

# THE REAL DIRT

The Garden Club of America's Horticulture Quarterly Publication

## The Perennial Freeman Medal Winners:

*Pycnanthemum muticum*

*Maianthemum  
racemosum*

*Caltha palustris*

## Right Plant, Right Place from Omaha

## Cover Crop Importance

## Leaf cutting propagation of Begonias

## Growing Orchids

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## FREEMAN MEDAL WINNER 2018



*Pycnanthemum muticum*

These native plants are selected to encourage their use in the landscape and to make them familiar to gardeners, and more available in plant nurseries. This year, 14 outstanding plants were nominated by members of GCA clubs, and the three noteworthy plants were chosen by a Plant of the Year Selection Committee comprised of leading and nationally known horticulturists.



*Pycnanthemum muticum*

## What's the buzz?

### The 2018 GCA Plant of the Year: Montine McDaniel Freeman Medal know how to attract a plethora of pollinators!

by Lulu Lubbers, Town and Country Garden Club, Zone XI  
GCA Horticulture Committee, Vice Chairman of the Freeman Medal

*Pycnanthemum muticum*, commonly known as mountain mint, is a pollinator magnet and has been named the 2018 GCA Plant of the Year. Mountain mint is a native perennial that attracts an abundant assortment of native bees, butterflies, moths and other beneficial insects. It also attracts beneficial predatory wasps and/or parasitoid insects that prey upon pest insects. This provides natural pest control and reduces the need for hazardous pesticides. *Pycnanthemum muticum* is loaded with pulegone, a natural insect repellent described as being better than OFF!

Andre Michaux, French botanist and friend of Thomas Jefferson, found this plant in Pennsylvania in 1790 and named it *Pycnanthemum* or "densely flowered" from the Greek for dense (pyknos) and flowered (anthos). *Muticum* is Latin for blunt, referring to the flat bracts at the top of each stem.

This low-maintenance ornamental plant has noteworthy blue-green foliage, flat bracts, spearmint leaves, and clusters of diminutive pinkish to white flowers that continually bloom from July through September. The flowers are accompanied by powdery white/silvery bracts that give the plant the appearance of being dusted with snow. An architectural vertical structure in the winter garden completes the plant's four-season interest. *Pycnanthemum muticum*, a member of Lamiaceae (the mint family), spreads politely by rhizomes and provides an attractive upright and tiered clump that is 2 to 3 feet high and just as wide. It is well behaved and can be effectively used for naturalizing or as an attractive blue-green filler in the garden. *Pycnanthemum muticum* grows in USDA zones 4 to 8, in full sun to partial shade and in both drought and wet conditions. It helps with erosion control, is resistant to diseases, insects, deer and critters and grows joyfully from Maine to Michigan and south to Florida and Texas.

Mountain mint was used by Native Americans for the treatment of fevers, colds and stomach aches. Average Gardeners today could put a sprig of leaves in a pocket to keep the mosquitoes away, or dry the leaves to make a minty tea and sit back and watch the "wildlife TV" of dancing pollinators.

*Proposed by Alice Wade, Garden Club of Madison, Zone IV*

## Honorable Mention



*Maianthemum racemosum*

The 2018 honorable mention Plant of the Year was awarded to *Maianthemum racemosum*, a three-season native and beneficial woodland beauty with rose-like fragrant white flowers. Formerly known as *Smilacina racemosa* and commonly known as false Solomon's seal, it is a pollinator plant extraordinaire. Not only does this plant provide nectar for butterflies and bees, it also attracts beautiful beetles to its white panicle flowers from April to June. The graceful architectural form of arching stems and ridged green leaves carry the plant through summer. In fall, its foliage turns a warm rich yellow, and its flowers turn into showy red berries. The leaves provide food for grazing elk and bear and the bright red berries feed birds and small animals.

