

MGV NEWSLETTER

All Things Master Gardening

Summer 2020

Arboretum Update

We don't know when the arboretum will return to normal access. The general appearance of the arboretum has been impacted and will be slightly reduced. The Wooster Campus grounds crew, which takes care of mowing the arboretum, is short-staffed due to the state-wide hiring freeze. This, compounded by the weather, has made mowing the grounds on a weekly basis a challenge. Visitors to the arboretum may notice shaggy grass.

People may also notice some weedy areas in the arboretum. Without the help from volunteers and being short a staff position ourselves, we are not able to maintain the gardens to the level we would like. This is not to say that the gardens look bad. Quite the contrary, they look great considering the reduced maintenance.

Our integrated weed management strategy is paying off right now; we've worked diligently over the last five years to reduce the weed seed bank by eliminating those weeds going to seed in the gardens. As a result, we have fewer weeds (We still have weeds, just less of them). The three years following the tornado were nightmarish regarding the amount of weeds in the arboretum. We believe that the tornado deposited weed seeds in the gardens along with compost that was brought in following the clean-up of beds for debris like nails and glass.

Visitors to the arboretum can expect to see beautiful gardens and plants as they normally would. The arboretum isn't being neglected as some might believe. We were fortunate enough to have offered student positions to three students before the hiring freeze went into effect. We have three summer students and help one day a week from ATI horticulture staff member, Shane Berner.

We don't know when the visitor center will reopen or when staff and faculty will be allowed to return to campus. The majority of our staff is now considered essential due to the fact that Secrest was never closed and our staff was needed to maintain the gardens. However, our offices (except for Jason) are in our homes. The biggest challenges have been the loss of personal connectivity that comes with sharing a physical space, and poor internet connection for some staff members. Staff members are currently working between home offices and the arboretum grounds.

--Paul Snyder



LUV 2 DIG

If you see this license plate on a vehicle in Secrest Arboretum, you probably will find Master Gardener Sue Cook somewhere nearby. The plate actually describes Sue pretty accurately, with gardening being one of her true passions in life. She has through the years converted a quarter acre of land next to her home into one of the premier shade gardens in the area. It was actually featured in the 2013 Purple Ribbon Garden Tour.

We recently had the opportunity to chat with Sue to get some tips for starting a shade garden. Not everyone has a large tract of land to devote to a garden, but that is not a problem. She would recommend starting small and doing your research. Although she has a number of very good books on gardening, Sue's most helpful tool is her cell phone. If you find yourself taken with a particular plant at a gardening center, look it up on some reliable web sites to see what its growing requirements are regarding soil type, amount of shade/sun per day and cold hardiness. A garden is always a study in trial and error. Mistakes are a part of the process, and plants can always be moved.

Although hosta is usually the first plant you think of for a shady area, Sue feels it really is a good place to start. From there, you might consider working with shades of green to develop some contrast.



Another of her favorites is the hellebore. Its blooms last a very long time and actually change color as the weeks pass. She also likes to use natural woodland plants such as bellwort, golden seal, woodland phlox, hardy begonia, trillium and Solomon seal/false Solomon seal. They should be purchased from a garden store or native plant sale, not dug out of their natural habitat. Beware of native plants that can be aggressive, like violets and lily of the valley. They are pretty but need to be contained.

Plants should be given time to grow into a space. Although it's tempting to want a full-looking bed, Sue reminds us of the sleep, creep and leap

maxim. With a perennial, you can expect it to sleep the first year, creep the second and then leap after that, perhaps to the point of needing to be thinned. She is never reluctant to ask for a start of a plant from someone else's garden. She loves to share plants with others.

There are challenges to any garden. In her situation, it is the natural world. Even the shade itself is a challenge, but others include deer, raccoons, moles and slugs. You have to learn to live with nature. Consider buying deer resistant plants or perhaps plants with thick leaves that are slug resistant.

A good garden is high maintenance, so enjoyment of the process is necessary. You have to love to dig in the soil. Soil preparation is very important. Sue is diligent in using mulch and compost to continually improve it. She loves the feel of a rich, enhanced soil that tumbles through her fingers.

