

Spring 2021, Issue 17

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**Veggie Garden**

April is the time to plant many warm season crops, including Swiss chard, beans, squash, and tomatoes.

For a complete list, download the North FL Gardening Calendar:

<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/files/EP/EP45100.pdf>

or The Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/vh021>



**St. Johns County Master  
Gardener Volunteer Program  
Applications**

The Florida Master Gardener Volunteer (MGV) program is a volunteer training program designed to help University of Florida Cooperative Extension faculty disseminate research-based information about horticulture to the public.

UF/IFAS Extension St. Johns County is accepting applicants for the 2021 MGV Training Program. Our program provides participants with 50 hours of horticulture training and requires 75 hours of volunteer service within the first year and 35 hours each subsequent year to maintain MGV status.

The deadline to apply is Monday, May 31. Training will be part virtual and part in-person. In-person classes will be on Wednesdays from August 11 to Sept 29. Interested St. Johns County residents should contact Terra Freeman at [terraf@ufl.edu](mailto:terraf@ufl.edu) for an application. Applications will be sent out via e-mail.

**HAPPY GARDENING!**



**For more information contact: UF/IFAS Extension St. Johns County**  
Terra Freeman ▪ [terraf@ufl.edu](mailto:terraf@ufl.edu) ▪ (904)209-0430 ▪ FAX (904)209-0431

**UF/IFAS Extension St. Johns County  
Master Gardener Volunteer Plant Sale**

**Friday, April 16, 2021**

**9am to 3pm**

**UF/IFAS Extension St. Johns County  
3125 Agricultural Center Dr.  
St. Augustine, FL 32092**

**Cash or check only**

**Only 20 shoppers permitted in nursery at a time.**

**We follow all CDC and UF guidelines for social distancing,  
face coverings, and sanitation. Masks required.**





# *Growing a Backyard Food Forest*

**Terra Freeman, Urban and  
Commercial Horticulture  
Agent, UF/IFAS Extension  
St. Johns County**

With a resurged interest in edible gardening, many of us are embarking on establishing home vegetable gardens, perhaps for the first time. For many, home vegetable production conjures images of vegetable plants in neat little rows within raised beds that are replanted each season. I'd like to invite you to consider a different style of edible gardening. One that is less labor and energy intensive and, in my opinion, more enjoyable to create and maintain.

A food forest, or forest garden, is a food-producing system that mimics natural forest design by integrating canopy, understory, shrub, herbaceous, groundcover, root and vertical/vine layers. Food forests are appealing because they include many perennial or long-lived plants, such as fruit trees, shrubs, vegetables and herbs, and therefore do not require starting with a clean slate each season. They are also more sustainable during intense weather events. It's important to start off with a well thought-out, purposeful design, but food forests can be planted over time and evolve or rest with your level of time and energy. I like the idea of tucking in annual edibles here and there, while the garden maintains an attractive overall structure year round, one that becomes more sustainable and less labor intensive each year.

No two food forests are alike, and the level of complexity is up to individual preference. They do not have to include every single "forest layer" - one can simplify to fewer layers, so long as layers of differing heights are included. Food forests come in all shapes and sizes, and each evolves to a unique entity.

The canopy or "umbrella" layer is the foundation of a backyard food forest as it is the largest and will provide shade and shelter/windbreak for other plants. Typically 30-60 feet tall, the canopy will provide leaf litter (aka mulch and organic matter) for the understory, contributing to soil health and moisture retention as well as temperature moderation. In north Florida, the canopy layer may consist of native or fruiting trees such as oaks, pecans, persimmons, or peaches. The larger live oaks may work best in gardens with larger plots of land where the plants can be spread

further apart, while smaller trees may be more suitable for smaller properties.

Beneath the canopy is the understory, consisting of smaller nut and fruit trees with dwarf rootstock in the 18-25 foot range. This layer provides the bulk of fresh fruits such as figs, loquats, pomegranate, plums, nectarines and citrus.

Next in the composition are shrubs ranging from 5 to 15 feet tall. These are often planted in groups of three or five and interplanted among the larger species. Currents and berrying shrubs such as rabbiteye blueberries and blackberries provide an abundance of seasonal produce; bananas and papayas are also worthy contributors. Additionally, banana tree clumps make great hiding places for compost piles.

The more diverse herbaceous layer, consisting of annual and perennial edibles and pollinator plants, is then dispersed throughout the food forest. Seasonal vegetables and herbs such as tomatoes, peppers, basil, and cilantro are included. Perennial herbs and spices such as ginger, turmeric, rosemary and lemongrass make other tasty additions. Be sure to include native plants such as asters, wild bergamot, and coreopsis to attract pollinators to the garden.

The ground cover layer then serves to retain moisture, limit weeds, and moderate soil temperatures. Vigorous horizontal growing species such as sweet potatoes, Seminole pumpkins, and strawberries work well in our area of north-east Florida.

