

The Dirt | May, 2025

Mobile County Master Gardeners

Mother's Day May 11!



Border Bed

Spiderwort

Master Gardeners,

The month of April is hurtling past us. We approached the month a little tired from a very successful, yet sometimes stressful, Spring Festival. Due to the roof repairs that closed down the Archer Center and the Greenhouse project at the Ornamental Horticulture Research Center that preempted our usual growing function, we had to find a new home and a new grower. Everything was different. Emily Arellano led us to a successful sale regardless of all the differences and the difficulties. With a gracious invitation from the Mobile Botanical Gardens we found a new home with a little bit of a familiar touch, and with a broader perspective, we found a ready, willing and able grower -- Mary G Montgomery High School. Everything was different -- but also exciting. We learned that we could adapt to new surroundings -- and new things -- but still achieve our objectives. All the partners of this year's Festival responded very positively to the new features of the event, and everyone was willing to consider an encore. For 2026, we will have options to consider as we continue to develop the educational event of our yearly program.

We are still wandering in search of a home, but our most recent General Meeting at the West Regional Branch of the Mobile Public Library was well attended. The program on Bellingrath Gardens and Home presented by Dr. Todd Lesseigne was very interesting. We may still be at the Library in May -- and still meeting on a Friday. As plans are

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worked out, we will let you know soon.



Transition with me for a moment from the Association to the thing we meet about – plants in our yard. I have a bumper crop of spiderwort this year. Yes, I know most of you consider it a weed . . . but it is a pretty weed. The foliage somewhat resembles bamboo, but it is not related to bamboo. It is a *Tradescantia* and is related to *Tradescantia pallida* with its purple leaves and pink flowers and to *Tradescantia zebrina* which makes such a dramatic display in a hanging basket.

The Spiderwort has a very simple purple flower with 3 petals and 6 yellow anthers. The flowers are in a small cluster of buds at the top of the stem. One or two buds from that cluster will open in the morning, but they wither away by afternoon only to have another bud or two bloom again the next morning. While it is certainly not a plant suitable for a table arrangement, I do enjoy the natural display that greets me in the morning when I walk my three pups, Lucie, Suzie and Bettie – no expectations, just appreciation.

(See photos above.)

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Chronicles

by Cindy Findlay

After the hustle and bustle of March we finally get to slow down to do some digging in our own gardens. The Alabama Master Gardener Conference & Business was held from April 3rd through April 5th in Prattville. The theme was “Fountain of Knowledge”. Along with all the speakers, raffles, door prizes and tours, this was where the business got taken care of. Also, the business of new officers being sworn in and other award hours were presented.

Congratulations to MCMG **Julie Conrey** who is our newly elected AMGA Vice-President for 2025. Also of significance, note that **Marsha Stoltz** MCMG received her Silver Star Pin with amethyst colored gemstone for volunteering over 10,000 hours. Congratulations and thank you Marsha for all you do!

Speaking of Marsha, (that’s how she gets those hours, she is everywhere!) Friday, April 11th was a late vegetable planting day. Marsha kept us busy like an assembly line! The work was done in no time flat, with a few ant bites to show off.

Steve Sisk, MCMG was out in the native garden planting some goodies Jack and Steve got at Kim’s nursery.

On April 11th MCMG’s also helped at the Mobile Botanical Gardens with Mary B. Austin School children as they toured the garden. MCMGs answered questions and the children helped and learned what they could!

The West Mobile Public Library was again the location for our General (and Business) meeting. Dr. Todd Lasseigne from Bellingrath Gardens presented an outlook on “Before, After, and the Future” of Bellingrath. The year 2032 will be the gardens 100-year

anniversary! I'm sure we will be hearing more on this.

Stay hydrated as you garden and if you can be anything, be kind.



Mark Your Calendar

It's never too early to think about attendance at the AMGA conference in early May 2026. Saddle up, MGs, Huntsville here we come!

May 16-18, 2026, for Master Gardener Garden Tour. Details TBD. This gives you plenty of time to gussy up your garden.



Master Gardener of the Month

by Emily Arellano

This MG is a member of Crew 22. This MG has volunteered as a docent at MBG, volunteered for projects at Mulherin Home, and assisted with plant sales at MBG. Other activities include Greenery Sale, mentoring an Intern, attending a State Conference, working in the Greenhouse at MBG, and working the Spring Festival. I'm not sure I've mentioned all areas in which this MG has worked, but she is a busy lady!

Congratulations, **Mary Ann Tomberlin** for MGoM!

