



THE WALTON COUNTY GARDENER

by Walton County Master Gardeners

FEBRUARY 2023

4 WINTER-INTEREST SHRUBS TO CONSIDER

Our growing zones allow us to have mostly evergreen gardens. Evergreen gardens in the winter make it a plus. Below are a few new and some old, evergreen shrubs that give you winter interest in the landscape. All are available from the Southern Living growers.

'Stellar Ruby' Magnolia - maybe not a magnolia that you might think of, but *Magnolia figo* (also known as *Michelia figo*). It gets its common name because the flowers smell like banana. The leaves on this shrub are a dark green throughout the winter which is attractive during the gloominess of winter. Small 'ruby' flowers in the spring and throughout the summer.

I plan on replacing my banana shrub with this one because of its pyramidal growth habit and dense growth. Other banana shrubs meander and are a lot of work to maintain their growth.

Stella Ruby grows in zones 7-9 in partial shade to full sun. She grows to 15 feet with a width of 6-8 feet. Naturally, she gets her name for her pretty ruby flowers. Flowers early spring and sporadically throughout the summer.

No pruning is necessary. Resists deer and insects and tolerates our heat, salt air and is drought tolerant.



'Juliet' cleyera (*Terbstrienua gymnantgera*)

Known as a False Japanese Cleyera, this shrub with its fantastic variegated foliage of olive green and creamy margins, makes this a great winter-interest shrub. Low growing and compact, it is also disease and pest resistant. New foliage will emerge a reddish color, but flowers are non distinct. Grow as a specimen or as a hedge.

'Juliet' grows in zones 7-10, full sun to partial; salt spray tolerant (great for coastal gardens!). Moderate growth rate so easily maintained to the size you want, including containers. Pruning in the spring for control.



'Soft Caress' Mahonia (*Mahonia eurybracteata*)

This lovely plant gives your shade garden some nice texture and pretty yellow flowers in the fall-winter. I like to use it because it gives the look of a small palm without being one. Mahonia is very easy to grow and keeps its evergreen look year round. This mahonia spreads nicely without being aggressive or invasive. Unlike other mahonias, this does not change color in the fall.



'Soft Caress' grows in zones 7a-9b. It is pest and deer resistant, but rabbits will enjoy it. It can tolerate some morning sun, but mostly enjoys the shade.

'Florida Sunshine' Florida Anise (*Illicium arviflorum* 'Florida Sunshine')



Did someone turn the lights on? This lovely and bright Florida native shrub will brighten the gloomiest days in winter. Crush the foliage and it will give a wonderful licorice aroma. This shrub is a no fuss no problem shrub. Although not very architectural, it needs a little pruning each spring to keep it in check. This shrub loves the shade and is a great compliment to hydrangeas in the summer.

'Florida Sunshine' grows in zones 7a-9b. Most Florida anise will flower, but the flowers of this cultivar are very discreet (I've never seen it in flower). Not fussy about soil. It will grow in sun but loses its lovely chartreuse color and turns to a golden yellow, but its best look is in the shade. It's a nice accent foliage in a flower arrangement.

All plants featured in this article are considered Florida Friendly by the University of Florida.

"We may think we are
nurturing our garden,
but of course, it's our
garden that is really
nurturing us."

— Jenny Uglow

garden  therapy

Winter is Tree Planting Time

Sheila Dunning, Commercial Horticulture Agent, UF



January to February is the ideal time to plant trees. During dormancy, all the energy in a tree is in the root system. They will establish very quickly. In the spring, they will be ready to grow leaves. Planting and establishing trees is all about managing air and moisture in the soil. *The exception is palms.* They are not technically trees and should *only be planted in the late spring and summer.*

Three of the most common causes of poor plant establishment or tree death are planting too deep, under watering, and over watering. If appropriate trees are planted at the right depth and they are irrigated properly, the trees will thrive for years to come. As simple as this sounds, problems often arise that lead to poor establishment or plant failure.

