Want to feel better about the future? Plant a tree. That technique worked for me back on October 27, when Master Gardeners Cathy Town and Beverly Reinhardt and I participated in the planting of 50 trees in Troy. Organized by Capital Roots and funded by a grant from the Department of Environmental Conservation, we met at a vacant lot along Sixth Avenue to organize, then fanned out in teams throughout town. My trio was paired with six young ladies from Troy High School’s Environmental Science Club and their teacher, Seth Cohen. Our students enthusiastically dug into the sod, powering through compacted clay and removing sizable rocks. Although the adults were ready to work, we stepped back and provided guidance as the ladies (all Juniors) made the dirt fly. Their keen interest and upbeat attitude brightened a day which soon turned to sleet and rain.

Street tree guru Sharon DiLorenzo of Capital Roots carefully selects the site for each tree, choosing a species which will fit amongst streets, sidewalks, lampposts and other urban architecture. A nearby home or business owner must promise to act as the tree’s guardian and provide water. Sharon has been coordinating tree plantings in Troy since the early 90’s and knows better than anyone the complexities of not only choosing the right tree for each space but the often hidden factors which can spell doom or success.

First in the ground was a pair of ‘Redpointe’ maples. The chosen location was farther off the street than most, which allowed for these larger trees, which under ideal conditions may reach 45 feet tall with strong central leaders. ‘Redpointe’ will grow into a handsome canopy of shade, has an outstanding red fall color and can withstand the knocks of city life.
Next we planted an ‘Ivory Silk’ Japanese Tree Lilac on Seventh Avenue. Although most folks know lilacs as shrubs with lavender-ish flowers, this species is an upright tree form, growing to about 20 feet tall. It sports white flowers in late spring and is one of the last lilacs to flower, but these blooms don’t smell sweet. In making up for its lack of pleasant perfume, the Tree Lilac can tolerate poor soils, fits under overhead powerlines and is low maintenance. The cultivar ‘Ivory Silk’ is especially noted to flower at a young age and have a sturdy and compact form.

Lastly, we moved west toward the Hudson River to install a ‘Cleveland Select’ Callery Pear. The site was a narrow planting strip between street and sidewalk where this pear’s upright, compact shape will be suitable. While ‘Bradford’ and other older types of Callery Pears are noted for breaking apart as they age, ‘Cleveland Select’ is an improved, stronger cultivar. It sports a cloud of white flowers in spring which entirely covers the tree, and clean green foliage which turns shades of red, orange and purple in autumn.

With some modest care and a little luck, these trees will enhance the city’s streets well past retirement age for our high school Juniors.

Yikes! Who’s Eating My Plant?

Way back in September, Nick from Troy sent us this photo of an insect chewing up the foliage of his privet hedge. The hungry culprit turned out to be the Two-banded Japanese weevil, or *Pseudocneorhinus bifasciatus*. These grey/brown beetles feed on the foliage of over 100 different plants, including such diverse species as rhododendron, marigold, sedum and elm. Since arriving in the USA near Philadelphia in 1914, they’ve been fanning out across the country. In their larval phase, they may feed on the roots of their host plants, too. Only females are found here—they can reproduce parthenogenically, without help from males of their own species!
Halloween offers the opportunity for “normal” people to take on new forms, be it a Ninja Turtle, spooky ghost or even spookier presidential candidate. The holiday’s official horticultural ambassador, the pumpkin, is also available today in many forms beyond the standard orange globe. Farmers grow triple the acreage of Cucurbits nowadays than they did 30 years ago, attempting to fulfill our desires for the weird and wonderful. Here are just a few that have caught my eye.

Warts, at least on pumpkins, are hot. The ‘Warty Goblin’ sitting on my front porch is both cute and ugly, having an orange body splotched with bright green warts (top specimen in photo). This hybrid usually weighs in between 8 and 20 pounds, is designed to be a good keeper and sports a strong stem, or “handle.” ‘Knuckle Head’ is vibrant orange, rounded in form and freckled with orange warts. These fruits average 12 to 16 pounds. While it may seem that warty pumpkins must be a modern oddity concocted in a laboratory test tube, they’ve actually been around for centuries. Also on the porch sits ‘Red Warty Thing,’ a vibrant red-orange specimen covered stem to stern in a multitude of lumps (on right in photo). This Thing was introduced back in 1897 by the James J.H. Gregory & Sons Seed Company of Marblehead, MA, and was the result of a cross between and ‘American Turban’ and ‘Hubbard.’ Mr. Gregory, an entrepreneurial farmer, plant scientist and seed salesman, developed the most-famous and original ‘Hubbard’ way back in 1844. These squashes have history.