Even though her garden requires a lot of work, Sue takes time to enjoy it daily. She finds nothing more pleasant than sipping her morning coffee there. When asked how she would describe her garden, the words “peaceful, very therapeutic, a place of respite, peace, quiet and hope” came to mind. “Growing things represents looking to the future, a spiritual experience.”

-- Janet Broda



Tracing Our Volunteer Roots

Although the origins of the Secrest Arboretum can be traced back to 1908, the creation of a formal organization for volunteers similar to what we have today began in 1992. We owe much to Mr. Jack Miller, a resident of Strasburg, Ohio who took a plant identification class at ATI in the early 1990s and became one of Secrest Arboretum's pioneering volunteers.

Here are excerpts from an article titled “Rosemary...Pansies...and A Man Named Jack” written by Jennifer Kiko in Spring 2000 shortly after Mr. Miller's passing, for the Green Times, the newsletter he created for the arboretum.



“ Ken Cochran, the instructor and curator of Secrest Arboretum, encouraged his students to visit the arboretum and study the plants.

Cochran was out in the arboretum pruning shrubs one afternoon when an apt pupil approached him.

‘What are you doing here? You should be in the halls of ivy! You’re a professional. What you need is a group of volunteers to do this work.’

‘What I need is someone to coordinate the volunteers,’ Cochran replied. “ If you’ll do that, I’ll have volunteers.’

Almost immediately a meeting was held and in July 1992, five dedicated gardeners formed the Secrest Arboretum Volunteers. The volunteers worked on many projects including plant care, new plantings, labelling and nursery work. Jack said they should hold a little plant sale in the spring.

It was not only Jack’s idea to have the sale, but to feature rare plants for a silent and oral auction. The plant sale was the first Plant Discovery Day, held each year on the first Saturday in May. After that, the

industrious group became incorporated, elected officers and wrote a constitution. Jack was elected president.

In 1993 Jack suggested the volunteers take the plant sale proceeds and build a garden railway in the arboretum. The little engine was chugging merrily around its new tracks when the Wooster Garden Festival was held later that summer. The railway wasn't the only featured activity though.

Jack gathered a 55-gallon drum, cement blocks, chicken wire and a stove pipe and proceeded to build a beehive oven in the arboretum. During the festival Jack and several volunteers baked bread in the new oven and served it to hundreds of delighted visitors.

Jack decided Secrest Arboretum needed a newsletter to educate and inform interested gardeners. He was a former journalist and had worked for newspapers in Ohio, Oklahoma and Indiana. His gardening articles were published in the New York Times and Cleveland Plain Dealer. Putting his journalistic expertise and love of gardening to work, Jack created and edited Green Times.

Jack Miller, former journalist, founder of the Secrest Arboretum Volunteers, and imaginative motivator to many passed away on Thursday, January 27, 2000."

According to Paul Snyder, "We have a garden area dedicated to him. It is located on what some know as the Rhododendron Service Road. There is a set of steps that go down the hill to a deck".

-- Herb Broda

Featured Plant of the Season

An Ohio summer garden is not complete without at least one hydrangea saturated with blooming flowerheads that brighten the landscape. In Ohio six species dominate, some more successfully than others. One beauty of particular note is this season's featured plant—*Hydrangea paniculata*, perhaps better known to most as the panicle hydrangea.

The first cultivar "Grandiflora," often referred to as Grandma's PG or PeeGee, was introduced to the United States in 1862 from Japan. This deciduous shrub with its cone-shaped panicle has a long history on the lawns of the United States. In recent years, new cultivars with strong stems, upright flowers, and color varieties have renewed the interest of American gardeners.

Hydrangea paniculata is hardy in zones 3—8, making it an ideal Ohio garden choice. The flowerhead with a primarily pyramidal shape is a mix of showy sterile flowers and smaller, fertile flowers. Several cultivars are reputed to be highly attractive to pollinators. The plant blooms from late July through October, and the range of cultivar colors include



white, ivory, lime green and pink. Due to its genetics, not its environment, the colors are true, and most cultivars put on a show as they morph from pale to darker shades.