Following ten critical steps can ensure proper tree planting:

1. Look up for wires and lights. Make sure that the tree species' mature size will not interfere with any utility lines.

2. Find the topmost root and treat root defects. After removing the pot from the tree, remove all excess soil on the top of the root ball, until a root that is similar in diameter to the lower branches is located. That is the topmost root. Look for any roots that encircle the rootball, particularly close to the trunk. Remove any roots that will strangle the trunk. Cut all encircling roots at the point they turn to encourage root branching. Then, rough up or shave off all the roots on the perimeter of the rootball. If the tree is balled and burlapped, use a metal skewer to locate the depth of the topmost root. Remove an inch or more for extremely root-bound trees.



3. Dig shallow and wide hole. Using the corrected rootball as a gauge, dig the hole slightly less shallow than the rootball. Loosen the top six inches of soil around the entire rootball.

4. Carefully place tree in hole. Lower the tree into the hole slowly. Do not pick it up by the trunk! You run the risk of detaching the rootball from the tree and perhaps killing the tree.

5. Position top root 1-2 inches above landscape soil. Make sure that the rootball is above the surrounding soil grade. If balled and burlapped, the nylon straps, metal pins, burlap on top of the rootball, and wire basket above the grade will need to be removed.

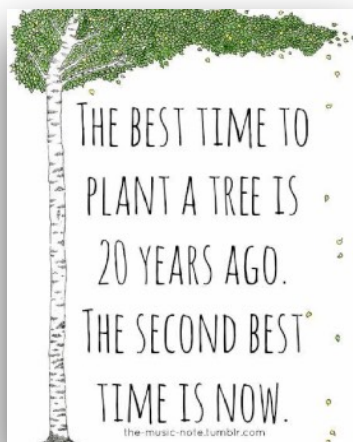
6. Straighten tree. Check the tree from two directions at 90° angles from each other.

7. Add and firm backfill soil. Tamp soil with fingers, not feet. Do not stomp on the soil. It will compact the soil and reduce the oxygen to the roots.

8. Add mulch. Apply a 2–3-inch layer of natural mulch out to the perimeter of the tree's branches, or beyond if possible. However, there should be 1 inch or less mulch on top of the rootball. *Do not allow mulch to touch the trunk.*

9. Stake and prune if needed. If there is a strong steady wind, staking is necessary. If you need to stake, remember to remove the next year; otherwise, don't stake. Make sure to do all structural pruning at planting time. Establish a central leader and remove crossing branches. But do not remove the lower branches. Just reduce the length. The tree needs to bring food to the lower portion of the trunk to increase the diameter.

10. Water the tree. Don't walk away until the tree has been watered. Apply at least ½ gallon. The tree will need to be watered twice a week for 20-30 weeks. The larger the tree, the more water needed at each event. However, if the water doesn't perk in within a few minutes, reduce the amount being applied. Overwatering can be as harmful as underwatering.



Growing Your Own Food

Margaret Morrison, Walton County Master Gardener



Ah, springtime! When many have the desire to do something about getting into gardening. The thought of growing some food for your own table becomes a thought brought to mind from many prompts we see in newspaper articles about healthy eating, healthy living, and the importance of exercise and sunlight in our lives.* Community gardens are one venue to explore, especially when you may not have the space or the permission to plant your own garden plot. What you may not know is that an opportunity for you to join in this worthwhile adventure exists here in Walton County, ready and waiting for you.



Cultivate Community Gardens was established as a Section 501(c)(3) organization in 2017. It was initially the dream of Tracy Whealy Miller, a Walton County resident coming here from a background making her well-versed in the advantages of growing your own food. Tracy grew up in Iowa in a family dedicated to preserving and sharing seeds. Her parents went on to found the Seed Savers Exchange, a source of high-quality seeds well known and respected in gardening circles. What she realized is that many people would like to have an opportunity to work a plot to grow items that were personally known to be GMO-free, and grown to organic standards to benefit the health of their families. Having a garden

plot perhaps would allow people to grow some types of special heirloom or culturally important foods for their families that cannot readily be found in stores. Being in a county where the space we live in does not always lend itself to this type of activity (whether through lack of space, living in a rental, lacking knowledge, or the restrictions of HOAs), Tracy committed an enormous amount of energy to taking the steps necessary to achieve this dream.