Confessions of a Caterpillar Crybaby

My Grandma Abbie was a gardener with no formal training. As relayed to many people over the years, Grandma Abbie could make a brown stick grow! I was the oldest grandchild, and dare I say, her favorite. Where Grandma was, there I was, doing whatever she was doing whether it was mucking in cow manure, watering a calf destined eventually to the freezer, or planting the annual vegetable garden. Funny thing, when you are 4 years old, helping eviscerate a chicken after Grandma chopped its head off and watching it run around headless was fun and not a PTSD moment.

There was one thing, though, that Grandma Abbie told me to do where I balked, and I confess even cried...removing caterpillars from her dill crop. If you have ever had an ICK moment, you know what I mean. Dill was an important herb that she used in her prize dill pickle recipe. I loved her dill pickles, but I hated those caterpillars more because she wanted me to remove those worms by hand squishing them with my fingers. Even at such a young age, I had to figure out a way to remove worms without touching them. Aha! A stick was close by, so I picked it up and poked at those icky things until they landed on the ground. I didn't even want to squash them with my flip flops, so then I picked up a rock and sent them to caterpillar heaven-or that you-know-what place.

It wasn't until many years later that I discovered the life cycle of which these caterpillars are part of. So, forgive me Mr. or Ms. Butterfly for interrupting your life cycle of a short but beautiful life. Nor was I aware that these creatures play such an important role in pollination and are a major indicator of ecosystem health.

I wish I could replay the ICK factor. Despite Grandma's command I would

take a stand and allow those caterpillars to keep on munching, knowing that in a short time, a chrysalis would form and then a butterfly would emerge. A miracle! Metamorphosis is a beautiful thing. Besides, dill pickles are available on a shelf at your local supermarket!

by Barbara Boone



Roses at MCI



More Roses at MCI



Roses at MCI



Crew hard work at MCI



More roses ar MCI



Extension Leaders and Volunteers Enhancing the Community

Wilmer Hall update: **Jack LeCroy** reported that the irrigation system is complete. Winterization is complete as well. A meeting with Pratt indicates planting will begin soon. A request from Jack for volunteers to follow up on the planted vegetables, health of the plants, and lookout for pests was sent out. Jack also sent out a request for a Master Gardener to coordinate the volunteers working at Wilmer Hall. **Jan Wood** stepped up and will coordinate the volunteer teams at Wilmer Hall.

Pictured above, **Dr. Dana Nettles** continues to speak along with other MGs like **Pat Hall** to participants at the Connie Hudson Senior Center. Her topic furthers Master Gardener outreach of education, health, and community involvement. Hooray, Dana, for speakership every month moving forward!

Crew 22 continues to beautify Mitchell Cancer Institute (MCI). The rose garden has more blooming roses seen in the photo above left. The Crew met at R&R Seafood for lunch with **Linda Guy** joining to discuss fertilizing and watering roses photo bottom. Crew members attending: **Patti Hicks, Carolyn Rooks, Paul Ezell, Carol Mackay, Lisa Davis, Mary Ann Tomblin, Earl Gochey, Kathy Deckbar** and a few Crew spouses.



Dirt Under Your Nails

Easter Lilies

Easter lilies are an iconic bulbed flower showing off showy blooms in a trumpet shape. During the Easter season homes, churches, and cemeteries are adorned with *Lilium longiflorum* which came to be commonly referred to as Easter lilies.

Although Easter lilies are symbolic of new life and purity, their arrival in America was not instantaneous. Native to Japan, then to Bermuda, the lilies finally made it to the U.S. via a WWI soldier who resided in Oregon. Over time lilies were heavily grown in Oregon and California in greenhouse settings.

There is no reason to discard these lilies after the Easter season is over. Easter lilies are very hardy, more so than other seasonal lily bulbs. Winterizing with mulch will protect bulbs during colder weather. Planting in morning sun and afternoon indirect sun in well-draining soil will encourage blooms for years to come. Fertilize in spring when growth appears. With this proper care, lilies will multiply and clump so they can be divided for more plants. **Note: this bulb is toxic to cats!**

Every Spring thanks to **Marcia Stolz** as the leader, the Dream Garden is planted with a variety of vegetables. Upon maturity, most of the vegetables will be transported to recipient non-profits, adding to consumer nutrition.

Marcia Stolz called for volunteers April 11, and complying with her request, they showed up to plant Spring vegetables. Another example of MCMG teamwork!



