

Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks and Home Horticulture

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Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks and Home Horticulture is an online newsletter designed to provide citizens of Allen County and northeastern Indiana with up-to-date information about Horticulture and home issues, written in a lighthearted style! To subscribe, send an email to kemeryr7@frontier.com.

More About Bluebirds

I mentioned in the last issue of Home Horticulture that starlings are a problem for bluebirds as the starlings compete for nest site and resources such as the tasty, delicious, and satisfying mealworms they both love. Starlings are larger, more aggressive, and have numbers to totally overwhelm the bluebirds. To solve that issue, I purchased a bluebird “cage” to protect the bluebirds and their food from starlings. A small container containing the mealworms is placed in the center of the cage, whose openings are 1 ½ inches – the same as a bluebird house. I placed unused metal barbecue skewers under the cage, so the bluebirds had a place to perch outside the cage.

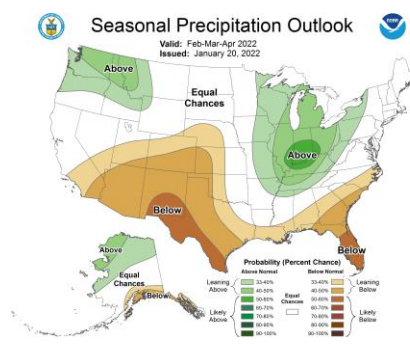
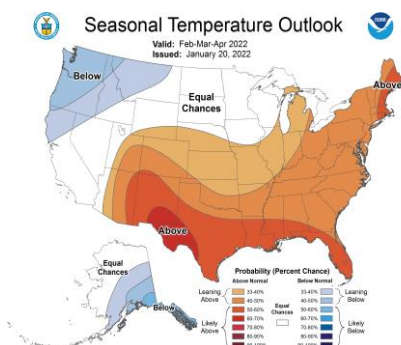


It took a while for the bluebirds to learn how to enter the cage, but the lure of the mealworms is incentive for the birds to enter. It took about 3-4 days for them to “squiggle” into the cage to feed. It is satisfying to watch the frustration of the starlings as they cluster around the cage unable to enter. The starlings are able to scavenge any mealworms - using their long beaks - that are scattered too near to the edge of the cage.

The bottom line is that the cage works to protect bluebirds from starlings so they can feed in peace. One drawback is the cage is expensive (approximately \$85.00) as there are only two companies that make the feeding cage. Perhaps the bluebirds can file an anti-trust suit in the future.

2022 Weather

The Climate Prediction Center outlook for Feb, March and April is pictured to the right. It appears as if we will definitely see above average precipitation and temperatures slightly above normal.





Heliotrope

Heliotrope is an old-fashioned plant that has seen a resurgence in popularity recently. Its flowers have a sweet scent likened to pleasant aromas of vanilla, baby powder, grapes, or cherry pie. Heliotrope belongs to the borage family, also known as the forget-me-not family. The cherry pie plant, or *H. arborescens*, is the most common species grown in the Americas and Europe. I do like cherry pie.....

The heliotrope tends to follow the sun—that is, turn its blossoms toward the sun as it travels from East to West every day. But the fact is, *heliotropism*—turning toward the sun—is common among flowers (and even leaves), and some, like the sunflower, are more dramatically *heliotropic* than the heliotrope.

The symbolism behind heliotrope began with a Greek myth. The water nymph Clytie was in love with the sun god, Helios. Unfortunately for Clytie, he just wasn't that into her and left her for another. The heart-broken Clytie pined for Helios, sitting in one place, and turning only her head to watch his chariot travel across the sky each day. Eventually, she died of a broken heart, and Helios transformed her into a heliotrope flower - that turns its "face" to follow the path of the sun, just as Clytie once did.

The story has also been told and retold in poetry and art through the centuries, in works such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Elizabeth Colomba's paintings, and sculpture by George Frederic Watts.

Heliotrope's fragrant blossoms symbolize devotion in the language of flowers.

The heliotrope we are most familiar with is a genus of half-hardy perennials native to the subtropical regions of Peru. It is grown as an annual in our area. It is grown both for the attractive clusters of small flowers, which can be, blue, purple, or white. The older varieties are more fragrant. Pollinators love these flowers, too.

