

## THE GARDEN PATH , DECEMBER 2013

A publication of Kerr Lake Extension  
Master Gardeners

### PLANT OF THE MONTH - DECEMBER

By Marty Finkel

Japanese Fatsia (*Fatsia Japonica*) is the plant for you if you're looking for something large, distinctive, and different from the usual plants recommended for shade such as ferns, hostas, hellebores, azaleas, etc. It offers a lovely contrast when planted with them, but a lot of space is needed since Japanese Fatsia can reach six feet tall by the same width and has lobed leaves that can reach 16 inches across and are evergreen. Its blooms are a little strange-looking but certainly attention-getting, and it blooms at the JC Raulston Arboretum from November through January. It reproduces by seeds, and the seedlings can be potted and given to friends. It prefers rich, well-drained soil in open to deep shade (no hot sun). Foliage will be larger and look better with regular summer watering but it will tolerate only occasional watering during dry weather once the plant has become established. If you have the space, a mass planting of Japanese Fatsia would be stunning; however, it works well as a specimen or a companion plant.

Photos are from the JC Raulston Arboretum.



### CHECKLIST FOR DECEMBER

By Mary Jane Bosworth

*I'd rather have roses on my table than diamonds on my neck.*  
Emma Goldman



- ✓ Fertilize cool season grasses around Thanksgiving, and again around Valentine's Day.
- ✓ Winter applications of lime are beneficial to spring gardens since lime takes a long time to react with the soil, but always best to lime according to soil test results!
- ✓ Add your raked leaves to your compost bin for good compost in the spring.
- ✓ There is still time to plant spring blooming bulbs.
- ✓ Cut back Sedum, Mexican Bush Sage, Fall Asters and Garden mums within a few inches of the crown.
- ✓ Add colorful, cold hardy annuals to your garden for color this winter.
- ✓ Weed out the "weed" trees and shrubs in wooded areas while they are easily removed and before they compete for light and nutrients with desirable plants.
- ✓ And the most important thing to remember – make a list of garden items and plants for your holiday wish list!

### GARDEN TO DO – DECEMBER

By Carl Shafer

Most outside gardening activities will be finished by now. Trees and shrubs can still be planted as long as the ground is not frozen. If you are adventuresome, try a cold frame in a sunny area to grow radishes, lettuce, spinach, and other greens.

Still time to apply lime, if needed and the ground is not frozen.

Most pruning can be put off until late winter or early spring when the weather is more comfortable. You can do fruit trees and grapes in Jan if the weather allows, otherwise do it in Feb. See the Feb 13 issue of this publication for pruning information web sites.

If you want to grow your own onion transplants, start seeds in December so that plants can be set out in February or early March. Use short-day or day neutral varieties for our area.

Inventory your left over seeds. Do a germination test if you are uncertain of their viability.

If you are growing transplants, note that the average last frost date for the Henderson area is about April 21. Some seeds need to be started as much as 12 weeks before setting out. Thus, seeds will need to be ordered in December or early January to be available by mid to late January. For web resources for planning your garden and growing transplants, see the Feb 13 issue of this publication. Note that the Central N.C. Planting calendar has Cabbage and Leaf Lettuce being transplanted the first week of Feb and Broccoli, Cauliflower, Celery, Kale, Kohlrabi, Leek, and Parsley being transplanted in mid Feb. For a lead time of eight weeks, that means starting seeds in early Dec for first plants and continuing for about two months for successive plantings. The first plantings may need season extension steps for cold temperatures and the last for the heat. A recent "Season Extension" posting can be found at: ([www.ces.ncsu.edu/chatham/ag/SustAg/seasonextension2012.html](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/chatham/ag/SustAg/seasonextension2012.html)). Also see "Resource List for Season Extension" at: ([www.ces.ncsu.edu/chatham/ag/SustAg/seasonextensionlist.html](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/chatham/ag/SustAg/seasonextensionlist.html)).

If we have a dry spell in Dec or Jan and the soil can be tilled, you may want to prepare part of your garden for planting early cool season crops because in the late winter and early spring the ground is often too wet to work. Note peas and bulb onions can be seeded in Jan and many plants can be seeded in Feb.