If green and orange warts are not your thing, how about grayish bumps? ‘Marina Di Chioggia,’ a sea pumpkin of noble Italian ancestry, can range in color from aquamarine to blue-gray-green to very dark green, and has the surface texture of a heavily pimpled teenager.

Gourmands say its sweet flesh is among the best for a wide variety of dishes. Of a gray-blue hue, and trading warts for heavy vertical ribbing is ‘Jarrahdale.’ This is an heirloom from western Australia, but I can attest it will grow well in the Hudson Valley, too. New to me this year is ‘Triamble,’ another wonder from down under, a gray three-lobed pumpkin whose shape might qualify it for a contemporary art gallery. Reportedly it can last in storage for more than two years. (left of “Red Warty Thing’ in photo)

Some pumpkins are truly sophisticated. ‘Empress of Iran’ is mottled dark green, light green, orange and beige, with a svelte, rounded shape. (next to porch post in photo) Perhaps this is the pumpkin that P.G. Wodehouse’s Lord Emsworth grew, alongside his equally high-class but much fatter pig, “Empress of Blandings.” The ‘Flat White Boer’ hails from South Africa, has a lovely cream-white skin and tasty orange flesh, and is rather flat and disc-like, but with ribs. It is named for the Dutch Boers who once ruled the country and it will keep your fall porch display from being boer-ing (it’s the white pumpkin in the photo). Also wheel-shaped is ‘Rouge Vif d’Etampes’ with a spectacular burnt orange skin. Hailing from France, it is nicknamed “Cinderella’s pumpkin.” What could be more cosmopolitan than that?

Text and photos by David Chinery
Winter has a habit of being very long in the Northeast, so having a few plants indoors can bridge the gap between the seasons, especially for the gardener. The term “houseplant” is a misnomer as most houseplants are tropical foliage plants that grow outside in warmer climates but readily adapt to life indoors as long as their caretakers know what it takes to make them happy.

Check out the light exposure where you want to have a plant and if in doubt, choose something that will tolerate low light levels. An eastern (morning sun) exposure is ideal for many plants. Things get complicated when people want to use plants decoratively which often means placing them in a corner or away from the window.

If you are new to indoor gardening, stick to the easy going plant choices such as *Pothos*, *Philodendron*, or snake plant. If you need a plant with some size for a dim area then look for the cast iron plant, *Aspidistra elatior*. A favorite of the Victorians, this humble plant can survive very low light and cool temperatures. The Chinese evergreen, *Aglaonema*, is another good low light choice and it will tolerate very dry air. Assess your environment as well as the light exposure to fine tune the right plant for the location.

Try to purchase plants on a temperate day but if the temperature is close to freezing then insist that your new plant be wrapped for protection. Wrapping plants is not done automatically at many stores today so the consumer needs to be wary. Careful wrapping is crucial at holiday time, especially when purchasing poinsettias as they are extremely intolerant of cold and the damage will begin to show within a few hours after exposure. It would be wise to warm up the car if it is very cold as even that dip in temperature can affect a wrapped poinsettia.

Many of the indoor flowering plants offer color and interest when the weather is dreary. African violets, *Streptocarpus*, and *Kalanchoe* are few plants that are easy to find and to grow. Be sure to read the plant tags to see what each plant prefers before making your decision. It is easy to fall in love with a blooming beauty but be sure that you can meet its needs before committing to the relationship. Remember that plants respond to light and when the days are short, many are resting, so do not force them by fertilizing. October through March provide only water (no fertilizer) and water less frequently but just as thoroughly. The old rule of thumb is that you cannot water a plant too much when it needs water, BUT you can water a plant too frequently resulting in root rot from overwatering. Err on the side of caution and let most plants dry out a bit—this may take a week or ten days in the winter. If the plant is not too big, lift up the pot to see if it is heavy or light. If it is light then it needs water, so water very well until the water comes out of the drainage holes. Cactus would be the exception to this method as they have very specific watering needs and the soil is sandy and always heavy. Cactus make good plants for new indoor gardeners who are busy and forget to water. They are not good choices for those who like to nurture…

