

# Green Thoughts

## *Conversations and ideas about growing at the Spring Gardens*

I can't speak for anyone else, but after many years of gardening I am still learning how to be a better gardener. And most certainly I am still learning from other gardeners. There is an old Yoruba expression: *ogbõn ki şe tẹ ni kan – wisdom is not for one person*. Indeed, collectively we know a lot about what works and what doesn't. Individually some of us are groping around. *Green Thoughts* is intended to be an on-line vehicle for us to exchange notes about what we have learned in this wonderful community garden in the middle of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. To get things started in this inaugural issue we will talk about wintering over; starting early in the spring; the frustrations of growing eggplant; mosquitos; and soil conditions. And that is just scratching the surface. In subsequent issues we look forward to you writing in and enlightening us. Please.

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### **Wintering Over**

This I learned from my nephew who gardens in the Berkshires of western Massachusetts. It gets really cold there – you can expect it to go down to below -10° F every winter. Add to that, the last day of frost is very late. It is hard to imagine any annuals surviving those conditions. But they do. He grew spinach in the fall but didn't harvest it all by the time the ground froze. Imagine his surprise when he surveyed his moribund winter's dregs of a garden in mid-April and he had beautiful, deep green, full-size spinach plants. What is neat about that time of year is that flying pests that normally attack spinach are still trying to decide if it is safe come out.

I tried the same thing here at the Spring Gardens. I planted a row a spinach in early September for harvest in the spring. It worked like a charm. It is a lot warmer here than in western MA. We were eating spinach starting in mid-March.

Here is a question for anybody out there. Are there plants other than spinach that can winter over so we can harvest in early spring? Please let us know.

### **Getting an Early Start in Spring**

Most of us have heard that we should plant peas on about St. Patrick's Day (March 17). I have never had much success doing that. The ground is still pretty cold and it takes a long time for the pea seeds to germinate. By the time the pea plants really start growing it is getting warm and they don't thrive. But there is a trick I learned from a fellow Spring Gardener (I never found out his name) who was growing wonderful peas that put my peas to shame. He used a very lightweight polypropylene cloth that he put over the soil just after he planted the seeds. The cloth has 3 properties: it lets in 85% of the sunlight, it blocks the cold wind from getting to the soil and it acts like a miniature greenhouse.

Using the cloth the soil was much warmer and so I planted my pea seeds in mid-February rather than mid-March. The seeds germinated much faster. By St. Patrick's Day I had pea shoots emerging from the soil. I made a 3 foot high tent out of the cloth to cover the plants and they did splendidly. I had a bumper crop. I used the cloth for other cold weather crops (beets, lettuce, arugula, kohlrabi) and they did much better than in previous years. If you are careful not to tear it, you can re-use the cloth. The cloth is available from on-line garden suppliers. I got mine from Gardens Alive. It comes in a roll about 55 feet long and 6 feet wide.

### **Eggplant Anyone?**

I have a problem I have not yet solved and could use some help. For a few years now I have been trying to grow eggplant. I have started from seed and they turn into very nice plants. Once the weather warms they grow nicely. They produce flowers. However, they rarely set any fruit. I don't know what I am doing wrong. Is it the soil? pH? Lack of a nutrient? How much I water? The variety I am using? Do the flowers need hand pollination? Any suggestions would be appreciated.

### **Mosquitos**

By mid-summer they are out in force. There are lots of them and I get plenty of bites. I have been using insect repellent which helps a lot. The bigger question is whether we should be concerned about mosquito bites. This is not the tropics so we don't have to worry about malaria or yellow fever but is there anything else at our latitude? If so, should we do a better job of reducing breeding grounds within our Gardens?...

### **Soil Testing**

I decided to test the soil in my plot, which is close to the middle of the Spring Gardens. I used the Penn State Extension Service which is between 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> streets just north of Walnut St. and the Curtis Center. For \$9 they provided a soil kit with a bag and instructions for taking samples at various locations in your plot and then mailing to Penn State. I also spent an additional \$27 for checking on the lead concentration in my plot. Here is basically what they found:

The soil acidity was pH 7.5, which is on the high end of "optimum" (unless you are trying to grow plants that require acidic, i.e., low pH, soils). The phosphate (P), calcium (Ca) and magnesium (Mg) levels were all "above optimum" so I don't have to add limestone, Epsom salts or gypsum. The potassium (K) level was "below optimum." They had no suggestions for rectifying the K level. The lead (Pb) content was 105 mg/kg. On the Penn State scale, for anything less than 150 mg/kg, "there is no need to be concerned about lead exposure from these soils."

Of course these results are only from one plot and your specific plot could be different. But it is at least a start and it would be interesting to learn test results from other plots in the Spring Gardens.

### **Topics for the next issue**

- variability within a plot
- growing artichokes
- composting

And please send your ideas, thoughts, suggestions and observations to:

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That address can also be used for getting on the mailing for Green Thoughts, or getting off.

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