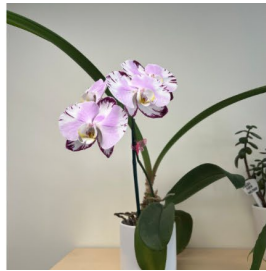


Gardening in Rich Land

Vol. 27 Issue 4, September 2026



Richland County Extension Office sign, office orchid, Victoria's plants, Jackie's plants, Jackie's pink chair

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Debbie Thomas

A Little About Me!

Before becoming a Master Gardener, I retired from AgFirst Farm Credit Bank—the building downtown with the famous “Tunnel Vision” mural on the side. I have a twin sister who lives in Elgin and a younger brother in Lexington. We grew up in a tight-knit family and enjoyed the great outdoors. I have a wonderful husband, two dogs, and my son and his family live in Blythewood.



I became a Master Gardener in 2018. As an intern, I participated in every opportunity I could and soon found my niche at the Sandhill Children's Garden. I have been a member of the Board of Directors of the Friends of the Children's Garden for six years, including two years as President.

And then there are the children! I love watching them run through the garden and discover the flowers, birds, and butterflies. Seeing their eyes light up when they see a tomato growing on the vine for the very first time is one of the things that makes the Children's Garden so special.

And that brings me to where I am today writing my very first President's Letter. Wow!

It was quite a surprise when I walked into the Lake House on June 2 for the June Gala and Val told me I was going to be the new president. I am still speechless!

As Val would say, “It takes a village.” I cannot ask for a better village than this one. I am honored and excited to serve as your president and to be part of a group that shares a common goal and believes in the importance of what we do.

Together We Grow!

Final note: Please feel free to reach out to me anytime. I would love to hear your ideas, suggestions, concerns, or simply your thoughts. I truly believe that when we work together, we can make a difference.

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Mary Stepling

Debbie Thomas

MEMBERSHIP MEETINGS

Tomato Tasting

July brought us to our annual celebration of tomatoes. This year, Lexington County Master Gardener Volunteers hosted the event, full of great food and fellowship.



Top row, L-R: Susan Zourzoukis, Kay Roman, Marilyn Hogan, Susan Wilson, Carla Frantz, Evelyn Abernathy w/Regina Monteith in the background; Karyn Taylor & Kristi Haltiwanger. Row 2, L-R: Susan Wilson, Nancy Maseng, Debbie Thomas, Kay Roman; Robin McClellan & LCMGV President Imogene Conder; Sylvia Beall & Debora Life. Row 3, L-R: Betsy Russell, Lawrence Haselden, Kay Roman; Linda & Ted Zanders. Row 4, L-R: Sandy Watson & Marilyn Hogan and buffet line.

2026-2027

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Ask-a-Master Gardener

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Compost Education Garden

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Sandhill Children's Garden

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Kay Roman

Turfgrass Demonstration Area

Jim Hightower

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Development

Elaine Jeter

Midlands Fall Plant & Flower Festival

(Open)

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Robin McClellan

Regina Monteith

Mary Stepling

A Lesson in Videography for Master Gardeners

Toni Hubbell



Tim Carrier checking his equipment before the presentation.

At our September 1, 2026 Membership Meeting, our resident videographer Tim Carrier shared some of his expertise in using videos as teaching tools. “Shooting Short Gardening Videos with Your Smartphone” showed us how to use video clips to reach larger audiences. With our Master Gardener mission to teach the community about sustainable gardening using research-based plant science, we are always looking for ways to reach more people. With a vigorous and active Community Education Committee (CEC), Master Gardeners go out to libraries, schools, and community events to share knowledge. We have Ask-a-Master Gardener booths at Soda City market, plant and flower festivals at the Farmers Market and Rent-a-Master Gardener opportunities, but Tim showed us how to reach viewers of social media.

Using his 30 plus years of experience as a professional, he led us through steps that are easy for Master Gardeners to follow and very educational for the audience. For example, he said to know what the learning objective is and then plan, shoot and share. Why use videos? One obvious reason is to reach more people, to demonstrate techniques, preserve this knowledge and to support our outreach programs.

What makes an effective video? Tim said three of the most important points are to limit the video to one topic, do this in one lesson, have clear visuals and good audio and limit the time to between one and three minutes. Demonstrating these principles, Tim used a video shot in St. Michael’s Sharing Garden to illustrate how to remove tomato suckers. First, we heard his voice explaining what a tomato sucker is and then showing a close up of a tomato plant and his hand finding the sucker and pinching it off. This demon-



One of the starting pictures in Tim Carrier’s presentation.