Spring Dream Garden
Planting Leader Marsha
Stolz



Spring Dream Garden
Volunteer: Maryann
Days



Spring Dream Garden
Volunteers:
Paul Ezell, Shirley
Reynolds, John Mitchell,
Jan Woods



More spring Dream
Garden Volunteers:
Paul Ezell, Cindy
Findlay, John Mitchell,
Jan woods

Gardenology

No Dig Gardening

Editor's Note: Yet another gardening method. You may not approach your garden space like this, but it is fun to be aware of alternatives. Keep these informational nuggets in mind for your next cocktail party banter or competing on Jeopardy.



Of all the gardening techniques reported here despite the editor's note above is the No Dig concept. No Dig has been gaining traction for quite some time for several reasons: saves time, saves money, fewer weeds, have a better harvest, and promote better soil. All of this for not tilling the soil!

New in ground gardens almost all require tillage to prep the soil for planting. A rototiller will take care of grass and smooth out the soil and even incorporate a few inches of compost amendment. But beyond this first attempt at new in ground garden prep, **NO MORE USE OF THE ROTOTILLER!**

It may seem improbable that a garden can be maintained without digging. But think about forests and roadsides. Neither one requires digging yet growth thrives. What is actually going on underground are microbes, fungi, insects, and worms tunneling through the soil and transforming organic matter into rich humus.

To plant in a no dig garden, make very small holes for seedlings or directly sown seeds. Doing so perpetuates the soil transformation into humus. Repeated tillage will destroy this process. Charlie Nardozzi, a huge supporter of no dig says, "Be mindful of no dig because the best tended garden is the one that only has the footsteps of the gardener in it." **NO ROTOTILLER TRACKS!**



What's in a word: Kokedama

Kokedama (ko-keh-da'-ma) is another Asian and minimalist influenced horticultural element used for decor merging with nature. The finished product can be used inside or outside.

Instead of traditional containers, kokedama features the plant or bulb planted in soil and held together with moss and twine. The twined kokedama can be suspended with additional decorative twine or placed in a bowl for display. Here are the materials needed to DIY your own kokedama:

- moss
- twine
- suitable small plant or bulb

Surround plant or bulb with damp soil. Hold the damp soil with dampened moss. Surround the moss with twine. Suspend the kokedama ball with more twine.

- potting soil

Compiled by Terra Firma

Source: Sophia Beams, Gardening Trends, March 2025

Photo: B. Boone

From the Garden to Teacup

by Dr. Dana Nettles

Editor's Note: Dr. Dana teaches us the "how to" of growing teas and herbs harvested for consumption.

Why Grow Tea in Zone 9a:

1. Ideal Climate for *Camellia sinensis* (true tea)

This is the plant used for green, black, oolong and white tea.

Zone 9a's winters are cold enough to trigger dormancy, but not so harsh that plants die back.

2. Perennial Herbal Tea Plants Thrive:

Many herbs like lemongrass, lemon balm, mint, tulsi and moringa love the warmth and return yearly.

3. High-Value Niche Crop:

Tea (especially organic, hand harvested, and locally grown) has strong market value at the farmers markets and online.

4. Low Input, Regenerative Potential:

Tea plants can live 30+ years, benefit from mulching, and support agroforestry or permaculture designs.

Best Tea Plants to Grow in Zone 9a:

1. *Camellia sinensis* {True tea}
Grow in partial shade to full sun with well drained acidic soil.
Harvest leaves for green, black, or oolong tea.
Takes 3 years to mature, but long-lived and rewarding.
2. Moringa, *Moringa oleifera*
Fast growing trees; leaves are nutrient-packed and make energizing tea.
Loves the heat, drought-tolerant once established.
3. Lemon Verbena, *Aloysia citriodora*
Fragrant leaves, strong lemon flavor, perennial in Zone 9.
Popular in sleep and digestive teas.
4. Tulsi (Holy Basil), *Ocimum tenuiflorum*
Adaptogen (extracts offering stress relief) with strong health benefits.
Can overwinter in Zone 9a with mulch or be grown as a self-seeding annual.
5. Lemongrass, *Cymbopogon citratus*
Refreshing flavor, grows quickly and looks great in gardens.
Used for calming, digestive teas.
6. Mint (Peppermint, Spearmint), *Mentha x piperita*
Thrives in moist areas, spreads easily, great for cooling tea blends.
Grows back each year with minimal care.
7. Roselle (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*)
Grows like an annual in Zone 9a but can be perennial with protection.
Tart, cranberry-like calyces, makes bright red, Vitamin C rich tea.
8. Ginger and Turmeric, *Zingiber officinale* and *Curcuma longa*
Grown as annuals in Zone 9a or overwinter indoors.
Adds warming, anti-inflammatory notes to tea blends.