Plants grown for their roots and tubers such as carrots, onions, garlic and sweet potatoes make up the next element of the food forest, the rhizosphere. Some, such as sweet potatoes, work simultaneously for the groundcover and root layers. The vertical layer is then composed of passion fruit, beans, muscadines or other vines that require another plant or structure to grow on.

Once established and when properly maintained, a backyard food forest can become an enjoyable hobby and sustainable food production system, keeping you well-stocked with fresh fruits, vegetables, and herbs.

## *Spring has Sprung....along with the bugs*

Gail Wheeler,  
Master Gardener Volunteer  
UF/IFAS Extension SJC



The winter lawn doldrums are coming to an end and you're looking forward to a green and lush lawn again - and so are the insects. Chinch bugs, spittlebugs and grass scale live on plant foliage and suck the grass blade juices. Other pests, such as sod webworms, grass loopers and armyworms happily munch on grass leaves, while mole crickets, white grubs and billbugs live in the soil and damage grass roots.

If you are noticing soil mounds and tunnels, mole crickets are a likely culprit. Early detection is a key factor in controlling outbreaks and examination of your lawn every 7-10 days in the spring and summer is a helpful practice in identifying a pest problem before widespread damage occurs.

Pest control in the turf can be approached organically, chemically or as a combination of both. Organic pest control includes the use of various strategies such as natural products, natural predators and biocontrols. Examples of a natural predator include certain nematode species that have been shown to be a predator

of mole crickets and sod webworms. Overfertilization, improper mowing and overwatering can increase susceptibility of sap feeding insects.

In Northern Florida, where St. Augustine grass is used extensively, chinch bugs are a common problem. Bigeyed bugs, earwigs and anthocorids are a few of the beneficial predator bugs that help keep infestations under control. Lawns can be spot treated with the recommended pesticide or if heavily infested the entire area may need to be treated. Correctly applied treatments should control chinch bugs for 8- 10 weeks, however, most insecticides will not kill the eggs. Always follow the pesticide directions for recommended application and safe handling use.

For more information: Homeowner Best Management Practices for the Home Lawn:

<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ep236>



Spittlebug

Credit: Lyle Buss, UF/IFAS

# Herbs for your Spring and Summer Florida Garden

Pat Ludwig, Jane Palmer, and  
Linda Mundy  
Master Gardener Volunteers  
UF/IFAS Extension SJC



African Blue Basil

Love how herbs improve the taste and smell of your cooking? Just want to spruce up your lemonade, cocktails and teas? Or are you simply looking to enjoy the sweet smells and beautiful blooms of many herbs? Now that spring has sprung, it's time to consider what herbs you want in your garden.

Herbs can be annual, biannual or perennial. Many are colorful and have interesting textures. Most herbs do well in full sun and soil conditions similar to vegetable gardens. They can be grown in small spaces or in containers outdoors, or indoors at a sunny window. Some herbs, like mint, can grow rapidly and take over other plants if left unchecked.

While our Florida gardens support many herb choices, we thought it would be fun to highlight some herbs that are often overlooked but are wonderful additions to your spring and summer gardens. These are African Blue Basil, Chervil, Cuban Oregano, Lemon Balm and Nasturtium Baby Rose.

**African blue basil** (*Ocimum kilimandscharicum* × *Ocimum basilicum*) is a hybrid basil and one of the few cultivars of basil that is a perennial. It survives heat, humidity, drought and excessive rain well. Its flavor is different from many Italian basil varieties and its leaves are often blended into pesto, chimichurri sauce, or layered over bruschetta. The African blue basil flowers are also edible and can be used as a garnish in soups and salads. Not hungry for this herb? Don't worry as the bees and other pollinators find this herb a delight!

**Chervil** (*Anthriscus cerefolium*) is an annual herb that looks like a petite feathery version of flatleaf parsley with small white flowers. Chervil will bolt easily in full summer sun, so plant it in a sheltered area with a balance of sun and shade. It has a mild, sweet anise/parsley flavor and its leaves are picked to garnish salads and soups. Chervil is often used in many French cuisine dishes.

**Cuban Oregano** (*Plectranthus amboinicus*) is a perennial evergreen herb that reaches about 19 inches tall and has a spreading growth habit. With aromatic, velvety leaves, this oregano is an ideal herb to grow in partial shade. Despite its name, it is not related to oregano and often is called by many other names including Mexican mint, Spanish thyme, and Indian borage. Often used in poultry stuffing, beef, lamb and game dishes, it can easily overpower other flavors, so use sparingly.

**Lemon balm** (*Melissa officinalis*) is part of the mint family which grows easily in Florida. It grows in clumps and with lemon-scented leaves. This plant loves full sun and both its stems and leaves are used to add flavor to drinks, salads and other dishes.