Michael Brown and Evelyn Abernathy.

stration included the tips for making an effective video: he filmed in the best light (early mid-morning or late afternoon when there are fewer shadows); he used inexpensive small microphones to cut out distracting wind noise, and he shot very close to the subject including showing his hand reaching into the plant. He avoided some common mistakes, such as shooting shaky footage and having a cluttered background.

He also reminded us to plan our video by knowing what audience we want to reach, to be clear about our objective. Remember, he added, a good video begins with the hook to get the audience interested and clearly demonstrates the teaching objective.

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Next, Kay Roman followed his demonstration with explanations of our web site, social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram which we use. She pointed out that our web page not only outlines Master Gardener activities but also the activities of other organizations in the community with similar missions—Columbia Green, Historic Columbia and South Carolina Wildlife, for example.

She encouraged us to send her pictures from our gardens with explanations of what is being shown, to send questions and/or answers to common garden problems. Suggest topics to be discussed on this site, she encouraged. Know about an event? Let us know so it can be on our website. Our social media presence is impressive in its beauty, information and updates. As a late learner about social media, I was surprised and very impressed at how interesting and meaningful Richland County Master Gardeners' media presence is.



Mary Stover and newly elected president Debbie Thomas.

FROM OUR MEMBERS

Growing Annuals from Seed

Linda Bradley

If you want more flowers in your garden, the secret is syncing your seed sowing with nature's natural cycles. In our Zone 8b climate, we can grow an abundance of flowers from seeds, but timing is everything.

Most popular gardening books are written for cooler northern climates. If you've struggled to start seeds in the past, it's likely because generic seed packets simply weren't written for the heat and unique seasonal rhythm of the South Carolina Midlands.



Cool-Hardy Annuals (Fall & Late-Winter Sowing) Many flowers need cooler temperatures to germinate, root, and bloom. In our region, they often fail when planted in the heat of spring. Instead, these **cool-hardy annuals** thrive when started in the fall or very early spring so they can establish roots during our coolest months (late October through our last frost in mid-March).

This category includes favorites like bachelor's buttons, larkspur, bells of Ireland, sweet peas, and nigella. For an in-depth guide on this method, Lisa Mason Ziegler's book *Cool Flowers* is an incredible resource for getting the timing down.

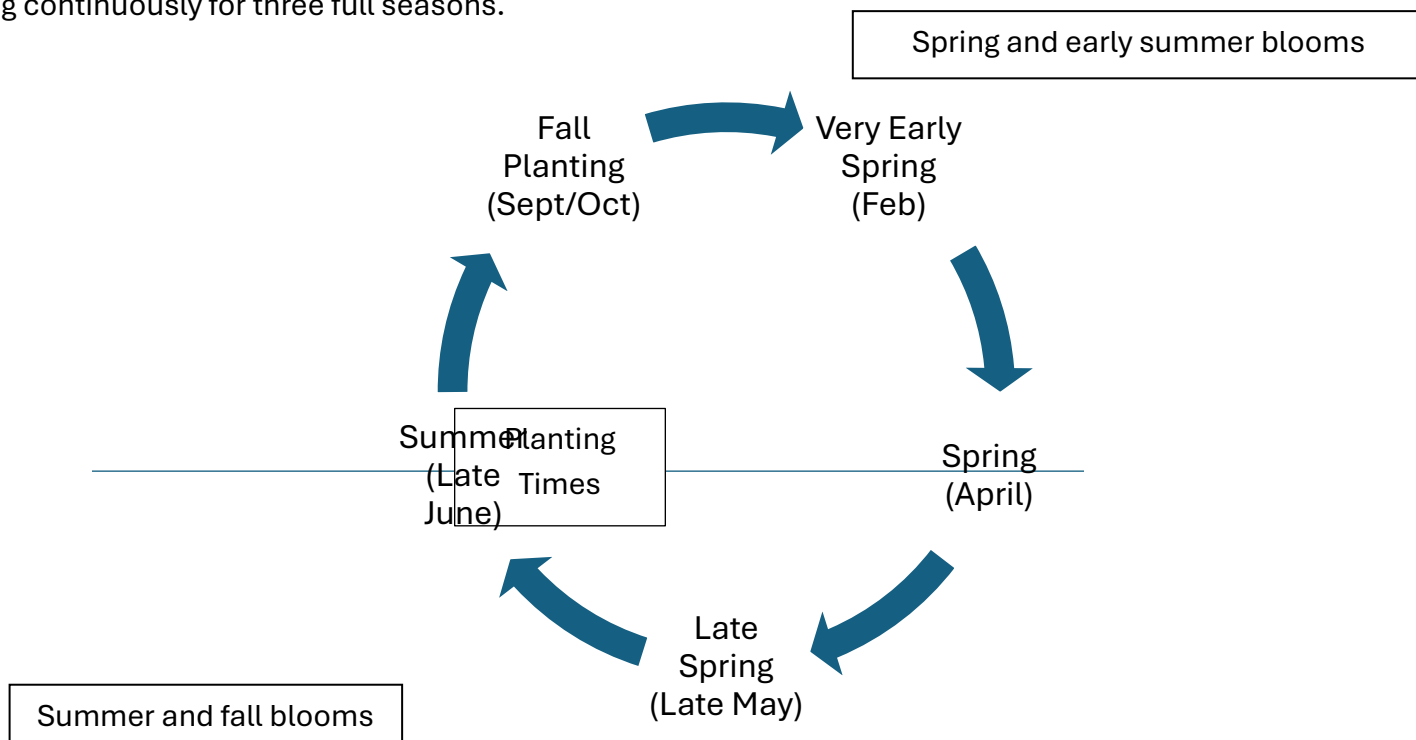
Warm-Season Annuals & Succession Planting Because of our long growing season, you can plant warm-season annuals much later than most people realize. While everyone rushes out in early spring to plant zinnias alongside their tomatoes, those first plants often get tired or succumb to powdery mildew by mid-summer.