Regular pinching and deadheading will encourage more blooms and a bushier, denser growth habit. In my experience, powdery mildew and mites can sometimes be a problem. A location that receives bright morning sunlight and light shade in the afternoon is ideal. It does not tolerate soggy heavy – clay soils. Keep the soil evenly moist, but not waterlogged, and don't allow the plants to dry out.

The most common type grown as an ornamental is *H. arborescens*. Popular cultivars include:

'Fragrant Blue': this variety has strongly scented flowers that turn deep blue when temperatures drop

'Marine': a compact variety that grows to 14 inches tall and blooms with dark purple blossoms

Other species of heliotrope include:

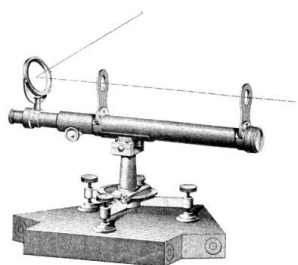
Blue heliotrope (*H. amplexicaule*): A drought-tolerant species indigenous to and cultivated in South America; this blue-flowering plant has naturalized in Australia, where it's considered an agricultural weed

European heliotrope (*H. europaeum*): Native to Europe, Asia, and North Africa, this annual grows to about 15 inches tall, with white flowers and a strong, unpleasant scent

Indian heliotrope (*H. indicum*): This Asian native reaches 19 inches in height and blooms with light purple and white flowers atop a dramatic green calx.

Salt Heliotrope (*Heliotropium curassavicum*): Salt heliotrope is native to and widely distributed in North and South America and has naturalized elsewhere. It is sometimes considered a weed. In California, salt heliotrope is commonly found in saline or alkaline soils in much of the continental U.S. It has green to blue grey slightly fleshy leaves, and uncurling spirals of small white star-shaped flowers that emerge with lime to yellow centers that mature to purple.

All parts of heliotrope are poisonous but large quantities must be ingested. Heliotrope can cause digestive upset and liver damage over continued use; sometimes used in herbal teas. Probably I would stick to English Breakfast tea instead.



Side Note:

The heliotrope is an instrument that uses a mirror to reflect sunlight over great distances to mark the positions of participants in a land survey. The heliotrope was invented in 1821 by the German mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss.

Heirloom Tomato Trivia

I have noticed that the term “heirloom” is bandied about by companies selling vegetables and flowers online or in catalogs.

Heirloom vegetables are defined in several ways. Many experts consider vegetables to be true heirlooms only if they are passed down by a family or group over generations. Other sources say that an heirloom variety must have been on the market for at least 50 years. Most experts insist that heirloom varieties must be open pollinated “pure lines” - meaning they must retain their characteristics or “breed true” from collected seed.

Lately it seems as if the lines have been blurred by some who use the term heirloom to describe any vegetable that has been on the market for a “period of time”. In my opinion vegetables should only be considered heirlooms if they meet all the criteria listed above, and not be some veggie that has just been on the market “for awhile”. This means once again that one must not just take it for granted that a product is an heirloom just because a company says it is. Sigh... I have seen a couple of catalogs that use the word heirloom when the products are not heirlooms at all.

I love the stories that come with the heirloom varieties of tomatoes. These stories (and seed) can be passed from generation to generation. I love the fact that I feel like I am a part of preserving plants and history. There are reasons why people from all over the world saved the seed of heirlooms – usually taste or some other characteristic that is valuable - even in today’s world.





‘Brandywine’ is a well-known heirloom tomato. This is one of the favorites among heirloom-tomato aficionados. Brandywine tomatoes produce large, pink, beefsteak-style tomatoes on vigorous plants. They have an excellent, old-fashioned tomato flavor, but are prone to cracking. The Brandywine lineage goes back 100 years and has reputed Amish origins. One account is that the Brandywine was first passed on from the Sudduth family to an Ohio tomato enthusiast named Ben Quisenberry. Many people traded seeds with Ben, and Brandywines eventually became widely available. Several other tomatoes (Red Brandywine, Yellow Brandywine, and Black Brandywine) carry the name of "Brandywine" in part, but any true relation between them is pure conjecture.