For the latest research results, see [www.sciencedaily.com](http://www.sciencedaily.com) News & articles in Science, Health, Environment & Technology. Most interesting results will be found in the Plants & Animal section under: Agriculture and Food or Botany. The Garden Professors have a new web address: <http://blogs.extension.org/gardenprofessors/>

## HERB OF THE MONTH

By Edna "Ladybug" Lovelace Gaston

Lemon Balm - *Melissa officinalis*

**Height:** 2 ft.

**Flowers:** late summer, tiny, usually white to pale yellow

**Propagation:** seeds (sow uncovered but keep moist, seeds are viable for several years), cuttings (summer or fall), division, layering

**Growing conditions:** full sun to part shade, well-drained soil

**Cultivation:** very easy to grow or increase plantings but occasionally has downy mildew. Pinch frequently to keep plants bushy and to avoid seeding

Of all the lemon-scented herbs I have, Lemon Balm is my favorite. However Caveat Cultor (grower beware!) This plant can take over area. With its tendency to spread, growing in a container or separate bed is best. It is wonderful to stop erosion on a slope. Unless pinched back it can become leggy. Hence it is not a good choice for the formal garden.

Lemon balm has a long history of sharing its wonderful fragrance. It is referenced in Homer's *Odyssey*. For usefulness, Pliny noted that it was a favorite of bees. For this reason, among others, I have a bed just outside my vegetable garden. And he is definitely correct – during the summer this plant lures bees to the area where they migrate to the vegetables for pollination. This is very appropriate as in Greek mythology Melissa was a nymph who fed honey to the baby Zeus. Zeus was hidden from his father Cronus as the father was intent on consuming his son. When Cronus discovered what Melissa had done, he turned her into an earthworm. Zeus continued to have a taste for honey, was distressed at what had happened to Melissa so he turned her into a honeybee.

Herbalists of old have many references to the wonders of Lemon Balm. Beekeepers believe it helps bees find their hives if rubbed inside. This herb is a wonderful addition to potpourri. According to the *Merry Wives of Windsor* Lemon Balm is a good furniture polish. With origins in the Mediterranean region, this herb migrated to the New World and quickly became established. In a list of plants grown by Thomas Jefferson at Monticello, Lemon Balm is in the inventory.

This plant certainly deserves a place in most gardens. After working in the garden during hot weather, just brush across the leaves – so refreshing. But watch out for the bees.

Plant catalogs have started arriving – don't forget the herbs.

Additional Information:

- Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs. Claire Kowalchik and William H. Hylton, Editors. Rodale Press, Emmaus, PA, 1987.
- Herbs Their Culture and Uses. Rosetta E. Clarkson. The Macmillan Company, New York, NY, 1942.

## **THE TYROS' CORNER -DECEMBER**

By Eileen Novak

Walking on the wild side.

Anyone remember the Kevin Costner movie about a farmer who builds a baseball field? The recurring whisper "If you build it, they will come" is haunting, isn't it? When we moved here in November of 2011, I was thrilled at the prospect of being able to see deer on the property; graceful creatures with those soulful eyes. Well 2 years later, my recurring theme is "if you plant it, they will come – and eat it". Just as haunting, let me assure you.

First, let me tell you, the deer here are xenophobes. They don't like strangers and I'm strange to them. So they show up at night, when I'm asleep. So much for watching them. But they are there. Two months after moving in, my mother and I were rock-picking in the back (a necessary pastime if you don't want to buy new lawnmower blades monthly) and we noticed deer track. Lots of deer track! So many, in fact, that we speculated that my back yard was the Arthur Murray dance hall for deer. You know, the place with the footprints on the floor with the numbers for the cha-cha, the waltz, the polka. I can tell you where the conga line is for the deer, where the wallflowers wait to be noticed and where the bucks pretend not to notice.

So armed with the knowledge that there were deer here, lots of them, my husband researched what kind of deer fencing was available. We wound up buying two 50 foot rolls of quality plastic deer fence, and getting four-by-fours to surround the garden. He built me a gate and I was the proud caretaker of

a nicely protected garden.

Soon after my carrots sprouted in one long, orderly row, I noticed that large clumps of them had gone missing. And there were little round droppings reminiscent of when my younger sister had pet rabbits.....Ah yes, the little creature did not think that plastic was much of a deterrent. It gnawed right through a couple of places and helped itself to my plants. So husband and I went back to the store for some metal rabbit fencing with which to surround the deer fencing. Several hours of work in 90 degree heat later, I had a nicely impregnable fortress.