Don't let that stop you—pull them out and sow another round in June or July (or both!). Warm-season annuals like zinnias, cosmos, marigolds, and sunflowers can be succession sown every three to four weeks throughout the summer. The warm soil means seeds germinate in just days, rewarding you with fresh

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blooms all the way until our first frost in late October or mid-November. Just check the "Days to Maturity" on the seed packet to ensure you have enough time before that first freeze and consider adding temporary shade cloth or sun protection over summer seed beds while tender sprouts get established.

Using the Planting Diagram The accompanying diagram outlines the ideal windows for both seasons. You don't have to plant every single wave but adding just a second or third sowing will keep your garden blooming continuously for three full seasons.



All Plants are Edible....Some Only Once

Mary Stepling



On a recent trip to Blarney Castle in Ireland, I was surprised to find many gardens surrounding the ancient structure. The gardens cover approximately 60 acres and even include rock formations with names like Druid's Circle and Witch's Cave. The garden's design includes a gothic-style archway and a wrought-iron gate that creates an eerie atmosphere for visitors exploring the grounds. Very close to the castle and catching my eye was the Poison Garden, which features over 100 toxic plants. It does not date back to the castle period but has rather been put in more recently to educate the public. Although very little plant material was visible during my visit in early March, the signs prompted some thinking on what plants had been used



as medicine or for more nefarious means.

Cont'd on p. 6

Among the numerous poisonous plants found in the garden are wolfsbane, mandrake, ricinus, opium poppies, and cannabis. Wolfsbane, also known as *Aconitum lycoctonum*, is a striking ornamental plant native to Europe and northern Asia that has a lethal history. It was used in ancient Rome as a method of execution for criminals and was historically used to poison carnivores by lacing meat baits. In Greek mythology, it is even associated with Medea's plot to poison Theseus. While modern medicinal research explores its potential, all parts of the plant remain highly toxic and can cause fatal systemic effects.

Mandrake (*Mandragora officinarum*) also holds a rich history. Known for its human-like root shape, it prompted superstitions associated with witchcraft and medieval potions regarding protections against evil. It was used in fertility charms and love potions. Beyond folklore, it was historically utilized for its narcotic properties to provide sedation, pain relief, and muscle relaxation. Similarly, the *Ricinus communis*, or castor oil plant, serves a variety of purposes. One of the most toxic plants in existence, it is a key ingredient in biological weapons. While its seeds contain ricin, they are also the source of castor oil used in pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, and as a laxative. The plant has been used in pest control and as an insect repellent. Castor oil is utilized in the production of paints, varnishes, inks, and biodiesel.



Mandrake root from internet.



Birthwort image from internet.

Birthwort (*Aristolochia clematitis*), another poison garden plant, produces small yellow flower blooms in early summer. The bloom has a tube and trumpet shaped opening which has been seen as representing a womb and birth canal. Its name means “best birth” and was used to induce labor. The plant contains aristolochia acid which has been shown to damage kidneys, and the FDA warned consumers to not take this herbal supplement in 2001.

