

Food for Thought

By Schann Nelson
OSU Master Gardener



Dreary, dreary, dreary...siighhh...it's still Winter. This winter seems very long, perhaps we were all just a bit busy last year making last winter speed by. Less occupied this year, the continued freezing every day, rocks on the road, snow in the hills, cold white stuff that falls and melts making everything slippery and treacherous is wearing. Fog and ice are winter's stealth weapons, intermittently and unexpectedly coating the road with an invisible tractionless surface impossible to keep your car on. I know it is the absolute truth that Hwy. 47 will grab your car and slide it off the road completely outside of any control you may have thought you had. Your only hope is to be going SLOWLY enough that nobody gets hurt! Really folks, studded tires and 4-wheel drive do NOT make it safe to drive 47 at the posted speed much of the time, especially at dusk and dawn.

Now, with my traffic rant out of the way, perhaps I can be a bit more positive. Few things are as wondrous: The winter morning sun refracting from each tiny ice crystal coating every needle, branch, twig and seed; grasses' spectacular sculpture across the land. The north side of hills and buildings remains frozen where the sun cannot reach. It's a great time of year to bundle up the little ones and explore the wonders of nature. Water is such strange stuff! Its unique chemistry and structure creates many of the wonders of the world around us. Late winter is when I can find one of my favorite tiny wonders, what I call ice worms.

Now, I made up this name twenty-some years ago, long before such a thing as an ice worm was actually discovered living on/in glaciers in some remote place discovered by National Geographic. As a loyal PBS watcher, I have seen the little black worms living on the surface of glacial ice and these nearly microscopic (but real) worms are not what I am talking about.

MY ice worms resemble miniature white basalt columns emerging from the earth. Apparently, when the ground is saturated (a common winter condition here) there is not enough space for the expansion of water as it freezes. As a result perfect hexagonal columns are pushed up out of the ground, sometimes as long as an inch-and-a-half. 'Ice worms' don't occur over large areas, can be hidden by detritus on the surface and melt away at the first touch of sun or rain. I usually find them on the top of mole hills, side hills and other places where soil has been disturbed but is relatively loose. There was a remarkable batch under the 'patio' fireplace. When you walk over the 'worms' and knock them all aside, the ground looks like it's covered in glass shards that melt like snow flakes as soon as you touch them.

It's depressing walking around the yard now and seeing the damage. Contemplating the amount of work to repair and clean up seems overwhelming. I swear every time I walk the yard, I notice something else that will require work before spring arrives. More contributions for the giant burn pile. Thankfully, I'm also seeing daffodils beginning to peek out, and tulips I planted in pots are on their way to providing color soon.

Now is also the time to tune up the lawnmower, sharpen your tools, and not just the mower blade. A sharp hoe or shovel with a smooth, well-polished handle will amaze you with how much easier the work becomes. The coolest tool I've found for sharpening garden tools is a small, flat sharpening stone with an attached plastic handle. It fits in a pocket and was designed by the Good Cook people to sharpen kitchen knives. Like all good gardeners, I see garden applications for all kinds up stuff and all kinds of places. Tools larger than pruners should be sharpened with a more hefty, flat file to get an edge, but you can retouch as you work with the pocket file.

New and young trees should be protected from sun scald by wrapping their trunks with several layers of newspaper. Sun scald is the result of the low winter sun warming tree bark just enough to wake up the cambium layer and start the flow of sap. Unfortunately, when the nights are as cold as they have been, this flow freezes and causes the bark to separate from the tree. On a small tree the damage can be enough to kill the tree by itself, as well as creating a weak spot for bugs and diseases to access the heart of the tree and wreak additional havoc.

If I bundle up, I can start working, there's plenty to do. Finish pruning, start the biweekly spraying regimen to control fungi, plant bare root trees and shrubs, move others around, start cole crops (broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, etc.) indoors to set out in the garden in 4 – 6 weeks with a little protection at night.

Be sure to 'harden off' transplants which means allowing them a gradual transition to the outdoors. Robert Hammond has another good article in *Country Living* – the free extension publication – on the history and culture of brassicas. I really enjoyed his article last month on sweet potatoes and this article is equally good. Planting frost hardy crops (brassicas, spinach, some lettuces, radishes, parsnips, etc.) is possible in mid-March.

Other news you can use in the newsletter: An essay "The challenge of distance" presenting topics for discussion in rural communities faced with delivering infrastructure and energy in low population areas; nature deficit; garden journaling; livestock stuff; and announcement of a new extension website designed to help families cope with sudden economic collapse: http://extension.oregonstate.edu/emergency/tough_times.php

I'm pleased to see in the February list of stuff to do: *Prune clematis*, Virginia creeper and other vining ornamentals. I have yet to be able to get the blooming period of my clematis, which are two of the three different types of clematis, to align with the descriptions of when to prune based on flowering time. Our weather is just so all-encompassing and different from other places. It seems it's safe to disregard this obsession with which type of clematis and just prune them to shape in the dead of winter, hopefully before they start to grow. This means NOW! The clematis will start to grow at the tip of last year's growth as soon as they get any sun warmth, at least some of them are susceptible to sun scald. I would resist pruning to within 1-foot of the ground as recommended for some types of clematis. I'm sure this would mean the death of my *Jackmani* (a common dark purple clematis) even though it is in the group that 'should' be drastically pruned. Maybe someday, but the move from the sunny front to the shady back set the poor thing way back. After three years, and subtle pruning, it's finally growing enough to reach the sun it needs. It's still not bushy but it blooms all summer.

Perhaps I'd be a bit cheerier if I hadn't been so disciplined in disposing of most of the plant porn (those glossy winter plant catalogues) directly after removing them from the mail box. I don't think I've ever heard a more accurate description to convey the passionate gardener's response to these catalogues. I can drool over them for hours and I know I'm not alone. Now, there's an unexplored area of eroticism for the remaining long winter months!

Enjoy your plant porn!

I've vowed to spend as little as possible this year and to resist any major additions. I need rock for 'paving' and one side of the yard fence needs badly to be replaced. It will be a struggle to make those purchases. But I *will* make it to the Master Gardeners' plant sale. Mark it on your calendar!

COLUMBIA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS PLANT SALE

SATURDAY, APRIL 25, 2009 • 9 AM – 4PM • ST. HELENS HIGH SCHOOL

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.

VERNONIA FOURSQUARE CHURCH

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

CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER DAY SAINTS

Marc Farmer, 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.

SEVENTH DAY ADVENTIST

Gary S. Walter, Pastor
2nd Ave. and Nehalem St., Vernonia
503 429-8301
Morning Worship, 11:00 a.m.
Sabbath School 9:30 a.m.

ASSEMBLY OF GOD

Wayne and Maureen 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.

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

359 "A" Street, Vernonia
503 429-4027
Sunday School 9:45 a.m.
Sunday Worship Service 11:00 a.m.
Wednesday Prayer Meeting 7:00 p.m.

ST. MARY'S CATHOLIC CHURCH

Rev. Luan Tran, Administrator
960 Missouri Avenue, Vernonia
503 429-8841
Mass Sunday 12:00 Noon
Religious Educ. Sunday 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 Mon. & Wed. 9:00 a.m.
Wednesday Prayer 6:00 p.m.
Tues. & Fri. Adult Volleyball 7:00 p.m.