Until the corn ripened, that is. One day I pulled an ear of corn to test it and my husband and I shared it for lunch. The NEXT MORNING I went out to gather the fruits of my labor and found that some creatures had demolished it. Many cobs were bare, on the ground. Some stalks were pulled over and the rest of the corn had been stripped and eaten while still on the stalk. Two whole rows of corn and nothing left for us. <sigh> We know it was raccoons because some of the perpetrators left their footprints on the four-by-four doorframe as they exited.

As far as I know there is no way to fence them out, so we invested in humane traps. The first morning, we noticed that the trap was moved a few feet but not triggered. The suet cake we put in there as bait was gone – possibly too close to the edge and within reach of the little things' paws. We reset the trap and waited. The second morning the trap had moved about 15 feet from the start point but was still empty. One more time, we set it up but this time we set up one of my husband's game cameras to catch the action. One large raccoon showed up in the pictures AND in the trap. There is one less raccoon to raid my garden.

This year, I planted a small lettuce garden just outside the back door. Nasturtiums as the front border, 2 rows of assorted heat tolerant greens and the final row, against the house, of swiss chard. The mental picture is lovely. The reality is less so. There is a groundhog somewhere in the back (3 acres so I can't find him easily). Said groundhog has good taste. Buttercrunch, Romaine, and believe it or not, swiss chard. The other greens – mustard, arugula and the like (relatives of the cruciferous vegetables) do not appeal at all. He, however, is much wilier than the raccoon. Despite offerings of lettuce, bananas and cantaloupe, he has yet to be entrapped. I have seen him in the back on numerous occasions,

and the darn thing has ESP. He can feel me looking at him and he looks around furtively and scoots for the nearest cover.

No happy ending this time, I'm afraid. The moral of this story is: plant enough to share or invest in window boxes for the salad greens.

## INTERESTING TID-BITS FOR DECEMBER

By Marty Finkel,

Kerr Lake Extension Master Gardener

- This link is excellent for plant identification, with over 5,400 plants that have been or are growing in the display gardens at the Missouri Botanical Garden. There are photographs, culture, noteworthy characteristics, problems, and garden uses for each plant. The information is presented in an easy-to-use format and is one of the most useful sites I have seen.  
<http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/plantfinder/plantfindersearch.aspx>
- Scientists have known for years about the ability of bees to use nectar guides on flowers to find nectar and pollen. Now scientists have found there is an interactive electrical charge that functions as a guide! Jeff Cox, in the article "Bee Positive" in the Sept./Oct. 2013 issue of *Horticulture* magazine, writes "Flowering plants, rooted to the ground, carry a 100-volt negative charge. A bee, on the other hand, because of the friction of its rapidly beating wings, carries a 200-volt positive charge." He goes on to explain that the fuzzy hairs on the bee's body begin to bristle as it gets to within a few centimeters of a flower. The flower helps out by giving a little power surge of negative electricity as it senses the approach of a bee. The surge continues while the bee goes about its business, and it increases for a bit after the bee leaves. The research comes from sensory biologist Daniel Robert at the University of Bristol in England, reported in *LiveScience*, and his theory is that bees don't have time to waste on flowers where the nectar has been harvested. Flowers emit a different electrical signal after a bee has sipped their nectar; this tells other bees the well is dry, so to speak.

Here's an even more fantastic aspect (quoting Jeff Cox): "Robert's team found that the

electrical charge from the plant may even hold clues to where the bee can find the richest source of nectar. In a brilliant bit of scientific ingenuity, they wafted positively charged colored aerosol particles over flowering plants and found that the electrical activity of the plants isn't an amorphous cloud. It is emitted in striking patterns." Other scientists, such as Thomas Seeley, a behavioral biologist at Cornell in reporting his reaction to *Scientific American*, and Anne Leonard of the U. of Nevada in Reno reporting her reaction to Susan Milius of *Science News*, are very excited about these discoveries.

- Interesting news on the Deutzia front: while most deutzias have a ho-hum appearance after the two-week bloom period in spring, the dwarf 'Nikko' (2' tall by 5' spread) has leaves that turn a deep burgundy in the fall. It was introduced by the U.S. National Arboretum in the late 1980's. Now there is 'Yuki Snowflake', introduced this year, which is similar in size and shape but reported to bloom more heavily. The 3 to 5' Chardonnay Pearls ('Duncan') has been out for a while, adding summer foliage of bright yellow-green to the Deutzia collection, and the new Crème Fraiche ('Mincream') has medium green leaves edged in white with a height of around 2'.

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