

# Diggin' In The Dirt: Planning and Planting for Spring

By Chip Bubl

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Extension Service - Columbia County

## Basic Woodland Management course

Our OSU Extension forester, Amy Grotta, is offering a class in March. Everything she puts on is exceptionally well done. Registration now open!

This five-session course is ideal for anyone who is just starting out taking care of a woodland property. Topics to be covered include:

- Getting started: assessing your property and site
- What's going on in your woods? Understanding tree biology, forest ecology, and habitat
- Taking care of your woods: tree planting, care for an established forest, weed control
- Getting it done: Timber sale logistics, laws and regulations
- Field trip to see first-hand examples of what you've learned

Dates: Tuesday/Thursday, March 12, 14, 19, 21. Saturday field trip TBD (probably March 23 or 30)

Time: 6:00 pm - 8:30 pm

Location: Columbia County Extension office, 505 N. Columbia River Hwy, St. Helens

Cost: \$40/individual or \$50/couple sharing materials

To register: <https://tinyurl.com/basicwoodland2019> or call Sonia at (503) 397-3462. Deadline: Friday, March 1.

## Grafting workshop March 9<sup>th</sup>

The OSU Extension office in St. Helens will be hosting a grafting workshop on March 9 from 9:00 am - 12:00 pm. Participants will be taught how to graft apple scions on to dwarf apple rootstocks. Each participant will receive 5 rootstocks to work with and supplies to secure the graft. Scion varieties will be available for free or participants can bring their own varieties they wish to graft. Cost of the workshop is \$15. The class is limited to 20 people so early registration will assure a place. To register or for more information, call the Extension office at (503) 397-3462.

## Field to Market workshop March 7<sup>th</sup>

OSU Extension is hosting a workshop titled "Field to Market" which will explore how to produce a value-added food product and sell it. Experts will discuss Oregon Department of Agriculture regulations, recipe development, labeling guidelines, pH testing, marketing, and pricing. The workshop is geared to fruit and vegetable farmers or other food

entrepreneurs. It will be held Thursday, March 7, from 9:00 am - 1:00 pm at the Columbia Soil and Water Conservation District office on Millard Road in Warren, just off of Highway 30. Registration is \$25 per person or \$40 per couple. Scholarships are available. For more information, register online at <http://bit.ly/2019FTM> or call (503) 397-3462.

## Small Woodland Association tree sale set for March 9<sup>th</sup>

The Columbia County Small Woodlands Association has an annual tree sale in St. Helens. You can purchase a variety of trees in very small quantities. The sale this year will be on March 9 at the Lawrence Oil parking lot (845 N. Columbia River Highway) in St. Helens from 8:30 am - 1:30 pm. They sell both forest tree seedlings, some native shrubs, and some ornamental tree seedlings. Get there early for the best selection.

## Planning and planting for spring

I recently had a question from someone looking to do succession planting for vegetables. They wanted to know the average dates for the last spring frost and for the first fall frost. For years, I have used April 15 as the average last spring 32° F frost and October 31 for the first fall frost for the Scappoose/St. Helens area. Of course, those numbers are not absolute. Rather, they represent the point where it is increasingly less likely to frost after that spring date and more likely to frost after the fall date. When we get to higher elevations in Columbia County like Vernonia, the last spring frost average date is a month later and the first fall frost, a month earlier, effectively decreasing the growing season between frosts by about 60 days. Clatskanie is interesting. The intervals between spring and fall frosts are about the same as St. Helens/Warren/Scappoose. Overall, the heat units during growing season are lower than South County but the winter low temperatures are higher.

This has been a very strange winter to date. The first frost in the Scappoose area was very late, again depending on elevation. Locations above where cold air pools have only had temperatures down to 30° F or lower a few times until recently. Lower areas have been several degrees or more colder on many winter mornings. So even within as small an area as Scappoose, there are microclimates. Outlying areas in Clatskanie were having 22-28° temperatures

while St. Helens dropped only to freezing if that. A lot of that was higher elevation related. Vernonia behaved like "outer" Clatskanie.