2025 State Master Gardener Conference

Editor's Note: Especially for those of us who were unable to attend the 2025 AMGA conference, please read Carol's summary and note photos below, especially Julie Conrey at the podium.

by Carol Williams

The Prattville MGA gets high marks for their great organization, wide variety of vendors and pre-conference activities, interesting and informative speakers, and great food, all in a small town off I-10. One important highlight is that Mobile's Julie Conrey was installed for a two-year term as vice president of AMGA.

The party began on Thursday, with morning registration and offerings of numerous outdoor tours as well as several craft workshops. Meanwhile, at the First Baptist Church in Prattville, where all our sessions were held, the silent auction fund raiser begins, and the vendors, including MCMG's own **Susan Hilton** Pottery, are ready for shoppers. **Julie Conrey** created and left the Painted Apron workshop with her cute painted garden apron, and **Theresa Davidson** created a flower arrangement at the Floral Design Techniques workshop, saying it was well worth the small fee.

The planners wasted no time bringing on their celebrity keynote speaker, Joe Lamp'l, creator and host of the PBS Series: [*Growing a Greener World*](#), and his latest [*joe gardener Online Gardening Academy*](#), along with several more outlets for his knowledge of ecology and gardening. His recommendations included ecological organic gardening with integrated pest management and fewer inputs, and the need to increase interest in healthy, biodiverse ecosystems.

We then strolled in perfect weather across the block to Prattville Gardens for a welcome reception including a delicious casual buffet and the opportunity to meet

interesting MGs from other organizations.

The Lamp'l ecological theme continued Friday morning with Wesley Anderson, Ph.D, a professor at Auburn University, conservationist and wildlife ecologist, shared the history and preservation of his favorite bird among the 11,00 species worldwide: the North American bluebird, a thrush unique to the United States. After explaining their near extinction from loss of habitat and invasive species, and their successful comeback, Dr. Anderson encouraged us all to add bluebird boxes to our gardens. The requirements are specific, and full details can be found at the National Bluebird Society nabluebirdsociety.org/fact-sheets-plans/.

The president of the [Herb Society of America](#) and a member of the Chilton County MGA, Betsy Smith, Ph.D., an Advanced Master Gardener, explained her school program "Opening the Gift of Herbs with Kids." She shared her methods and pictures from the classrooms learning about and growing herbs with students in local schools, including a Shelby County High School class creating a business for selling their herb harvest.

After the business meeting, which is the formal purpose of the conference, the final Friday afternoon speaker, Jason Reeves, an inspirational research horticulturist and curator of the [University of Tennessee Gardens in Jackson, Tennessee](#), recommended dozens of hosta and other shade-tolerant plants with pictures from his curated gardens at UT. On Saturday morning, Jason also narrated photos of changing his simple house into a dynamic showplace for hundreds (or thousands) of plants.

After a delicious dinner at the church, our last session for Friday night featured Grover Plunkett, Ph.D., who grew up on a successful farm in east Alabama and compared life and business there with the current agri-business in the US: international companies managing huge swaths of land, and the cost to our nation in soil, natural resource loss, and reduced nutrition in the harvest requiring us to rethink our methods and outcomes for the future. He mentioned a successful organic farm in Virginia, polyfacefarms.com that may offer solutions.

The conference closed Saturday with [Laura Perry Johnson](#), a 35-year veteran of the Georgia Cooperative Extension, leading in every aspect of Extension outreach until completing her service as head of Extension. As Paula Reeves noted, her interesting speech included how multiple generations see and interpret things in different ways and gave ideas for overcoming those differences when working with diverse groups.

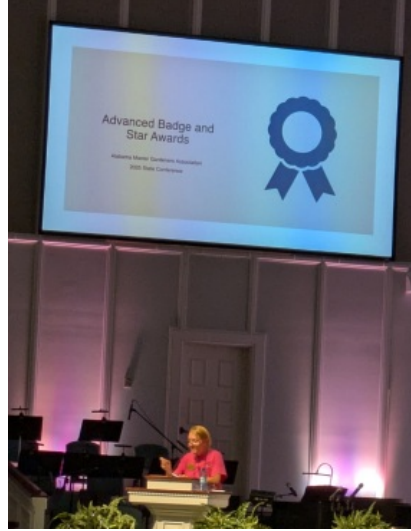
Next year, we gather at The Westin Huntsville at Bridge Street Town Center for *Gardening to the Moon and Back*, "to provide new ideas. . .to enhance outreach activities throughout the state." With 9 speakers, including prolific author [Dr. Doug Tallamy](#) and [Melinda Myers](#), author and gardening expert. The Prattville Conference was one of the most enjoyable ever, and we have started planning for May 6-8, 2026, in Huntsville. We hope you'll come, too!



