegetables, fruits and herbs. Many herbs are deer-resistant and can be incorporated into your ornamental garden. Iowa State University offers instruction to [prepare the soil for edible gardens](#).



Plant a tree to provide shade, privacy and add value to your home. Trees reduce air pollution, store carbon and help control stormwater erosion. Plant [trees native to Iowa](#) for the best success.

If you live on an acreage, you might consider [establishing a meadow](#) to enhance biodiversity by providing shelter, food and nesting sites for birds, butterflies, beneficial insects and pollinators. Typically meadows incorporate 50 to 70 percent native



grasses and flowering native perennial plants that have adapted to your microclimate and soil conditions. Seeds from a reputable supplier that

collects seeds from Iowa are the best sources. Wildflower seed mixes found in garden centers typically include annual flower seeds that are not native.

Removing turfgrass is not without problems—your neighbors may not endorse your new landscape so you may want to consider a sign for your yard that explains what you are doing. Maintaining a clean border helps. Sometimes homeowner associations regulate what can and cannot be done on your property. Be sure to check local ordinances.

Whatever you decide your property is your private space but also part of the world. What you put there matters. Replacing grass does foster a healthier watershed and creates a beautiful, enjoyable, wildlife-friendly space that requires less maintenance, water and chemicals. If you decide to scrap these ideas in favor of a grass lawn consider tips to properly [maintain your backyard](#).

A Beginner's Guide to Starting Seeds

BY LINDA SCHREIBER

Recently, a friend asked me when they should start seeds to transplant in the garden? Two easy steps will provide a guide: a) on your calendar count the weeks backward from the date you want to plant outside, and b) read the seed packets.

In Iowa, the typical planting date is between Mother's Day (May 9) and Memorial Day (May 31). Because that's a three-week span, let's mark May 22 as week 1, May 15 is week 2, May 8 is week 3, and so on.

Look at the number of weeks each seed packet recommends for germination and sort the seed packets by the number of weeks. To avoid leggy, weak transplants, it's better to sow seeds a little late than it is to start them too early. Young, vigorous transplants will transition to the garden with greater success than spindly, overgrown ones.

Remember small seeds usually take longer to germinate than big ones. Germination times are on

the seed packets. Some seeds may need special treatment before planting so look for that information as you sort the packets. You don't want to learn too late that a certain seed needs a month in the refrigerator before germination can occur.

The University of Minnesota Extension has easy steps to follow:

- Sow fresh seeds individually into each container according to package directions.
- If you are unsure about seeding depth, a rule of thumb is to plant a seed four times as deep as its width.
 - Plant a seed deep enough that three more seeds could be placed directly above it.
- Identify each container or tray with a tag. Use a permanent marker.
- Some seeds require light to germinate.
 - Cover them with a thin layer of fine vermiculite, porous enough to permit light to penetrate, yet keep the medium moist enough to encourage seed germination.
- Place cell packs containing seeds that need darkness for germination in dark plastic bags or cover them with several layers of newspaper until the seeds sprout.
- When using older seeds with lower germination rates, plant two or more seeds per cell.
 - Once the seedlings have developed true leaves, cut off all but the healthiest true leaf at ground level with scissors.
 - Avoid separating or pulling the unwanted seedlings as this could damage the roots of the one you want to keep.

You will likely need to add light because too often natural sunlight isn't enough. A combination of fluorescent "cool white" and "natural daylight" tubes provide a good light source for starting plants. Use chains to raise the light as the plants grow is recommended.



- Keep lights no more than 4 inches above the tops of your seedlings; as close as 2 inches is ideal. A lack of light is the major cause of elongated, skinny stems.
- Plants need 12 to 16 hours of light daily. Don't leave the lights on continuously, as many plants need some dark period each night to develop properly.
- A simple timer can be part of the set-up so lights are turned off and on automatically.

Many gardeners recommend using a heating pad to provide a constant heat source. Most seeds started indoors germinate sooner when the potting mix is warm. The temperature of potting mixes is generally cooler than room temperatures. Bottom heat can help prevent damping off.

Keep the potting mix moist but not damp while seeds are germinating. A spray bottle filled with water will provide gentle moisture without washing the mix out of the container. Bottom watering is helpful but be sure to drain excess water. Seedlings don't need to be fertilized until they have several sets of true leaves. Fertilize once a week at ¼ strength and water with plain water the rest of the week.

You may have to transplant seedlings into larger containers, peat pots, or plastic cups with holes in the bottom. Move seedlings by the "root ball" using a spoon for support. Don't hold a seedling by the tender stem as you may crush it.



Remember that plants started indoors will need to be "hardened" off before transplanting in the garden. Two weeks before planting outdoors, set the plants outside for a few hours in the shade in an

area protected from the wind. Bring the plants back inside before temperatures drop at night. Each day leave the plants out a little longer and expose them to more direct sun. At the end of two weeks, the seedlings can stay outside in a sunny area until you are ready to plant them into the garden.

JCMG Hortline Happenings

BY CARL AND MARY HENSLEY



The JCMG Hortline is happy to report that we have had approximately 81 contacts since we went remote in March 2020. Carl created a format for replying to e-mail questions and we also responded to phone contacts directed to the Hortline by the Extension and Outreach office. Our standard approach includes researching the specific topic, providing a narrative response, and when available also attaching internet links and/or pdf files with relevant information from educational and other authoritative sources.

The actual number of Hortline questions reached approximately 130 across several categories. Of the types of questions received, the most popular related to “Weeds and Pests” (29), followed closely by “Vegetables and Small Fruits” (20), then “Flowers” (19), plus “Trees and Shrubs” (18). Other categories of interest included “Lawn” (7) and “Houseplants” (1). The totals shown in parentheses represent an approximate number of questions, since many inquiries encompassed multiple categories.