The story of how this project came into being is part of history: lots of work with the County officials, a great deal of personal dedication from Tracy and her original board members, times of frustration and wondering if this would ever achieve fruition. Finally, with permission from the Board of County Commissioners, space was set aside in Padgett Park, on J.D. Miller Road, to allow the project to move forward. Grants from both the J.W. Couch Foundation and the St. Joe Community Foundation allowed this effort to begin taking shape. Clearing the land, erecting a fence, creating the 20 4'x12' plots, and acquiring and loading quality soil for the raised beds, brought the Garden to the point on May 22, 2021, for the Grand Opening and the dedication.

Since that time, beds have been available for individuals to rent on an annual basis. Several beds are set aside for local school and civic groups to use. All must go through the application process to be accepted, and must agree to observe the basic rules of the Garden. Whatever is planted must be non-GMO organic, legal, and non-invasive. Any products – like fertilizer, or fungicides - used in the garden must follow those same rules and be environmentally safe. Gardening etiquette applies, since you are sharing this space with many others.

At least two times each year, Master Gardeners offer on site learning opportunities. Other events are sometimes scheduled in the pavilion at Padgett Park for gardeners to share their experiences – both successes and failures. These events help not only to strengthen the cultivation of the gardens, but also to create a community of gardeners, strengthening broader community ties as well.

The current President of Cultivate Community Gardens is Angie Reilly, a South Walton High School teacher. With volunteers from the High School, Angie has continued the tradition of community gardening. Students learn the value of gardening, using this space as a teaching tool, providing not only fresh produce for food security, but connecting with others, and being educated about the importance of being good stewards of the environment. I would say these are important lessons for each of us, and invite you to explore the opportunities that exist at Cultivate Community Gardens, 810 JD Miller Road, Santa Rosa Beach Florida, inside Padgett Park.

The Master Gardeners of Walton County will be on site on March 4th, 2023, for the spring gardening event. Think about attending this event, open to the public, to see what has been accomplished and consider your own interest in obtaining one of the available plots for growing.

*<https://nwdistrict.ifas.ufl.edu/hort/2021/03/18/spring-vegetable-gardening-in-the-florida-panhandle/>

info@cultivatecommunitygardens.org





CURRENT GARDENING EVENTS

February 18 Volusia County Master Gardener Volunteers Spring Edibles and Limited Early Bloomers plant sale. 8:30 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. Herbs, edibles (including vegetables such as tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant), and a limited selection of early-blooming ornamentals. UF/IFAS Extension Volusia County Office, 3100 East New York Avenue, **DeLand**. Details: [386-822-5778](tel:386-822-5778). Terms: Cash or checks only. Parking and admission are free. (Bring your own wagon or cart!)

February 21 Pensacola Camellia Club General Meeting – Program: ‘Who were these Pensacola Camellias Name After’. An historical look into past member’s camellias that are registered with the American Camellia Society. Location: Garden Center 1850 N. 9th Ave, Pensacola 6:30 social, 7pm program.

February 23-24 Fort Myers is hosting Environmental School, Course 2 via Zoom.

February 26 Pensacola Camellia Club will welcome the public to our UWF Camellia Garden, provide air layering and pruning demonstrations, and have plants available for sale starting at Noon to 4pm. UWF students will transport visitors from the parking lot to the garden.

February 24-17 American Camellia Society Winter Convention, Macon, GA

February 26 Pensacola Camellia Club welcomes the public to the UWF Camellia Garden, provide air layering and pruning demonstrations, and have plants available for sale starting at Noon to 4:00 pm. For more information about the UWF Camellia Garden Tours go to Activities, UWF Camellia Garden & Tours on the Pensacola Camellia Society website.