False Solomon's seal, a member of Liliaceae (the lily family), grows in shade or partial shade and in both moist or dry conditions and is extremely resilient, and adaptable. It grows 2 to 3 feet high and spreads by rhizomes to form colonies that are just as wide. *Maianthemum racemosum* is considered a "survivor species" because of its ability to comeback after a wildfire. False Solomon's seal is low maintenance and well suited for small shade gardens and able to form impressive clumps in a park, campus or forest setting. Hardy in USDA zones 3 to 9 and except for Hawaii, it is located in every state in North America.

*Proposed by Megan F. Smith, Seattle Garden Club, Zone XII*

## Special Recognition



*Caltha palustris*

A charming spring ephemeral, *Caltha palustris*, commonly known as marsh marigold, was awarded special recognition. A member of the Ranunculaceae family. This golden yellow, showy plant produces both nectar and abundant pollen that attracts butterflies, flies, and bees. Its seeds provide food for small mammals and ducks. *Caltha palustris* grows 2 to 3 feet high and just as wide in shade to sun. Growing in wetlands and along the edges of streams, it provides natural erosion control. It is native to marshes, swamps, wet meadows and stream margins and is often found in the woods. It is well suited at home too, in rain gardens, water's edge and ephemeral ponds. Hardy in USDA zones 2 to 7 it is one of the first plants to bloom and is often called "a harbinger of spring."

Special recognition was awarded to *Caltha palustris* to help raise awareness that it needs to be promoted, planted, and protected from an ecologically exotic threat. An invasive plant, *Ficaria verna*, commonly known as lesser celandine, is a "look-alike" spring ephemeral with buttercup-like, yellow flowers. *Ficaria verna*, formerly known as *Ranunculus ficaria*, is a weedy, tuberous rooted, herbaceous perennial that is native to Europe, Africa and Asia which is now threatening *Caltha palustris* in wetlands in 19 states. When in bloom in wild areas, easily spotted colonies of *Ficaria verna* form dense vegetation, sometimes covering several acres of land. This aggressive plant blooms before the native spring ephemerals and forms a thick mat of foliage that displaces less vigorous native spring ephemerals, like marsh marigolds in forests throughout the East, Midwest and Pacific Northwest regions of the United States. Once established, celandine cannot be easily controlled. It grows from little corm tubers that live eight inches underground and if pulled, the tubers break off and it spreads more quickly. Native birds and pollinators cannot feed on celandine so areas covered by *Ficaria verna* have seen a decline in native insects. *Ficaria verna* is still being sold in the U.S. Gardeners are encouraged to not buy it and learn the difference between these similar looking...but very different spring ephemeral plants. *Caltha palustris* is a special and beneficial native perennial and deserves to continue being 'right at home' in our native American landscapes.

*Proposed by G.G. Williams, Saint Paul Garden Club, Zone XI*

## Right Plant, Right Place, Right Pruning

A Presentation by Philip A. Pierce  
Shirley Meneice Conference, Omaha Nebraska

### Pruning:

- The purpose of pruning is to keep plants healthy, to restrict or promote growth, to encourage bloom, or to repair damaged branches.
- Remove dead, dying and broken branches and those that rub against one another.
- When cutting back a branch, always make a diagonal cut to a lateral bud. Do not paint wound. Let it heal naturally.
- Do not make flush cuts. Leave the branch collar intact (swelling at base of branch.) If pruned properly, a ring will encircle the cut when healed.
- Take a large branch down in sections to avoid ripping bark and damaging the cambium layer.
- Proper pruning shapes shrubs: wider at bottom and narrower at top to admit light through to the base.
- Remove girdling root(s). If too large to remove, cut through girdled root.
- If tree has a double leader, remove one.
- Trees should never be topped.
- If there is one third or more damage to the circumference of a branch or if there is rot/decay, remove the branch.

### Planting:

- When planting a tree, the collar (flare) at the base of the tree should be above ground.
- Spread roots out from trunk to avoid girdling. Stake the tree to allow it to move with the wind. Monitor staking and remove stake once the tree is established, before wires & ropes become embedded in tree!
- Never spread mulch in a pyramid form at base of trunk. Excess mulch encourages rodent damage and shallow roots. Mulch should be at least 4" away from trunk.
- Irrigation systems tend to overwater plants. Use a soil moisture meter to determine if water is needed.