Photo by Mary & Carl Hensley

Gardeners contacting the Hortline also brought many interesting questions on a wide variety of general horticulture topics (35), such as identification of insects and plants, proper pruning, application of fertilizer and amending soil and mulching. There was interest in learning about native gardening; identifying Iowa DNR protected plants/invasive species; and making gardening choices that support bees, butterflies and other pollinators, as well as understanding the impact that pesticide use might have on pollinators. Landscaping questions included issues related to transplanting trees, and recommendations on replacing trees after the derecho in August 2020.



Photo by Mary & Carl Hensley

There were also many new gardeners with wonderful questions about how to start a garden and how to create raised beds. Experienced gardeners also contacted the Hortline for information, as many were trying something new in their gardens or expanding an existing garden. We also answered a question from an individual interested in becoming a Master Gardener.

We received feedback from many individuals that found the resources and the information we gave them helped with their gardening goals. This all during a year when many people had the opportunity to spend more time in their yards, learning more about gardening and finding more enjoyment in their gardens!



Photos by Mary & Carl Hensley

 MG Birthdays 	
February 2021	
13	Carolyn Murphy
14	Li-Hsein Lin
16	Jeffrey Smith
20	Nicole Pearson
22	Julie Thompson
28	Jeff Koepp

MG Upcoming Events/Volunteer Opportunities

*****Check organization website for cancellations prior to event date.*****

February 2021

Bur Oak Land Trust

<https://www.facebook.com/BurOakLandTrust/events>

Wednesday, Feb. 10, 6 to 7 P.M.

"The Nest Best Thing: Building and Monitoring Nest Boxes for Birds" with Bur Oak Land Trust).

Online. Join Bur Oak Land Trust's Conservation Education Specialist, Darcey Gans as she teaches us how to choose, build, and maintain a nest box. Learn how you can use your nest box to help scientists' track and study birds by contributing to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's NestWatch program.

Registration required; space is limited. Register at <https://www.icpl.org/events/35895/nest-best-thing-building-and-monitoring-nest-boxes-birds-bur-oak-land-trust>.

Johnson County Conservation

<http://www.johnson-county.com/conservation>

salgreen@co.johnson.ia.us

<https://www.facebook.com/pg/johnsoncountyconservation/events/>

Ongoing through February.

The Great Yeti Hunt (Self-Guided). Various locations. There's a yeti on the move, and she's roaming through Johnson County Conservation parks!

Every two weeks, the yeti will show up somewhere new—but in classic yeti style, she only roams in the most wild places—places with few visitors and few trails. Anyone tracking her should be comfortable navigating and visiting more primitive park settings and hiking 2-4 miles (in some cases off trail). Every two weeks, we'll help you find her by posting clues to her location on the Facebook event page. Follow at <https://www.facebook.com/events/819511732162713/>.

Linn County-ISU Extension

<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/linn/>

Saturdays in February.

Linn County Master Gardener Series. All events via Zoom. Register through Indian Creek Nature Center.

- Feb. 6:
 - 9 to 10 A.M. Outstanding Trees for the Midwest Home Garden
 - 10 to 11 A.M. Permaculture 101
 - 11 A.M. to 12 P.M. Milk Jug Greenhouse
- Feb. 13:
 - 10 to 11 A.M. Micro Prairie Gardening
 - 11 A.M. to 12 P.M. Native Bees
- Feb. 20:
 - 9 to 10 A.M. Blueberries Strawberries Raspberries Oh My
 - 10 to 11 A.M. Climbing Color: Clematis in Your Garden

- Feb. 27:
 - 9 to 10 A.M. Critter Control
 - 10 to 11 A.M. Seed Starting at Home
 - 11 A.M. to 12 P.M. Trees for Bees and Other Pollinators

Cost \$5 per person/session. Find details and register for all via ICNC's event calendar: <http://indiancreeknaturecenter.doubleknot.com/event/calendar/3421>.

Project GREEN

<http://www.projectgreen.org/> and <https://www.facebook.com/www.projectgreen.org>

Sunday, Feb. 14, 2 to 4 P.M.

Second Sunday Garden Forum: Love & Sex in the Garden. Online event. Grab your sweetheart and join us for our special Valentine's Day presentation by a favorite Project Green Forum speaker, Dr. Donald Lewis from ISU, whose timely topic will be "Love and Sex in the Garden". While we think of our gardens as tranquil, peaceful places, look closely and you'll see a fair bit of rowdy behavior...sex! Plants have sex (pollination) to reproduce, i.e., produce seeds. Plants are stationary and can't travel to meet a potential mate (there's no "Tinder" for plants). Instead, many plants use intermediaries to accomplish the essential process of sexual reproduction. Enter the pollinators! Dr. Lewis will help us identify the common pollinators in Iowa and examine the challenges they face and what we can do to aide in their preservation. Register at <https://www.icpl.org/events/35570/second-sunday-garden-forum-love-sex-garden>.

Trees Forever

<http://www.treesforever.org/Events>

Thursday, Feb. 4, 12 to 1 p.m.

DNR Seedling Webinar. Join Trees Forever Field Coordinator Emily Swihart for an overview of the DNR Seedling application, including an open Q&A session. Register at <http://www.treesforever.org/SeedlingWebinar>.

Additional Resources/Event Opportunities

100 Grannies

<http://www.100grannies.org>

Backyard Abundance

<http://backyardabundance.org/events>

Eastern Iowa Bird Watchers/IC Birds

<http://www.iowacitybirdclub.org/events>

Iowa State Extension

<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/calendar/>

Johnson County-ISU Extension

<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/johnson/>

New Pioneer Coop

<https://www.newpi.coop/community>

Seed Savers

<https://www.seedsavers.org/events>



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Mail can be sent to:

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