Carol Williams, Paula Reeves,
Cindy Findlay, Julie Conrey,
Theresa Davidson, Emily Arellano



Emily Arellano, Cindy Findlay,
Theresa Davidson, Jack LeCroy,
Carol Williams



50 Shades of Green

2025 Mobile County Master Gardener Spring Festival

It was a day, Saturday, March 29, that according to local prognosticators threatened bad weather, but Mother Nature was kind that day and had other ideas- at least until later overnight. So, weather cooperation kicked off a successful 2025 Spring Festival at Mobile Botanical Gardens (MBG).

An event like this requires direction and many hands on for success. Under the leadership of Mobile County Master Gardeners (MCMG) Vice President, Emily Arellano, and many committees, the MGs greeted customers before 9:00 am until 2:00 pm, all shopping for locally grown vegetables, herbs, and local vendor goods. The MBG gift shop was open for shopping and the grounds open for walking and enjoying spring foliage. Food trucks provided snacks for hungry shoppers.

Success is measured by the hundreds of tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, cucumber, and herbs sold. Any leftovers were taken to local non-profits. This is an excellent example of Master Gardeners working together as a team.. See photos below showing all the fun and activity.



Spring Festival MG Group



MBG Spring Festival entrance



Spring Festival Greeters



Festival MG Information Tent



Festival Customers



Festival Vendors



Festival Customers Shopping



Festival Plants on Trailers



Festival Caladium Sales Table



Festival Checkout Table



Festival Volunteer



Festival Extension Table



Festival Packing Up



Speaker's Bureau Update

Libraries often provide opportunities to reach out to people for more than book lending. They also provide the setting for informational programs such as horticulture and gardening. AND besides lending books, some libraries also have initiated seed lending. The Moorer Branch on McGregor Ave. currently has a program in place. Library hours are M, W, F, S 9:00-6:00.

The Speaker's Bureau is getting wound up for the Spring season. **Alice Marty** presented aspects of gardening at College Park Civic group April 8. Alice spoke and demonstrated container gardening and then took a Q&A session.

May 17 **Jane Finley** is scheduled to speak to Arlington Oaks HOA on home turf.

If you would like to be involved with the Speaker's Bureau educating and reaching out to our community with gardening and sustainability topics, please contact **Barbara Boone** (251-680-8263) or **Alice Marty** (251-709-1125).



From the Green House

A Household Favorite Useful in the Garden

Chances are you have a blue and yellow can with a thin spray nozzle stashed amongst other containers on your "wall 'o chemicals". This can is WD-40 and it is a very useful item to have to solve issues in your household or around your landscape.

Why is this item called WD-40? WD stands for "Water Displacement" which is exactly what this can does. Chemists have attempted to determine the actual chemical composition of WD-40, but truth be told, the only people who know its composition are the owners of this product. It may be a trade secret, but it works very well; some chemists claim it to be the best chemical invention of all time.

You may already employ WD-40 for garden and household use. If not, then the following is a breakdown of what this magical spray can do for you:

1. Remove sticky residues and labels, especially useful for pots. Who wants unsightly labels on those expensive pots?
2. Eliminate squeaks on storage buildings.
3. Remove grease stains from sidewalks.
4. Remove dirt and grime from gardening implements.
5. Repel pests like wasps, snails, and slugs probably due to mineral oil in its known chemical makeup.
6. Spray around a potted plant deterring bugs.
7. Keep squirrels off bird feeders. Coating bird feeder poles makes those squirrels slide right off.
8. Spraying on the bottom of a lawn mower prevents grass from sticking to its underparts.

There is a caveat to WD-40 usage. **DO NOT USE WD-40 ON OR AROUND EDIBLES!**

So, buy or reach for that long unused can. You will surely find it useful inside and especially outside. Spray on!

Compiled by Dirt Diva

Source: Hallie Milstein, S&L, March 2025

We might think we are nurturing our garden, but of course it's our garden that is really nurturing us. -Anonymous



Remember, see separate In the Loop for all MCMG date, time and location. Plus, how to capture MG volunteer hours, especially important for new interns wishing Master Gardener certification ASAP!

Mission Statement

The Alabama Master Gardener Volunteer Program is an educational outreach program provided and administered by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.

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