An interesting and different indoor plant is the *Oxalis*, or wood sorrel, which resembles a giant clover. Common at St. Patrick’s Day is the green oxalis which is sold as a “shamrock” plant for those wanting the “luck ‘o the Irish.” This oxalis flowers for a long period of time with many small white blooms. The purple oxalis (*Oxalis regnellii*) is a favorite at Valentine’s Day and it is often sold as the little “Love Plant.” A real charmer with purple heart shaped leaves and delicate white blooms, it is native to South America. Both oxalis grow from small rhizomes and when the plant needs dividing the task is as simple as separating out several rhizomes and replanting.

Text by Sue Pezzolla
When Alexander Hamilton Called Albany Home is the title for a Special Focus Tour that has been offered throughout 2016 at Schuyler Mansion. Interest in visiting the mansion has been fueled by the Hit Broadway Musical Hamilton by Lin-Manuel Miranda. People from near and far have come to learn about Philip Schuyler's famous son-in-law and the time he spent living at the Mansion with his wife Eliza.

A small group of Albany County Master Gardeners has been working on re-vitalizing the formal gardens at Schuyler Mansion. The goal was to have the gardens looking their best for the 2017 celebration of Schuyler Mansion's 100th anniversary of being a state historic site.

The project, which began with the class of 2012 MGV trainees, has seen the planting of an herb garden in one of the formal raised beds and the establishment of a formal garden in another raised bed. The goal was to suggest the gardening styles of the 18th century.

Albany County MGVs have participated in the annual Farm in the City Day at Schuyler Mansion providing gardening information and children's activities. As a prelude to future garden programming at the Mansion, this fall the MGVs offered a hospitality table for patrons awaiting the Hamilton focus tour. Information about the gardens and the Master Gardener program was available and the refreshments focused on the bounty of the herb garden with cookies, crumbles and cider.

Text by Christine Saplin
When I first heard about lasagna gardening several years ago, I was intrigued. The gardening technique with the evocative name brought up images of savory treats with tantalizing aromas coming from the kitchen. But lasagna gardening has nothing to do with that and is simply a way of making gardens by layering organic materials.

I did some research online and found that the person responsible for naming this technique is Patricia Lanza, as she wrote the aptly titled book, *Lasagna Gardening*. So with information in hand, I set about planning my own garden. I had an area in mind in our front yard around a large oak tree. This area is visible from our front windows and as we drive down the driveway. Digging down around the tree roots was not a good option, so the best solution was to build up. A garden here would also solve the problem of having to mow around the oak tree. To get a head start on the growing season, I started the layering process in late autumn after the leaves had fallen and had been picked up. Newspapers ten sheets thick (no glossy inserts) and corrugated cardboard were placed down first to kill the existing turf. Then alternate layers were placed with the organic materials I had on hand – compost, shredded leaves, and peat moss – each about two inches thick, being careful to keep away from the tree trunk. At this point, after spreading about five layers of material, the new garden was left for the winter, to be covered with snow and settle in somewhat.

In March, after the snow melted, I continued the layering process, also adding some lime to aid in the decomposition, until it was about twelve inches high. To speed up the decomposition process, I covered it with black plastic weighted down with stones and left it for six weeks. In May, my new shade garden was ready to plant. The new “soil” was soft and easy to dig – a huge improvement over the hard clay found elsewhere in the yard. The original twelve inches of material had settled down quite a bit, almost by half. Some edging stones around the perimeter and the garden was complete.

Four years later, the garden is thriving. Filled with hostas, ferns, lamium, and other shade-loving plants, it is one of my favorite gardens. I’ve used this technique in other areas of our yard as well. I would highly recommend lasagna gardening to anyone. It would work well with raised beds, and is an excellent use of all the organic materials we have available: grass clippings, wood chips, leaves, pine needles, kitchen scraps, etc. There are many articles available online for reference, or for more information, look for the book by Patricia Lanza. That really is a treasure trove of all things relating to this subject.