If your vehicle has a thermometer, just driving around and watching the numbers will give you a sense of what is going on. I recommend that people buy a max/min thermometer, take daily readings and compare them to recorded temperatures in Scappoose or St. Helens. Over time, you will have a better picture of your location's response to specific weather conditions.

We are now in the middle of very turbulent weather as this is being written. Cold weather has calmed the enthusiasm of trees and gardeners alike. Only daffodils seem unfazed.

To further complicate things, climate change, I firmly believe, is starting to kick in. We have had too many falls in recent years where there hasn't been a 32° frost until Thanksgiving or later. But climate change is thought to produce more unpredictability and more intense storms, like we are having now.

Depending on the vegetable crops you grow, there are ways to manipulate temperature and plant growth rates at the beginning and ends of the growing season including the use of row covers (see below), transplants, raised beds (soils warm faster as they drain better), and other techniques. Many vegetables will tolerate light frosts once they are established. Often, gardeners are slowed down more by wet soils than temperatures in the spring.

## Row covers will be available again

The interest in row covers continues to increase. For those of you that missed the buzz, row covers are made from a gauzy fabric. They come in twelve-foot widths and, when we cut the roll, in lengths of 25 or 50 feet. Row covers are used in vegetable production on farms and home gardens.

They serve several purposes:

- Covers increase temperatures around transplants and growing plants by 4-6° during the day and 3-4° at night. This is valuable heat in the spring and fall.
- Seeds planted under row covers aren't seen by crows.
- Soils warm with the covers but don't crust, so seed emergence is faster and more even.
- Covers can be left with enough slack so that broccoli-sized plants can grow tall underneath them.
- Covers can keep insects out like carrot rust flies and cabbage root maggots. However, slugs prosper under covers so slug controls are needed. Weeds also like it under cover, so persistent weeding pays.

Two years ago, we sold, in 25 or 50 foot pieces, about a mile (!) of cover. We are selling 1.5 ounce covers this year. The cost is \$30 for a 12 x 50' piece or \$15 for a 25' one. Larger lengths are also available. With some care, row cover can last several years or more. You can cut them down further to fit your gardening needs. Call our office (503)

397-3462 if you want some.

## What are the crows and starlings eating?

If you have driven around much in our agricultural or larger lot suburban areas, you probably have seen flocks of starlings and smaller groups of crows and ravens eating something in pastures and lawns. There are two insects whose larva provide excellent meals for these birds and also for robins and a few other insect eating species. The crane fly has been in Columbia County since the early 1980s after it made its trek from Europe to Puget Sound and then down the I-5 corridor to Rainier. From there, it spread to the Coast and down the Willamette Valley. It is a serious lawn problem in some years. The adult is a large mosquito-looking insect. The eggs are laid in the fall and develop over the winter where they become fat, olive-green and semi-translucent. They look vaguely like caterpillars but aren't. Cycles of heavy rain bring them close to the surface where birds feed on them. Before starlings got to North America, crane flies were a major food source in Europe, where both are native. Now they are reunited in the Pacific Northwest. How charming, but I would rather have neither.

The other meal is a similar but more recent story. Winter cutworms reached Oregon from Europe via Nova Scotia, Michigan, and Idaho about ten years ago. Their numbers exploded in 2015 with significant lawn and pasture damage in Columbia County. Grass seed fields in Washington County were hammered. They move in large groups and lay bare large areas. They are still around but we haven't had such a large outbreak since. My feeling is that the birds have made many a meal of them as well. Since both crane fly and winter cutworm larvae are active and available all winter, it makes for a well-balanced diet.

## Free newsletter (what a deal!)

The Oregon State University Extension office in Columbia County publishes a monthly newsletter on gardening and farming topics (called Country Living) written/edited by yours truly. All you need to do is ask for it and it will be mailed or emailed to you. Call (503) 397-3462 to be put on the list. Alternatively, you can find it on the web at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/columbia/> and click on newsletters.

**Take excess produce to the food bank, senior centers, or community meals programs. Cash donations to buy food are also greatly appreciated.**

**The Extension Service offers its programs and materials equally to all people.**

## Contact information for the Extension office

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