Mortgage Lifter tomato was developed by M.C. Byles of West Virginia in the 1940's. It was the midst of the Great Depression, and Byles needed a reliable source of income besides his auto mechanic business, where he was known as Radiator Charlie. He started with four tomato plants: German Johnson, Beefsteak, an unknown Italian variety, and an unknown English variety. Each breed of tomato can cross-pollinate with the others, so Mr. Byles carefully pollinated each plant with pollen from the others. The next year, he planted the seeds from the best tasting and heaviest producing plants. Byles continued this process for six years until he had seeds that reliably produced the same type of delicious tomato.

He sold the plants for \$1.00 each and was able to pay off his \$6,000 mortgage in six years. This method of saving seeds each year of superior plants is how many heirlooms were developed by folks from all over the world.

‘Cherokee Purple’ is one of the most popular “purple” or “black” tomatoes. The flesh inside is brick red and soft, and it has good flavor. This is one of the very first known "black", or deep dusky rose-colored cultivars that are becoming so popular with younger growers. The Cherokee Purple was named in 1990 by Craig LeHoullier, who received seeds of an unnamed cultivar in the mail from J. D. Green of Tennessee. Mr. Green indicated that the "purple tomato was given by the Cherokee Indians to his neighbor 100 years ago.”

Lillian's Yellow Heirloom is a bright, yellow-fruited heirloom that was collected some years ago by Lillian Bruce of Tennessee. Lillian passed the seed on to Robert Richardson, after which it found its way into the Seed Savers Exchange yearbook and became widely traded. It is now available in several seed catalogs. Lillian's Yellow Heirloom is described as a “full flavored tomato that is very meaty, with few seeds.



Black Krim is a heirloom tomato that has a dark red to brown skin. It is often cited online as being from the "island of Krim" in the Black Sea, better known as the Crimean Peninsula in Ukraine.

Azoychka is from Russia and dispels the myth of the "bland yellow" tomato. It attacks the taste buds with a rush of tartness. Medium sized with golden skin, it is nearly white inside. It comes on early and abundantly.



A Master List of tomato heirlooms <https://www.gardeningchannel.com/list-of-heirloom-tomatoes/>

Starlings and Shakespeare — Adapted from several sources including Cornell University.



All the European Starlings in North America are descended from 100 birds set loose in New York's Central Park in the early 1890s. The birds were intentionally released by a group who wanted America to have all the birds that Shakespeare ever mentioned. It took several tries, but eventually the population took off. Today, more than 200 million European Starlings range from Alaska to Mexico. Nice job, Shakespeare enthusiasts....

Starlings are common around cities and towns. Look in lawns, city parks and squares, and fields. They'll be working their way across the grass, often moving in a slight zig-zag line, and seeming to hurry as they stab their bills into the ground every step or two. In the countryside you're more likely to see starlings perched in groups at the tops of trees, telephone lines, or flying over fields or roads in tight flocks.

Starlings are great vocal mimics: individuals can learn the calls of up to 20 different species. Birds whose songs starlings often copy include the Eastern Wood-Pewee, Killdeer, Meadowlarks, Northern Bobwhite, Wood Thrush, Red-tailed Hawk, American Robin, Northern Flicker, and many others. Starlings turn from spotted and white to glossy and dark each year without shedding their feathers. The new feathers they grow in fall have bold white tips – that's what gives them their spots. By spring, these tips have worn away, and the rest of the feather is dark and iridescent brown. It's an unusual changing act that scientists term "wear molt."



Starlings may gather in immense flocks (called a murmuration) in fall and winter. Watching a murmuration of starlings in mid-air is to experience firsthand the power and mystery of the natural world.

Each bird in a murmuration keeps tabs on its seven closest neighbors and ignores all else. Considering all these little groups of seven touch on other individuals and groups of seven, twists and turns quickly spread. And from that, a whole murmuration moves. I do love to watch the murmuration at sunset in the fall.

Bird enthusiasts have different opinions regarding starlings. My experience in watching their behavior at a feeder is less than positive. I recently described them to a friend as "feral rats with wings". They are extremely aggressive, voracious birds. Starlings are known to take over nests and feeding sites of less aggressive birds – such as bluebirds. It is speculated they rudely quote obscure Shakespeare verses as they overtake areas.