Other plants in the garden include: deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*) used by assassins and known for its hallucinogenic effects, foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*), a plant that can both treat heart conditions and cause fatal poisoning, opium poppies (*Papaver somniferum*), the source of morphine, heroin, and other narcotics. Many plants in the garden are so hazardous that they **are** kept behind locked cages to prevent accidental contact.

Of course, we all know how important plants are to our survival. How many times are we urged to eat plenty of fruits and vegetables! As the sign at the entrance to the Blarney Castle Poison Garden highlights, some plants can be dangerous in their original form. However,



Cages used to protect plants or protect humans?

many more deaths can be attributed to products made from the plants. Examples given are overdoses from heroin or smoking tobacco. Many of us freely use herbal supplements simply because we saw an ad for better sleep or thicker hair. The thinking is that if it is plant-based, it must be safe. However, caution is urged especially when taken with prescription medicines.

A cursory search for more recent information on toxicity in plants turned up *Most Delicious Poison: The*



Story of Nature's Toxins—from Spices to Vices. The book is written by Noah Whitman, an evolutionary biologist. The author outlines how toxins from nature arose and have been used by humans and other animals, as well as how chemicals influenced evolution both positively and negatively. I will leave you with this tongue-in-cheek review from *Science News*. “So go ahead. Pour a cup of herbal tea, add some drops of lavender oil to the diffuser and enjoy this mind bending read.”

Thoughtful Reading

Toni Hubbell

When we are working in the garden pulling weeds, deadheading, pruning and back to pulling weeds, we are often by ourselves. Our minds may drift from mundane chores, to plants, gardens, slugs, weeds, and vines—all the minutiae of our gardening lives. We are kindred spirits then, and our reflections may wander then to deeper thoughts, such as our place in this world, this garden, our inner connectedness.

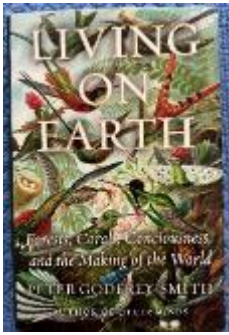
Lately my thoughts have landed on ideas I found in two books this summer: *Seed to Dust: Life, Nature, and a Country Garden* by Marc Hamer and *Living on Earth: Forests, Corals, Consciousness, and the Making of the World* by Peter Godfrey-Smith. As the titles suggest, these are not how-to-do it books but are instead thoughtful treatises on plants, gardens, organisms, and what shapes our environment, to name a few. These are not books to be read quickly but read when we have some time for ourselves, put down and then picked up again later.

Seed to Dust is a recounting by the author of his experiences in a twelve-acre garden on an estate in the Welsh countryside. He works by himself for the owner, an isolated elderly widow who rarely speaks to him but watches from her breakfast room window.

Month by month, the author, who is in his 60's, reflects on the cycles of birth, growth, and life and decay in nature. He feels the aches of his over-worked joints as he goes about the repetitive jobs in a garden and remembers being a young gardener in this place. This book, one writer said, is “an evocative reflection on the joys of caring for plants and the mysteries of being alive.”



Cont'd on p. 8



Living on Earth is another thoughtful book by a philosopher and historian who proposes a new way of understanding how the actions of living beings have shaped our planet. Godfrey-Smith takes the reader on a tour of the history of life on earth and in the seas. The author touches on the impacts of language, culture and writing and considers our responsibilities, our powers to create change. He relates these powers to topics ranging from factory farming, habitat preservation, climate change and animals used in research. One reviewer wrote: “Rarely is the mutual influence between people and the rest of our shared ecosystem spelled out with such care.”

NEWLY CERTIFIED MASTER GARDENER

Kim Byer



Kim became intrigued with gardening after her husband, Rich (Class Of 2023), began his Master Gardener training. She soon found herself pulled outside into the world of bees, bugs, sweat, and soil. After having squandered much of her adulthood inside a fluorescent-lit cubicle, she’s overjoyed with her newfound addiction to flowers and sunshine. As an intern, Kim pitched in on a few RCMGA design and marketing projects. She redesigned our association logo and the Carolina Yard Demonstration Garden’s brochure. Currently, she’s enjoying her role as a new Sandhill Children’s Garden board member where she’s helping create a series of garden signage. The highlight of her internship journey was joining the Carolina Yard Master Gardeners who embraced her early on and made her feel so welcome. Forming friendships with life-long learners who willingly share their gardening knowledge and passion for plants is by far the best part of becoming a Master Gardener.

...Plant sequoias.
Say that your main
crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not
live to harvest.
Say that the leaves
are harvested
when they have
rotted into the mold.
Call that profit.
Prophecy such returns.

Wendell Berry 1934-2026