*Lasagna Gardening*, Lanza, Patricia, Rodale Books, 1998
What to do in November & December

Winterize mowers, sprayers and other tools as needed.

Sharpen and oil knives, loppers, and other types of trimmers and pruners

Shut off and drain outdoor faucets and hoses

Remove plant debris of all types to discourage pests from over-wintering

Prune off all dead branches from trees and shrubs

Cut back perennials as appropriate and mulch with compost or mulch to provide winter protection

Test soil pH and amend soil as needed. Remember - it can take up to six months for lime to raise the pH or sulfur to lower the pH

Provide winter protection to evergreens (burlap wrap or anti-desiccant spray)

Cut back asparagus foliage and apply two inches of composted manure mulch

Mulch roses when the ground is frozen

Plant hardy bulbs now; wait as late as possible to plant tulips

Put root crops in winter storage (40-50 degrees F)

Harvest parsnips

Knock down and discard wasp/hornet nests

Store fertilizers in a cool, dry place, and set up a compost bin for this season’s plant debris

Text by Rensselaer County Master Gardener Warren Weiss
There’s not much tougher than to pass up than a half-priced shrub on your “must grow” list. So it was that I stood and stared at the potted bush, walked away then circled back, mulling and calculating, late one afternoon at a local nursery. Would it fit in the car? Where would I plant it? But most importantly, would it survive? In the end I passed it by, but not without regret. Writing this column is proof that I’m still pondering it.

The specimen in question was a shapely, sizable Corkscrew Hazelnut, a.k.a. Corylus avellana ‘Contorta.’ And contorted it was, with branches more sinuous than an Appalachian mountain road and large, dark green leaves that are somewhat corrugated. Reaching an eventual height of between ten and fifteen feet, Corkscrew Hazelnut commands attention, making it an ideal focal point plant. It deserves to be the centerpiece of a small garden, or placed somewhere prominent in the landscape. Impressive during the growing season, it is perhaps at its best in winter, when a light dusting of snow shows off its curves to maximum advantage. So beloved is the Corkscrew Hazelnut that bestowed upon it is a special name, Harry Lauder’s Walkingstick.

Harry who? Most people of my generation (and even before) should be forgiven for asking, but Harry Lauder, the man, was a crooner and showman once as popular as Frank Sinatra or Michael Jackson. This Scottish Elvis was born in 1870 and worked shoveling coal at an early age to support his family, but soon discovered entertaining. Taking to the traveling stage, including numerous North American tours, his Music Hall act made him the most popular performer in the world by 1911. And here’s why - some of his humorous recordings are entitled “Roamin’ In The Gloamin’,” “That’s The Reason Noo I Wear A Kilt,” and “Stop Yer Tickling, Jock!” Raising funds, recruits and spirits for the Great War, he was subsequently knighted for his service, then continued performing into the 1930’s. A man of many characters, some photos of Harry depict him dressed as a Scot carrying a twisted cane, cementing his connection with Corkscrew Hazelnut.

Harry Lauder (the plant) pre-dates the showman by just seven years, having been discovered in a Gloucestershire, England, hedgerow in 1863. Propagated by grafting, it had just the funky form to appeal to Victorian gardeners, and has been popular ever since. Unfortunately, this Harry has a darker side. Eastern filbert blight, a powerful fungus which infects Corkscrew Hazelnut, causes a canker disease deadly enough to kill in five to twelve years. Endemic to eastern North America, it destroyed European Hazelnuts when a nut industry was started here, although it causes only minor concern on native hazelnut species. This pathogen has already wiped out my own purple giant filbert, so I hesitate to bring a Harry home. Now I’m looking for ‘Red Dragon,’ a cultivar with a twisted demeanor, red leaves, and resistance to the blight. It sounds as charming as the grand man of laughs himself.
As a kid, the only person I knew who ate spinach and enjoyed it was Popeye. Even the promise of brute strength and a girl as lovely as Olive Oyl couldn’t get me to touch the stuff, despite my poor mother’s cajoling. Americans today have a different outlook, with many enjoying the nutritional boost that spinach provides. Spinach is one of the most nutrient-dense of all foods, and is an excellent source of folate, vitamins K, C, A, E and B-6, as well as iron, magnesium, riboflavin and potassium. Sales of this botanical powerhouse have soared and its now a crop grown on 50,000 acres and worth over $270 million annually.