Starling Quotes

To be or not to be – present.... as we steal every delicious satisfying mealworm in your feeder in less than 20 seconds...

The Bluebirds Doth Protest Too Much, Methinks"

All the World's a Stage" – and we are a gang of ruffians invading your peace and solitude

The starling creed_ "Conscience doth make cowards of us all."

Sweets to the sweet." – "Mealworms for us all!!!!!!

All's well that ends well." --- and every scrap of food is gone at your feeder., Hahahah//

Beets

Beets are sometimes also referred to as Beetroot, especially outside of the U.S. Beets come in an array of colors, including yellow, orange, red, white, and of course the traditional deep red/purple.

I have to admit that I have told others that eating beets is kinda like eating dirt, but recently I have had beets that actually tasted ok. My mother never served beets to our family. I can visualize the wrinkled noses my sisters would exhibit if she had ever dared to serve them. I actually am not sure my mom even knew beets existed. Everyone knows beets are good for you. Beets are particularly rich in Vitamin B9 and are also high in Magnesium. One of beets' best health benefits comes from dietary nitrates. These nitrates have been shown in studies to reduced blood pressure. Beet tops are super nutritious and can be harvested any time after they are 3 or 4 inches tall. Smaller leaves are more tender and are best for salads and sandwiches. Larger (older) tops can be used as cooked greens either steamed or sauteed.



Beets can be grown almost anywhere in the world, from gardening Zones 2 to 10.

Beets do best when planted by seed in areas of your garden that have full sun. Beets can tolerate a little shade either in the morning or afternoon as long as they get at least 6 to 8 hours of sun a day.

Each beet seed that you plant is actually a cluster of seeds containing 3 or so seeds each. So, when the seeds germinate you may have 2 or 3 plants coming up from the same spot. Carefully thin each seed location down to only one seedling by cutting off the unwanted seedlings. At this stage of their development beets are very sensitive to cultivation so do not pull the extra seedlings out or you will disturb the roots of the plant you want to keep.

Beets can be planted any time after soil temperatures rise over 45 degrees. . For a continuous harvest, all season long begin planting about 2 to 4 weeks before your last frost. Then replant every 3 weeks until late summer (about 6 weeks before the first fall frost).. Plant beets in rows that are 12 inches apart. Seeds should be planted 1/2 inch deep and about 1 inch apart. As the seeds start to germinate you should select the best plants and thin to about 4 inches apart. Don't forget to save the thinnings to add to your salads! Beets don't like crusty soil, so germination is helped by covering seeds with 1/2 inch of sand or compost when planting

Most beets take 45 to 60 days to mature to their earliest harvest stage

Drought conditions will cause your growing beets to become woody and hard, so be sure to be consistent with your watering. Don't stress the plants out. Inconsistent watering can also cause your beetroots to split.

Only fertilize early in the growth cycle. Once the roots start to develop you should stop fertilizing. Fertilizer, while the roots are growing, will cause excessive top growth. So, if you are growing beets for the roots you want to avoid the fertilizer while they are developing, or the tops will grow, and the roots will suffer.

Mulching beets accomplishes two things. It helps retain water in the soil and keeps that even moisture beets like. Second, as your beets grow the "shoulders" of the roots may push their way out of the soil. Mulching keeps those shoulders (the top of the roots) from being exposed to the sun and weather. This keeps them from becoming "woody".

If you decide not to mulch, be sure to check on your plants often and if you see the shoulders of the roots starting to come to the surface then be sure to cover the growing beets with soil to prevent woody shoulders.

Beets are susceptible to: Flea Beetles, Leaf Hoppers, Leaf Miners, Nematodes and Wireworms. Seedlings can sometimes fail because of dampening off. Dusting with Diatomaceous Earth can help with the leaf-munching insects, and a raw potato piece buried near the beets can attract the wireworms away.