Written by,  
Lydia Wallis, Zone III Hort Rep, Southhampton Garden Club and  
Peggy Mayfield, Zone I Hort Rep, Fox Hill Garden Club

## Begonia Leaf Propagation

Not frequently enough, my favorite catalogue from Logee's Greenhouses in Danielson, CT. arrives. This begonia haven is dangerous to visit, so I propagate from leaf cuttings and rhizomes whenever possible. Slow and, not always successful, but extremely rewarding, nurturing new plants has become a hobby.

Prepare a mini greenhouse using a clean, recycled plastic salad box or bakery container. Mix equal parts perlite and vermiculite and place approximately 1" of this mix in container. Spray with water to dampen, not saturate.

Choose a strong healthy leaf. Cut a 1" circle, separating the petiole (stem) and leaf base from leaf. Petiole should be approximately 1" too. Trim remaining leaf's outer edges, leaving a wide strip. This will depend on the size of leaf you're propagating (photos show 2 cuts, first and second).

Place petiole into mix, and some leaf edges also, gently securing both but not covering leaf. Form cone of inner leaf and stand in mix, placing a little mix in center. Or stand individual pieces in mix (#3). Document date, plant name and mix on container and be patient! Place container in warm, safe location away from sunlight. Do not jostle or tug plant to see if it's rooted, but open container monthly for signs of new life. Some leaf segments may rot; remove these. Don't expect anything for at least 2 months, but remain positive. If the mix feels dry, mist lightly again. Document when you see signs of life and maintain monthly checks. Replant babies when large enough.

Jocelyn Sherman

Zone II Horticulture Rep, Newport GC, RI.



Above: Leaf cuttings  
Above right: Placement in mix  
Right: *Begonia nacre* showing babies.



## Experimenting with Cover Crops

Nature abhors a vacuum – weeds and volunteers sprout in every patch of bare dirt. Why do these plants arrive in our gardens and lawns? The answer lies in the myriad of benefits in keeping the soil covered. Those 'visitors' are following mother nature's orders. Thickly planted ground resists erosion plus the soil has better condition and resiliency in the face of both drought and heavy rain fall. We can mimic this process, by harnessing it's benefits and choose the plant characteristics we'd like to see in our gardens by sowing cover crops.

Cover crops keep an area of soil covered for a specified duration. They are place holders in your garden. The Bedford Garden Club sowed its crop in late fall, under patchy perennial plantings, in place of last year's annuals and in vegetable gardens. We used a winter kill seed mix – radish, field peas and annual rye that would die at the first hard frost. Radishes reduce soil compaction, peas fix nitrogen and all three add organic matter to our soils as they decompose over the winter.

Broadcast seed over the area to be covered. Next, remove annuals and spent vegetable plants. Yanking them out disrupts the soil enough to let cover seed nestle into the ground. We saw germination in just days! You can't sow too heavily since the plantings are only expected to live for a few weeks. Come spring, till in remaining plant matter or treat it as a ready-to-go mulch.

Robin Ashley  
Bedford Garden Club  
Horticulture Committee Co-Chair

### Winter Rye:

Hardy winter crop, planted in the fall to prevent soil erosion and add organic matter into the soil before spring planting.



## Growing Orchids

Orchids grow high on trees in the wild. They love the comforts of home just like people, with light, shelter, humidity, temperature, food and fresh circulating air. Light is essential for all plants and orchids are no different.

For years I have lived in homes with different microclimates and with space to grow my orchids here in Hawaii. In our first home, a small screened area off my kitchen sink allowed me to water my plants with the sink spray. Then in Waimea, upcountry Hawaii, the misty, cool weather provided another micro-climate. Back to Honolulu, my orchids flourished tied to big monkey pod trees. Next, hot, dry Diamond Head proved the most challenging. I resorted to a small green house and also the fruit trees which dotted our kitchen garden. Today, I live in an apartment still with my orchids.

