Can You Dig It?

By Schann Nelson
OSU Master Gardener

It's hard to believe, as I sit hear listening to the wind whistle through the not-quite-closed window, that it's officially Spring. Spring in this part of Oregon is a chance to experience nearly every kind of weather we EVER have, within any given 24-hour period. It's not uncommon for it to be raining on one side of the house and sunny on the other. I like to call it 'Rainbow Weather.'

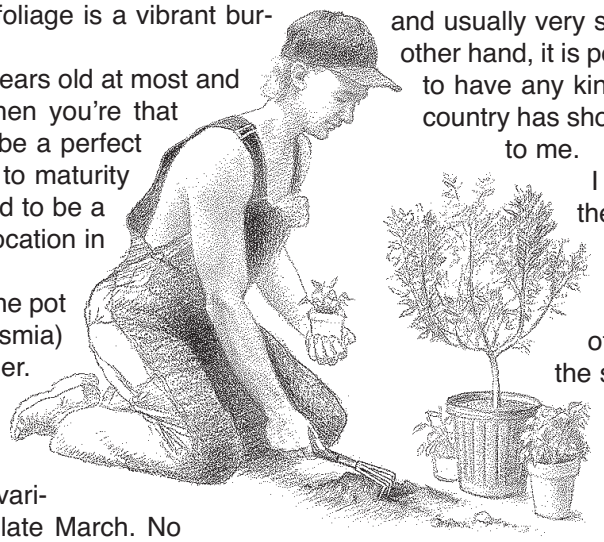
I ordered some baby plants from a nursery in North Carolina, Park Seed, and so far they are pretty disappointing. They didn't fare too well in shipping, so it looks like I may be testing their guarantee. It was fun to pick a grouping of plants for a very specific location and a defined budget. As the focus for this large pot in full sun, I've chosen a dwarf, columnar evergreen *Berberis thunbergii 'Helmund Pillar'* as a centerpiece. According to the description and photos, this is a three season plant (flowers in spring, followed by berries, then fall/winter color). The foliage is a vibrant burgundy (not green!) and thorny.

Unfortunately, it's also a baby tree, meaning it's two years old at most and only about 6-inches high. Hard to be a focal point when you're that short. Once it gets even a bit taller and fuller it should be a perfect specimen plant. My hope is that will be able to survive to maturity in that pot and in that place. When mature, it's supposed to be a 6 – 8 foot tall but only 1-2 feet wide, well suited for its location in a pot.

Until there is a more significant focal point, I'm filling the pot with several kinds of bulbs (daffodils, daylilies, crocosmia) that will provide interest through the spring and summer. This first year, I'm also adding annual *Calibrachoa* to fill-in. These nifty little flowers look like petunias but don't require deadheading to keep the blooms coming all summer long. Territorial had sold out of the *Terra Cotta* variety pictured in the catalogue by the time I ordered in late March. No wonder, the flowers pictured are an amazing collage of shades of soft colors, from dark umber to pale adobe, changing as the flowers age and all on the same plant. Watch for bigger production of this variety next year!

If you haven't guessed yet, this is one of the four pots at Black Bear Coffee and the only one planted with lavender. Adopting these pots allows me to fuss with them without guilt. And I can use them as public illustrations for this column. In this case, as example of the impact of microclimate. Note: Any environmental stress has a greater effect in a pot. A fact that can be used to your advantage.

All four of these pots were planted at about the same time, three with curly willow and the fourth with lavender. All initially had several smaller ground cover/flowers and a good rock mulch. The willows have mostly done well in the partial sun at that particular pocket park. The lavender was (I'm sure) designed to be in the one corner that gets a LOT of SUN. At some point the pots on the parking lot end of the park got reversed, with the result that the willow had a significant amount of sun damage (areas where the bark had looked 'cooked') and the lavender nearly drowned. The willow began to recover as soon as it was moved to a microclimate more suited to their requirements. This pot has the only successful ground cover, a moss with the common name *'Brass Buttons'.*



The lavender did survive, and even made it through the winter, but it is a sad looking remnant. I haven't decided whether to include it when I do the repotting. This pot may also have had an unfortunate use by some local creature. Certainly, all the humans would understand that relieving oneself in the pot would poison the soil. I know the cats have been into some of my pots when the mulch dried out on top.

To get back to the point of all this – the microclimate is easily effected. Only one side of the little park gets the hot, baking-the-parking-lot summer sun. All of the other corners of the park get at least some shade in the late afternoon, at least by the time we usually get some HOT weather (not June). By creating the environment for the plant, OR picking a plant suited to environment you can be successful growing many things.