With so much success, there had to be a spoiler, and in this case it is a pathogen called spinach downy mildew. Technically described as a water mold, it has some characteristics of bacteria and others of fungi. The panorama of water molds contains several especially deadly actors, capable of killing plants as disparate as fir trees, rhododendrons, and basil. One member of the tribe called late blight of potato caused the Irish famine in the 1840’s. Another, tomato late blight, destroyed thousands of plants locally in 2009 and is a potential threat each summer. A cousin causes downy mildew of impatiens, a menace which brought down the most popular bedding plant in history a few years back. Those in the know don’t mess around with water molds.

Usually most active on the large farms of California and Arizona, spinach downy mildew has unfortunately reared its ugly tentacles here in the Northeast. Meg McGrath, a plant pathologist at the Long Island Horticultural Research and Extension Center, provides the following description. “The purplish-gray, fuzzy growth of the pathogen, which is usually on the underside of the leaves, is diagnostic (upper photo). Early morning is the best time to see it as the growth (which consists of spores and the structures holding them) is produced overnight, then during the day the spores are dispersed. On the top side of the leaves, opposite where the growth develops, the leaf tissue will be yellow, initially dull, then becoming brighter and larger with time (lower photo). Subsequently affected tissue will become dry and tan.” If plants have yellow leaves but no other symptoms, a bag test is in order. Place some suspect leaves upside down on a wet paper towel in a closed plastic bag for a day. Keep the bag in the dark, such as inside a box, to further promote the pathogen, if present, to develop.

Back in the ‘80’s spinach downy mildew was known to occur in three distinct variations or races. New blight-resistant spinach varieties were developed which helped quell the beast. Unfortunately, more virulent strains of the pathogen have appeared, now numbering sixteen. It is important for farmers and gardeners to check their spinach today and destroy any infected plants to protect other growers in the region and new crops started in 2017. The disease spreads via infected plants, contaminated seed and soil, and spores in the air.
“I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself than be crowded on a velvet cushion.”

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

Gardening Questions?
Call The Master Gardeners!

In Albany County: Call 765-3514 weekdays from 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM and ask to speak to a Master Gardener. You can also email your questions by visiting their website at www.ccealbany.com.

In Schenectady County: Call 372-1622 from 9:00 AM to Noon on Mondays and Thursdays, follow the prompt to speak to a Master Gardener and press #1. You can also email your questions by visiting their website at http://counties.cce.cornell.edu/schenectady/.

In Rensselaer County: Call 272-4210 from 9:00 AM to Noon on Tuesdays and Thursdays and ask to speak to a Master Gardener. You can also email your questions to Dhc3@cornell.edu.

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“Root Concerns: Notes from the underground” is a shared publication of Cornell Cooperative Extension of Rensselaer, Albany and Schenectady Counties. It is published by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Rensselaer County.
Soap Crafting for the Holidays

Saturday, November 19, 2016
10:00 am to noon

Join the Master Gardeners to learn the basics of melt and pour soap making. Each participant will craft 4 bars of soap to their liking using various scents and additives. The bars will be ready to take home at the end of the session along with various Holiday wrappings. How to instruction provided along with a take home guide of the process and source materials. All materials provided along with delightful Holiday snacks to enjoy while crafting.
Cost: $20

Tabletop Evergreen Trees

Saturday, December 3, 2016
10:00 am to noon

Join us to craft a basic evergreen tabletop size tree that can be decorated to your taste. This is the perfect gift for someone who no longer puts up a large tree or it can be an additional Holiday piece for your table or sideboard. All materials will be supplied and you will take home a finished product in time for the festivities. Holiday snacks provided to spark creativity!
Cost: $25

Registration by mail or phone to 518-765-3516 with payment as confirmation of participation.

Winter 2016 Classes—Registration Form

*class sizes are limited, please register early*

Name(s) of participants

Address

Phone ___________________________ Email ___________________________

Class Choice:
___ Soap Crafting for the Holidays ($20/pp)
___ Tabletop Evergreen Trees ($25/pp)

Amount enclosed: $________

Please make checks payable to CCE Albany County and send to:
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