Regardless of the micro-climate in which you live, I want to encourage you to try growing orchids. Orchids are epiphytes and are adaptable if you provide basic care. Orchids need fertilizer since they don't receive nutrients from their potting media. If orchids are potted in bark or cork, they need a fertilizer high in nitrogen 30-10-10. If your orchids are planted in other media, they need a balanced water soluble fertilizer such as 18-18-18. Orchids with thinner, soft leaves generally require more water particularly when blossoming. Most orchids like to dry out between watering, because they don't like being soggy. Their roots desire good drainage and air. Take these few tips and give orchid growing a try.

By Priscilla Gowney  
Zone XII Hort Rep  
Garden Club of Honolulu



*Vanda ampullacea*

## GARDEN TIPS by Ms. Flora Hortus



FLORA

Question: *How often should I feed and water my orchids?*

Answer: It's best to feed orchids with one-quarter-strength orchid food every other time you water. Cut to a node two-thirds of the way back on the wand after the last flower fades so that a new flower stalk will grow from that location. Preferably, place the orchid near an east-facing window that receives morning light, or indirect bright light for best blooming results.

Question: *Tall conifers shade my garden from growing desired sun-loving plants. In particular, I want to grow more lilies for summertime color. Are there any varieties that can grow with more shade than sun?*

Answer: Martagon lilies are ideal for naturalistic and woodland gardens. These European natives are smaller, daintier, more refined, and can take some shade. Plant in containers so they can move around the garden and add color where needed.

Question: *What are the advantages of buying and planting bare-root plants?*

Answer: Bare-root plants are lighter and easier to handle. They generally cost less because pots and soil are not included. You can inspect the roots in the nursery, noticing any girdling, damaged or rotted roots. Bare-root plants enable you to avoid long-term problems and allow removal of damaged roots before planting. Best of all, the root systems generally develop much faster than those in potted plants.

Question: *When is it a good time to prune *Acer palmatum* 'Dissectum'?*

Answer: It's best to prune most deciduous trees in winter when they are dormant. Without the leaves, it's easier to see the branch structure clearly and select the right branch to remove. Also, the sap doesn't run in winter, so removing a branch then causes less stress to the plant. I enjoy pruning my *Acer palmatum* 'Dissectum', Japanese Laceleaf Maple as an excuse to get outside. They are delicate, so take care not to remove too much at anyone time. Look carefully for dead or crossing branches that can be removed easily, then cut diagonally at the node where the branch was growing. If the cut is flush against the remaining branch, this can cause damage to the cambium making it difficult for the tree to heal. A gentle touch is recommended on these specimen trees. Also, remove any leaves that remain so that air circulation and light can rejuvenate the tree once spring arrives.

Question: *How can I grow more vigorous tree peonies?*

Answer: Plant them in an open, uncrowded location in morning or dappled sun, in an area with well-drained soil. I usually mix a half-handful of fish-bone meal with a cup of organic rose food to work into the soil each spring, before bloom. Be careful to plant your tree peony so the graft is 4 to 6 inches below the soil surface. Otherwise, an endless stream of herbaceous peony suckers will grow into, and eventually take over, your tree peony. Tree peonies don't like to be transplanted, so choose the location carefully. Herbaceous varieties are cut to the ground. Tree peonies like to be pruned. I prune to a node after the flowers fade. A tree peony will rarely need staking if pruned between 3 and 5 feet.

Question: *How can you extend the season of enjoyment of cut peonies?*

Answer: I usually cut them when a tiny bit of color shows on the hard green bud. The bud should feel like a marshmallow and have some "give" when squeezed. Strip off most of the leaves and wrap the stems in newspaper and store them in your fridge. You can also wrap each stem in plastic wrap with both ends sealed.

When you are ready for fresh flowers, make a new cut on the stem and place them in water. The flower will “bloom” fully in about 2 days. The stems can be stored in the refrigerator for up to three weeks.