**Nasturtium baby rose** (*Tropaeolum minus*), a 2019 AAS flower winner, prefers full sun or partial shade, and grows in a tidy mounding habit, about one foot tall and wide. It's dark green foliage and cherry-colored flowers attract butterflies, birds and bees. Both drought and heat tolerant, it's relatively easy to grow and is a great fit for your summer herb gardens. With the peppery flavor of its flowers and leaves, this nasturtium is often used in pesto and salads.

Looking for more information on these highlighted plants or more on edible herbs and gardening? Please refer to UF/IFAS online or EDIS publications. Happy gardening!



Nasturtium

# Mangroves : A New Breed of Shore Protectors

Dianne Battle,  
Master Gardener Volunteer  
UF/IFAS Extension SJC

Important changes have been happening along the estuarine waters of the Guana, Matanzas, Tolomato, and San Sebastian Rivers. In the last two decades clumps of bushy trees have been popping up among the salt grasses, blocking marsh views. What are these uninvited newcomers?

They are mangroves, cold-sensitive Florida native plants, now thriving in north Florida because winters here are warmer than in the past. As more mangrove seed pods float northward, their numbers are increasing, fueling resentment among homeowners who paid dearly for water view property. If you are one of them, before you pull out the chainsaw, you should know that since 1996 mangroves have been protected by state law, the Mangrove Trimming and Preservation Act.

The reason for state protection is the mangrove's ability to mitigate storm surge, flood, and wind destruction. Studies have estimated that areas with abundant mangroves could experience 25% less weather damage than areas with no mangroves. Neither manmade structures nor marsh grasses provide that much protection. Projected increases in weather intensity and sea level rise make mangroves even more valuable.

Mangroves can benefit from proper pruning and can even be trimmed to allow some water views. However, if you are caught removing or illegally pruning a mangrove you risk a hefty fine. The key to responsible mangrove maintenance is to contact your local Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) Office. The Northeast Jacksonville FDEP can be contacted through the web or by phone (904) 256-1700. The FDEP review findings might permit you to do

your own pruning, or you may be required to hire a Professional Mangrove Trimmer (PMT). The FDEP Trimming Mangroves fact sheet is a helpful resource; your local FDEP office can provide you with additional resources, forms, and guidance.

Mangroves are found in tropical and subtropical estuaries around the world. Florida has three native species: black, red, and white, and they all grow in St. Johns County. The more cold-tolerant black mangrove is the one you are most likely to encounter. It is pictured here. To understand all three mangroves and their amazing adaptations to living in environments with fluctuating salinity and water levels, consult the FDEP Florida Homeowner's Mangrove Guide.

While it's tempting to refer to mangrove movement into north Florida as an "invasion," these plants are Florida natives merely taking advantage of changing climate conditions. In the succession from grassy marsh to mangrove swamp we may be losing our scenic views but those mangroves offer increased shoreline and property protection.





# Spring has Sprung!

Shirley Barber,  
Master Gardener Volunteer,  
UF/IFAS Extension SJC



The long dreary winter is finally over...Spring has Sprung!

Time to get in the garden and tackle the Spring chores. Tidy the beds, prune shrubs as needed, discard old tired plants and revitalize the landscape with colorful additions.

Annual bedding plants offer a wide range of color, size and growth habit. One of the most popular plants for our area is Vinca, also called Madagascar Periwinkle (botanical name *Catharanthus roseus*).

Over the years many varieties have been honored as All-America Selections (AAS) winners: Mega Bloom Polka Dot (2019), Mega Bloom Orchid Halo (2017), Mega Bloom Pink Halo (2017), Jams 'N Jellies Blackberry (2012), Pacifica Burgundy Halo (2007), First Kiss Blueberry (2005), Jaio Dark Red (2003), Jaio Scarlet Eye (2002), Stardust Orchid (2000), Parasol (1991), Pretty in Rose (1991), and Polka Dot (1969).

Most impressive is the recent Mega Bloom series of Vinca which was bred to withstand heat and humidity with resistance to disease. Plants maintain compact 14-inch mounds with flowers held above shiny green foliage. This variety lives up to its name with huge 3-inch blooms in gorgeous colors that do not fade in the heat. Blooming continues throughout a long growing season.

Vinca is easy to start from seed and grows rapidly. Pinch back seedlings to a leaf node when they are a few inches to encourage branching. Do not overwater seedlings as this could encourage damp-off, a disease that could stunt growth or destroy plants. Seeds can be purchased through several online seed companies.

The compact Vinca Mega Bloom series is well suited for containers. It is stunning planted en masse in beds and borders in the garden. Grow in full sun in well drained soil. Do not overwater or plant near sprinklers as this variety enjoys dry conditions.

Visit the AAS gardens in the Botanical Gardens at the St. Johns County Extension Center with its ever-changing display of seasonal flowers and vegetables. Swaths of colorful flowers and vegetation will brighten your day and uplift your spirits