Roots can be harvested any time after they reach the baby stage (about 1 inch). Young small roots are tender and sweet. It is best to harvest the roots by the time they are about 3/4 grown. Fully mature roots can be woody and tough. A good guide is to harvest any time from when the roots reach about the size of a golf ball until they reach the size of a baseball. Anything larger than a baseball will begin to be tough. When harvesting, be sure to leave about 1 inch of the tops and of the roots. This will help limit “bleeding” when you are cooking them.

Beets are by far the best root vegetable for storage. If stored around 32 to 36 degrees Fahrenheit they will last a long time, making them available well into the winter months. Beets will last up to 3 weeks when stored in a fridge. For longer term storage keep beets in moist sand or peat in an unheated basement or garage. Stored this way beets can last up to 3 months, Beets can also be frozen, and they will last for up to a year in the freezer.

A Few Recommended Varieties

Detroit Dark Red very dependable and easy to grow)

Early Wonder (another great producer, ready in 45 days)

Cylindra (long cylindrical roots)

Chioggia (Red and white striped) An Italian heirloom (picture to right)



Roasted Beet Salad

4 medium sized beets (any color), 2 Tbsp Olive Oil, Salt to taste , crushed black pepper to taste

Butter lettuce or any seasonal green/ ½ cup pistachio nuts, 2 Tbsp soft goat or ricotta cheese

Lemon (juice from half lemon) 2 Tbsp Olive oil, Aged balsamic vinegar or Saba to drizzle

Pre heat oven to 400 degrees, Wash beets well with cold water

Place beets in the center of large piece of aluminum foil, Coat with olive oil

Wrap beets well in the foil and place in the oven for 35-45 minutes – until the beets are done

When you can stick a knife into the beets with ease, pull out of oven and let cool 30 minutes

After cooled, peel the beets with a paper towel, the skin should come right off.

Cut beets into 1" pieces or wedges, set aside.

Toast pistachios on a dry pan on the stove top until they are a golden brown. Do not let them burn!

Place greens in a bowl with the beets, add olive oil, lemon juice, salt and pepper, mix well.

Place salad into a serving bowl or platter, put goat or ricotta cheese on top of the salad and drizzle the aged balsamic or saba evenly over the top of the salad. You don't need much as a little goes a long way.



Cat Judging

During my 23-year career when I was Allen County Horticulture Extension Educator, we were always encouraged to help other program areas such as Agriculture, HHS, and 4-H.

For many years, I helped out as a 4-H judge at the Allen County fair and other fairs across the area – primarily as a judge for the various youth projects. I actually found many of the Horticulture projects submitted by the youth interesting – and many of the submissions were very good. I didn't like the fact the judging rules were often confusing for both judges and youth, and the fact judging was often in buildings with no air-conditioning at the hottest time of the year. I sometimes would bring my own fan or "borrow" a fan from other areas.

There were always shortages of judges or sometimes judges would not show up. For a few years, I was recruited to be a cat judge. 4-H projects for the kids to pick from were numerous and varied. Projects could be posters on subjects such as establishing a garden, grafting, or even displaying vegetables or herbs the kids grew in their gardens. Some projects involved raising farm animals, but some crossover projects involved other animals such as rabbits, gerbils, andcats.

I was asked to be a cat judge solely on the fact I had a cat at home. I tried to explain my demented feline Hoggles was not a normal cat that followed the rules of exemplary cat appearance and behavior. It didn't matter – I had a cat – they needed a judge – so I was recruited.

I was perhaps the most bizarre judging experience ever, and my decision never to judge cats after a two-year stint was based on that experience.

Here is the setup. The cat judging was held in the same barn (no AC) that cattle and pigs are judged, so the general public is in attendance.

The cats are dressed in outfits – often constricting and demeaning (for a cat anyway).



A veterinarian is present to inspect the cats general health by looking at the cat, checking its teeth and especially important – its demeanor.

Here is the issue: There is really no cat in the world that would have a calm "demeanor" being dressed in a ridiculous outfit, paraded in front of an audience in a cow barn, and handled by a strange person looking at their teeth.

I was supposed to hold the cat while the vet checked it over and confer at the end about how well the cat met the criteria. After several scratches and bites to my hands and forearms - the vets would take over – often incurring bites and scratches themselves. Sometimes the cat would win – and be disqualified as it was too violent to be judged. I always thought that these cats should be photographed and placed in a cat notebook of "violent offenders" so they could never be judged ever again – being such a danger to themselves and others.