This year I finally had the courage, and the time, to get several bags of 'summer bulbs' in the ground, including dahlias. Even though all of the packaging says to plant outside "after danger of frost" is over, if you wait that long in this corner of the state, you won't have much to show for it by the end of summer.

I've decided that these instructions are for places with very defined seasons, and usually very short period of true spring weather. Here, in Vernonia, on the other hand, it is possible to have spring weather in any season of the year AND to have any kind of weather in spring! (I think?!) Turns out that most of the country has short spring and fall seasons, odd as that kind of weather seems to me.

I planted dahlias in the ground and I must admit I'm hoping they don't rot. The two half-barrels I planted with *caladiums* and other summer bloomers like lilies. Most of the new stuff is supposed to be hardy when established (not the dahlias) and is coming up just fine. The barrels have the advantage of having really good drainage, since they're above the rest of the soil.

The trick is to figure out (A) when your soil (microclimate again) has stopped freezing and (B) when it has dried out enough. I can virtually promise you that these things will happen at slightly different times in different areas. Some years, in very mild winters, the soil hardly freezes. Not an issue this year. We hope and pray we do get lots of rain in the spring. Lots and lots of rain. In order for plants to flourish however, soil must be partially composed of air. The are very few plants that will grow in standing water. Drainage is a big key to having success.

By next month the town will be all shined up. Are you ready for Cycle Oregon?

Columbia County Master Gardener™ Association's 11th Annual

Spring Garden Fair

Saturday, April 21, 9:00 AM - 4:00 PM
St. Helens High School Commons
2375 Gable Road in St. Helens, Oregon

Free parking & admission • 60 varieties of locally-grown heirloom & standard tomato plants only $1 each • 30 local vendors offering garden-themed products • answers to your gardening questions • raffle prizes awarded throughout the day • raffle tickets only $1 each

Visit our website: www.columbiacountymastergardeners.org

Presented in cooperation with OSU Extension Service, Columbia County Office
505 N. Columbia River Highway, St. Helens, Oregon 97051, (503)397-3462

Church Directory

Nehalem Valley Bible Church
Gary Taylor, Pastor
Grant & North Streets, Vernonia
503 429-5378
Sunday School 10:00 a.m.
Morning Worship 11:00 a.m.
Nursery available
Wednesday Service 7:00 p.m.

Seventh Day Adventist
John Aitken II, Pastor, 396-1856
2nd Ave. and Nehalem St., Vernonia
503 429-8301
Morning Worship, 9:15 a.m.
Bible Study 10:30 a.m.

Vernonia Community Church
Grant Williams, Pastor
957 State Avenue, Vernonia
503 429-6790
Sunday Breakfast 9:00 a.m.
Morning Worship 9:45 a.m.
Children and Nursery 10:00 a.m.
Youth Group 6:00 p.m.
Preschool Tues. & Thurs. 9:00 a.m.
Wednesday Prayer 7:00 p.m.
Friday Adult Volleyball 7:00 p.m.

St. Mary's Catholic Church
Rev. Luan Tran, Administrator
960 Missouri Avenue, Vernonia
503 429-8841
Mass Schedule
Sunday 12:00 Noon
Religious Education
Sunday 10:30 a.m.

Vernonia Foursquare Church
Carl Pense, Pastor
850 Madison Avenue, Vernonia
503 429-1103
Sunday Worship Service: 10:30 a.m.
Children's Sunday School

First Baptist Church
359 "A" Street, Vernonia
503 429-5190
Sunday School 9:45 a.m.
Sunday Worship Service 11:00 a.m.
Wednesday Prayer Meeting 7:00 p.m.

St. Augustine (Canterbury) Episcopal Church
375 North St. (Vernonia Grange Hall)
Vernonia, 503 705-2173
Please call for service schedule.

Assembly of God
Wayne and Maureene Marr
662 Jefferson Ave., Vernonia,
503 429-0373
Sunday School 9:45 a.m.
Morning Worship 11:00 a.m

Vernonia Christian Church
Sam Hough, Evangelist
410 North Street, Vernonia
503 429-6522
Sunday School 9:45 a.m.
Morning Worship 11:00 a.m.
Every Wednesday:
Ladies' Bible Study 9:30 a.m.
Ladies' Worship 10:00 a.m.
Children's Choir 3:00 p.m.
Family Bible Study 7:00 p.m.

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints
Jeff Cheney, Branch President
1350 E. Knott Street, Vernonia
503 429-7151
Sacrament Meeting, Sunday 10 a.m.
Sunday School & Primary 11:20 a.m.
Relief Society, Priesthood and
Young Women, Sunday 12:10 p.m.