Cultivars range in height from two to twenty feet and are available in tree form. Shorter selections include “Bombshell,” “Little Lime,” and “Bobo.” Since the plant blooms on new wood, gardeners do not need to fear pruning this hydrangea. Cutting low or thin will produce larger flowers. Although *Hydrangea paniculata* is adaptable to most conditions, the plant appreciates moist well-drained loamy soil, for low moisture will cause fading blooms. Plant in sun to partial shade. Popular varieties to look for include “Limelight,” “Vanilla Strawberry,” “Little Lamb,” “Pinky Winky,” “Fire and Ice,” and “Tardiva.” For more information on hydrangea species for Ohio gardens, view Eric Barrett’s article “Selecting Hydrangeas for the Home Landscape” (available at ohioline.edu/factsheet/hyg-1263).



Over the next five years, Master Gardener Volunteers will have the opportunity to witness the Secrest Arboretum *Hydrangea Paniculata* trial of 32 cultivars with three replications of each. Currently 18 cultivars

are in the nursery and will be installed in the fall. According to Paul Snyder, “The primary goal of the hydrangea paniculata trial is to recommend superior taxa based on the following observations: winter hardiness, floral display (including flower size, quantity, color, bloom period, faded flower quality), ability to attract pollinators, disease resistance, and overall plant habit (including height and width, foliage quality, stem strength).” Plan to follow this interesting study as you wend your way through Secrest Arboretum.

--Pat Warner

From the Curator...

First off, I would like to apologize. I suspect that the recent heat wave in Wooster might be the result of the explosion of yellow, orange, and red in Secrest’s new Coneflower Trial Garden. Over the last few weeks, our collection of 109 unique varieties (over 300 individual plants) representing the genus *Echinacea* has burst into bloom at the north end of the former Rose Garden. It has begun attracting a lot of attention—from both curious visitors and nectar-craving pollinators. Thank you to all of the MGV’s who helped make this exciting endeavor possible.



As anyone who has visited a garden center or shopped online for plants knows, the choices of *Echinacea* have skyrocketed over the last decade. The mind-boggling array of commercially-available cultivars is exciting but can also be frustrating. This project is part of a three-year evaluation to determine the best coneflowers for our area. Horticultural traits such as winter survival, growth habit, flower quality, disease resistance and pollinator visitation will be recorded and published as a service to our visitors and industry collaborators. We are also developing a method for visitors to vote for their favorite varieties, so look for an announcement on the Secrest homepage and Facebook within the next few weeks. Secrest Arboretum has a rich history of ornamental plant evaluation and we are thrilled about kicking off a new era of relevant, practical research.



We will not be resting on our laurels (or, um, coneflowers). As scores of dead and critically ill roses have disappeared, hundreds of square feet of new bed space has become available. This fall will see the planting of our next trial—*Hydrangea paniculata* (panicle hydrangea) cultivars—adjacent to the *Echinacea* trial. The breeding and marketing frenzy associated with these summer garden stalwarts has also proliferated of late. The situation calls to mind the title of a recent Simon & Schuster release: *Too Much and Never Enough*. A side-by-side showdown between the old favorites and new kids on the block is a great way to cut

through marketing hype fueled by perfect catalog photos and sickeningly cute trademark names. One of our objectives at Secrest is to provide unbiased data to help nurseries determine which varieties to grow, designers and landscapers select which varieties to install, and gardeners to decide which plants are worth our hard-earned dollars.

Both of these evaluation projects would likely succeed with just plants. However, making them an engaging display for public education and enjoyment requires a good labeling system. With the advent of the *Echinacea* trial, we are also pleased to introduce a brand new, permanent means of identifying each plant. Thanks to last year's purchase of a newfangled laser engraver, we can now produce up to 180 labels per hour. Look for these invaluable identification aids to begin appearing all over the Arboretum. Surely it won't take long to label all 15,000 trees, shrubs and perennials, right?

Thanks for all that you do. We are extremely grateful for your dedication as we diversify and improve Secrest Arboretum for future generations. Enjoy the rest of your summer. One note of warning: if you do come to see the Coneflower Trial Garden, I recommend quality sunglasses and a minimum UPF30 sunblock!

--Jason Veil

Arboretum Events

Because of the uncertainty of the times, we are not publishing an events list in this issue. To get the most up-to-date information about what is on and what is off, go to the Secrest Arboretum website.