Question: *Do you see gaps in your spring bloom display?*

Answer: In my experience, when planting daffodils in the fall, include at least one grape hyacinth bulb to the group. Because grape hyacinths send up foliage each fall, you will easily be able to identify locations where bulbs are already planted. This eliminates digging into established groups of bulbs and you will know right away where your planting gaps are.

Question: *My African violet doesn't bloom!*

Answer: In my years of experience, I have found thumping the pot vigorously and saying “bloom or you're compost” works every time. It aerates the roots I suspect.

Question: *How to summer over Amaryllis bulbs for winter blooming?*

Answer: According to Aunt Ida Mae from New England do this: She leaves them in pots in the summer, planted in the garden, with regular watering and feeding. In late September, she puts them in her basement under a plastic tarp and ignores them. During December, she brings them up and repots into fresh, sandy, potting mix. She uses a weak solution of MiracleGro to perk up the plants.

Question: *How can I tell if seeds are still viable?*

Answer: To check viability of seeds: put in water and if they sink they're good. If they float, throw them away.

Question: *What are these little black flies around my house plants? What's an indoor gardener to do?*

Answer: Fungus gnats! They like your plant's moist soil, where they lay their eggs. While the adults won't damage the plants, the larvae can harm roots. Try these controls: First, always let the soil dry out before watering, and be sure there is no standing water anywhere near your plant (including no wet stones in saucers). Second, hang “aphid white fly yellow sticky traps” near your plants to catch the adults—ugly but effective. Third, put small chunks of raw potato with the cut side down in the soil -- the larvae like potatoes! Check every few days and throw the potato out when infested. Good luck!

The GCA Horticulture Committee felt it was a good time to add a section where garden tips could be featured. We hope you enjoy reading and implementing some of these ideas. If you have others to add, please send them to Flora at [TRD@gcamerica.org](mailto:TRD@gcamerica.org).

A special thanks to Liz Warrick for reviving Flora and Carol Anthony, Flora's artist for publication in *The Real Dirt* and to Hort Committee contributors, Priscilla Growney, Lydia Wallis, Alice St. Claire-Long, Lynn Kunau and Jocelyn Sherman for their helpful tips.

## Book Review

### Deceptive Beauties; The World of Wild Orchids

by Christian Ziegler, Introduction by Michael Pollan

Orchid hobbyists are visual people. The orchid plant itself is not attractive until the magic of the blossom occurs. This event happens in most varieties only once a year. Although the blossom will last for a long period of time, the plant itself will eventually return to its original unattractive form.

Deceptive Beauties will delight those very visual orchid growers. The spectacular photography is done by Christian Zeigler a “biologist-turned-photographer”. He also has titles such as “conservation photographer” and “wildlife photographer” attached to his name, as well as the National Geographic organization. Michael Pollan is a writer of books and articles that deal with nature and culture. His introduction and description of what exactly happens in the interaction between the pollinator and the wild orchid flower is beautifully accomplished.

The combination of talents of these two very capable men make for a book well worth reading. The word “deceptive” is an operative choice of a word. It describes exactly what occurs to the pollinator instigated by the orchid blossom. The whole purpose of the flower in the wild is to deceive the pollinator to make it think it is “interacting” with a female of its species. The story evolves in an almost unimaginable form of nature at its best. How can a flower be “thinking” enough to accomplish this deceit? Many times it involves scent, other times it mimics the sexual parts of the pollinator. This presumes the target pollinator is an insect. Birds are often the pollinators of high altitude orchids, where insects cannot fly. Nectar is the big calling card for birds such as humming birds where deep throated flowers are easily pollinated.

One of my favorite orchids is *Masdevallia veitchiana*. unattractive odor. Its pollinator is a carrion fly. The rotting odor mimics decomposing flesh to attract this particular fly.

The photography captures many of these almost unimaginable happenings in progress. It is no wonder Darwin was so interested in orchids.

Gail Hamsher, Library Committee  
The Stonington Garden Club, Zone II



*Masdevillia veitchiana*