

Can You Dig It?

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Suddenly it's Summer! My yard is a riot of color! My usual palette tends to be on the cool side, but I am growing flowers for a wedding (in September). The bride chose dark red and fall colors, a challenge with some stunning combinations as the pots and troughs begin to fill in. (Actually I finally got the final one of four replanted since the first attempt rotted. See Progress Notes below.)

The goal is to stay away from the purple/blue side of the spectrum where the groom has a tendency to be colorblind. We certainly don't want him confused on his wedding day.

Our first exercise in attempting to define the colors was asking her to approve a bunch of 'summer bulbs'. The best excuse I've had yet to order new stuff to try!

I have three deep trough planters full of geraniums, verbena, zinnias, petunias and calabochias in various deep shades of red, with yellow straw flowers. I realized that I needed something with some height. Fortunately, the gladiolus and a bit of coleus and white lobelia will provide both height and fill.

I really wanted to write an article about the various kinds of blackberries, but my idea of discussing the attractive dangers of spurge finally fought its way to the keyboard. Weeds (plants in the wrong place) are such a funny thing – many of the plants we work hard to exterminate (or at least restrict) are quite beautiful. I know I've allowed plants to grow that I wish now that I had been vigilantly fighting from the beginning. Spurge is chief among these. Note: This is only because we've never allowed morning glories (*convul-vus*) to succeed, and we don't have any horsetail (*Equisetaceae*). There's a reason that particular blight is prehistoric!

My yard and garden are (mostly) organic, and we have religiously manured and mulched for over 20 years. The vegetable beds finally produce enough good soil that I can move it into the perennial beds which love the loamy, fertile stuff. The manure comes from our cow, Brindle, who eats local hay. Thus I have acquired every field weed known to the Nehalem Valley. Most are relatively easy to pull out or chop down and/or a heavy layer of straw mulch keeps new weeds from sprouting too thickly. BUT, every time the surface of the soil is exposed to light and moisture for more than a week, all manner of weeds burst forth from previously buried seed. Part of the color riot all over my yard is foxglove, poppies, phlox, poppies, calendulas, various and sundry flowering perennials and shrubs, and even more bright red poofy poppies. Most of the flowers are descendents of stuff I've planted, and are pretty, so we allow a certain number to mature just for the ambiance.

One of the nice things about using good straw mulch is that straw is made after a crop of grain is harvested. It is nearly weed free. In my garden this year it has sprouted lovely dense stands of wheat in what is usually the paths I'm hoping to harvest some for a project, but I'm afraid that we may have to let it mature and bundle it as winter feed for Brindle. This leaves the weeds that survived their journey through the cow and the compost bin. There are a few nasty weeds that I destroy every time I can get a hold of them, a few that I've used chemical warfare against (not in the veggie garden) and a few that fall in between.

Spurge was given to me as Mole Plant, a 'deterrent'. I quote from my favorite weed expert, Helen Gilkey, "Considerable difference of opinion exists regarding its efficacy for this purpose." That debate continues. I've never noticed any effect, though I don't recall finding a mole hill amongst the roots of a spurge.

Spurge was introduced from Europe, probably as an ornamental. It belongs to the family *Euphorbiaceae*, which includes plants that supply rubber, castor oil, tapioca and Poinsettias. A huge variety of new *Euphorbiaceae* have been developed as landscape plants in lots of sizes and colors. They are hardy, usually perennial and not invasive if purchased from a reliable nursery. Since they are pretty carefree they can be a great asset in the perennial border. Even plain old spurge provides a nice contrast in texture and form. But spurge can be a problem.

First, all of the members of the family *Euphorbiaceae* are poisonous in all their parts. All exude milky white 'juice' which can cause a rash similar to that of poison oak. The round fleshy seed

pods have been attractive to children with sometimes fatal results.

Second, spurge sets seed early, continues to set more seed throughout the season, each round pod contains bamegajillions [a technical term developed after hand hoeing through grass-like garden beds] AND the d##m seed seems quite able to survive in soil or compost for long periods of time.

Third, like most weeds, it grows great and will tower over and compete with more desirable plants.

So it's this way: I have to be sure to wear gloves so I don't get goo on me, and I can't throw it over the fence to the cow. I try to get rid of it before it becomes a problem. But the small ones are cute and the big ones are really wired looking and maybe they might keep the moles away from something. So sometimes they survive. It's not one of the worst weeds around, but it is a plant to be aware of so as not become victim to the plant world's revenge.

Progress Notes:

All of the hanging baskets planted with nasturtiums and/or sweet peas were WAY over-seeded. I knew this at the time, but seeds look so small, especially when set out in early March.

The post-top planters might be good places for nasturtiums but they are HARD to keep watered adequately. More gel?

Purchased plastic pots DO NOT have adequate drainage, which is essential. It's usually not to hard to drill several more 1/4 - 1 inch size holes. The caladiums I was looking forward to growing in the 'shady' wedding trough mentioned above (you though I was never going to get there did you!), turned into yucky slime because I neglected to add drainage holes.

Asian Lilies, while great as color examples in winter catalogues, are a one time display and I don't know how to do the timing. A single stem of these lilies have 3-5 large, often perfumed, flowers and make awesome cut flowers that can last for a week or more. But you have to know when to plant the bulbs to get the flowers when

you want them. I'm sure the science nerds are all over this somewhere on the web.

The huge all-white basket I planted with the first wave petunias and some other early white fine-leaved plant that I didn't save the tag from is GREAT. The single petunia and two of the others have completely filled and overflowed the container and look like they will bloom all summer if I can keep them watered. Fortunately it's in the front and gets only morning sun where it seems very happy. Sometimes it just works!

Make more compost! Enjoy the heat! Be safe!



Though not yet mature, this spurge will become large, attractive and poisonous.

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