Warning signs: There were several warning signs that a cat might be a problem in a judging contest (based on my own empirical observations)

Cats dressed as clowns or princesses often were a severe problem - I think because of the embarrassment and shame at being dressed in these ridiculous outfits in front of other cats and people.

Any cat with a name that suggested a demonic influence or behavior was going to be a problem. Names such as Satan, Demon, Vesuvius, Zeus, or any pagan god name should set off alarm bells.



Cats that howl before they even come close to judge should immediately be taken from the area. Howling is not a good sign from a cat-.....ever.....



Often the child bringing the cat to judges will remark “(enter cat’s name),,,,,, has never acted this way before”. Huge tolling bells should sound in alarm.

Suggestions : *4-H guidelines should be changed so that the cats are given heavy tranquilizers before judging – a shot of Jack Daniels wouldn’t hurt – for both the cats and the judges.*

Parents who complain about a red ribbon given to a cat who bites, claws, and then runs out of the ring should be immediately assigned to judge cats – next year.

Liriope — some material from Clemson University

Liriope, sometimes called lilyturf, is an evergreen ground cover native to China. It multiplies rapidly and requires very little care.

There are two major species grown in our area: Liriope *muscaria* which forms distinct clumps, and creeping lilyturf *L. spicata* - which creeps and spreads. For decades liriope was primarily grown in USDA plant hardiness zones 6 through 10. It was not able to live through colder winters in USDA zone 5.

Climate change has once again played a role in the survival of liriope in Zone 5. Fort Wayne was also assigned to zone 6 so in theory liriope should be fine. Looking around at plantings in Fort Wayne downtown, liriope seems to be flourishing. I would suggest that liriope could be used more as a substitute for invasive groundcovers such as periwinkle (*Vincor minor*), and wintercreeper euonymus.



I know what you native plant enthusiasts are thinking – we could use native groundcovers such as Wild ginger, Virginia creeper, Jacob’s ladder ,Wild stonecrop, and Blue-eyed grass. Go ahead, but often these plants can struggle to keep out weeds in a garden setting. Virginia creeper can creep up and damage trees and walls and some native ferns can actually rampantly take over areas. Liriope plants make tough, drought-tolerant ground covers. Even though liriope looks like grass, it's an herbaceous flowering perennial plant in the asparagus family. It is often used as a ground cover to prevent erosion, serve as an edging plant, or help with weed control. *Liriope spicata* is named for the spiky form of its flowers, and *Liriope muscaria* is named after *Muscari botryoides* (grape hyacinth), which has a similar flower formation.

Most liriope grow to a height between 10 and 18 inches. *Liriope muscaria* generally grows in a clump form and will spread to about 12 to 18 inches wide. *Liriope spicata* spreads rapidly by underground stems (rhizomes) and will cover a wide area. Because of its rapid spread, *L. spicata* is not suitable for an edging but is excellent for



groundcover. Lilyturf blooms in July to August with lavender, purple, pink or white flower spikes. Although the flowers are individually small, they are very showy, since each plant has many spikes of blooms. Clusters of bluish black berry-like fruit follow the flowers.

Liriope is remarkably tough. It will grow in deep shade or full sun, sand, or clay. It can endure heat, drought, and salt spray. Liriope will not take “wet feet”; it requires moist, well-drained soil. Flowers are produced most freely in a sunny location. When planting liriope, do not install plants too deeply where the crown of the plant is buried. Keep liriope healthy by watering weekly as needed during summer droughts, don’t over-apply mulch next to plants, and don’t over-fertilize.

A Few Liriope Muscari Cultivars (clump forming)

Big Blue Lilyturf: This lilyturf grows in a clump form, making it well-suited for edging. The leaves are a little wider (3/8 to 1/2-inch wide) and the flowers somewhat bigger than those of creeping lilyturf. Some folks report this is one of the most cold-hardy liriope.

‘**Majestic**’ is a strong grower that grows to 12 to 15 inches tall. It has large, showy, deep lilac flowers and 1/2-inch wide dark foliage.

‘**Monroe’s White**’ has bright white flowers in large clusters. Matures at 12 to 15 inches tall. This variety does best in shade and has slightly slower growth.

‘**John Burch**’ has a thin border of creamy yellow edging each leaf blade. It will have less variegation if grown in shade. The flowers are lavender, and it grows to 12 to 15 inches tall.

‘**Gold Band**’ is an excellent specimen plant. It has wide leaf blades with a gold edge and lavender flower spikes. Mature height is 12 to 18 inches.

‘**Royal Purple**’ has deep purple flower spikes and the plants mature at 12 to 15 inches tall.

Liriope spicata Creeping Lilyturf Cultivars

‘**Silver Dragon**’ has slender, highly variegated green and white leaves and lavender flowers. It reaches about 12 to 16 inches tall. ‘Silver Dragon’ is great for lighting up a dark area. It does not grow as densely as most lilyturf.

‘**Franklin Mint**’ has pale lavender flower spikes above green leaves that grow to 12 to 15 inches tall. The leaves are a little wider than those of ‘Silver Dragon’.

Final Notes: Variegated cultivars can burn and do poorly in full sun. Creeping lilyturf is invasive in some areas of the country.

Community Garden Grants Available

Do you have an interest in starting a community garden in your neighborhood? Abel’s Offering, a program of Associated Churches, would like to offer the gardeners in your neighborhood an exciting grant opportunity to start a community garden. The focus is to create spaces that stimulate social interactions, provide nutritious food options, encourage mental and physical well-being, and build on faith. This is a matching grant of up to \$2000. The grant is open to any groups in Allen County who want to do something great to bring people together in their neighborhood through gardening. Applicants must apply as a group of stakeholders; individual applicants will not be accepted. The application letter is due approx. March 26th, 2022. <http://www.associatedchurches.org/>



Borscht compiled from Babel magazine article BY STEPH KOYFMAN

What is borscht, exactly? In its most essential form, borscht is a sour vegetable soup that usually contains a variant of beets or beetroot, which often gives it a striking red or magenta color.

A commonly accepted theory is that borscht has origins dating back to the 14th century, and those origins are localized in the country we today know as Ukraine.

The word borscht comes from the Slavic “borschevik,” which means “hogweed.” In early Slavic cuisine, hogweed stems, leaves and flowers were often cooked into a soup or fermented, yielding something akin to sauerkraut. This is the same invasive giant hogweed that causes severe contact dermatitis here in the U.S. Wow, Ukrainians really are sturdy folk.

Borscht can be served hot, and it can be served cold. It can be served with or without meat. It can be spelled “borscht,” “borsch” or “borshch.” It might be pink, but it can also be white or green. And it means something slightly different to Ukrainians, Russians, Poles, Georgians, Belarusians, and Lithuanians. Borscht recipes even vary widely depending on what region of the Ukraine borscht is made

You might not immediately imagine that a photogenic red soup would have such loaded political implications, but the debate over borscht and its cultural ownership has been especially fraught in recent years, given the ongoing tensions between Ukraine and Russia. For some Ukrainians, Russians claiming borscht as their own is just another notch in the belt of territorial acquisition and imperial might.

By the end of the 19th century, borscht had spread as far as Persia, France and by Ashkenazi Jews immigrating to the United States.

I taught a wonderful Master Gardener who was originally from Ukraine. I loved her deep Russian/Ukrainian accent.

She had a beautiful garden and grew lots of vegetables. She made her version of tasty borscht for a Display Garden workday at the Extension office. I often asked her about her life in the Ukraine. She said most people had gardens in the Ukraine because food was scarce and expensive. She also remarked it was good to have a productive garden - but if the garden was too productive and visible to local officials – (during the time Ukraine was a region controlled by the U.S.S.R) - someone would come and take all the produce away.



Hoggles – Demented Cat Logic

To my caregiver: *Your threat to feed me Borscht for the rest of my life unless I allow you to dress me in a traditional Russian folk dancer outfit falls on deaf ears. My 23 and Me DNA profile has revealed that I have Russian heritage. I may eat the borscht, but I will NEVER be dressed in any outfit – especially since you intended to post the picture on Facebook. Talk to my agent for my letter of denial.*

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