



Volume 21

Issue 5

May 2024

Here's the Dirt

A publication of the River Valley Garden Club

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Rooting for You..... Deb Rooney Co-President

They say IT TAKES A VILLAGE — and boy, is that true. This garden club would not be what it is today without you, your donations, and the giving of your time — and we are so appreciative!

Our key fundraiser for the year — **THE Plant Sale Extravaganza** — is on Saturday, May 11, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. in the RMA parking lot. But don't be thinking it's JUST a plant sale. Not only will there be plants galore, but there will also be a Raffle, a Silent Auction, a Children's Mother's Day Project, beautiful flower arrangements for Mother's Day, Garden Art, and did I say Plants, Plants, Plants, and more Plants — and then even more Plants!



Past president and Master Gardener Pam McCabe at a prior year plant sale



Plant sale items from a previous year

So where do all these items come from? They come from you! Our plant sale relies on generous donations from this community, and boy, have you delivered. We've had camellias donated, beautiful amaryllis, donated, sago palms, succulents galore, beautifully planted pots, garden art, and more than I can even count. And you've grown plants from seeds — so many tomato plants! It is truly amazing!

And a huge "Thank you" to each and every volunteer. For the past few months, a group of volunteers have endlessly met to organize and make this plant sale happen. They've given their time to meet and share their ideas to make this plant sale better than ever. And I can't wait to see it all come to fruition.

This plant sale will allow us to continue our tradition of giving scholarships to college students and providing grants to the local community groups that make a difference in Rancho Murieta. I couldn't be prouder of you, of this community, and the River Valley Garden Club and the wonderful things we can do together.

It truly takes a village, and we have a great one!

THANK YOU so, so much!

Deb





Are Your Tomatoes in Yet?

Fred Hoffman, better known locally as Farmer Fred, always proclaimed that April 28 was tomato-planting day in Sacramento. Presumably that is the day that the ground is warm enough that tomatoes would happily begin growing in a garden. It is also Farmer Fred's birthday.

The question is — is the ground warm enough to plant even now? It seems that our spring weather is getting cooler as the years go by. Yes, we've had sun for a few days in a row, with the exception of that amazing and somewhat terrifying thunder storm a week ago, but my soil feels downright cold! And so do I! Maybe in a week or so, our milder more dependable weather will pay us a visit, but for now, I'm happy to observe my seedlings in their peat pots.

While we still have time to think about planting our tomatoes, here is the gist of an article about growing tomatoes that appears on our Facebook page as we speak (today is May 1). Margaret Watson-Hopkins, our Facebook host, posted what she calls an absolutely great article about planting and growing tomatoes. Here are some highlights:

1. Plant deep — leaves and all.
2. Don't pluck out the suckers that form in the crotch of the limbs — in our hot weather, those extra branches offer shade the tomato fruits need.
3. Tomatoes are one of the only plants that will grow additional roots (called adventitious* roots) along the stem when you plant the stem deeply.

Some people pinch out the shoots that appear where tomatoes branch but it is not recommended in our climate. Because it is hot and dry, and the sun is intense in our low humidity, the more leaves you have to shade developing tomatoes from the sun, the better. Pinching out those tomato "suckers" is a technique used in more humid parts of the country where staking (rather than caging) tomatoes is common.

4. If the seedlings are in biodegradable pots, you can plant them in the pot, but break up the pots slightly so the roots can easily grow into the soil.
5. Fill the planting hole with soil, press the soil firmly around the plant, and then water the area thoroughly.

Tomatoes need full sun and plenty of room to grow. If planting in a pot, choose a large one. If planting in the ground or in raised beds, space seedlings 24 to 30 inches apart. If you don't intend to stake or cage them, they will need even more room.

Most tomato plants benefit from some type of support. Cages or stakes keep them off the ground, maximizes space, and make harvesting easier. Don't fertilize until the plants are flowering and fruits are forming. Too much nitrogen fertilizer in the beginning will encourage green growth, but will delay fruit formation.

*** Remember this word so you can impress your friends with your great tomato-growing knowledge.**



Choosing the Best Mulch for your Flowerbed



Mulch is one of those annoying things that gardeners don't really want to spend time or money on, and it's really annoying when it comes in bags that weigh more than some gardeners do. Schlepping mulch from your car to a wheelbarrow and around to the other side of the yard is about as much fun as repainting your hallway because a gang of toddlers used color crayons on it during the last family birthday party.

We know that mulch is a necessity to shield our plants and flowers from the heat of the sun, retain water, and keep weeds at bay, but what kind of mulch to choose? So many choices...so little time. Here is an excerpt from an article from an online source called "The Spruce" that I found helpful in determining which type of mulch is best for me.

1. **Compost:** This is organic material in various stages of decomposition. Mature compost is dark brown and crumbly with soil-like particles, and it has an earthy aroma. Applying a thick layer of compost over soil helps suppress weeds, and also leaches nutrients into the soil whenever it rains or you irrigate your plants. The compost will slowly work down into the soil and may need to be refreshed over the growing season.
2. **Dyed Mulch:** Red, brown, and black dyed mulches are showing up in landscapes everywhere. The product is usually waste wood (like shipping pallets) ground up and sprayed with a variety of dyes. This product is 20-40% more expensive than traditional mulches, and the vivid color may steal the show from your flowers. The color will fade over time, making the landscape seem reminiscent of a neglected office park.
3. **Rocks:** There are pros and cons to rock mulches. Rocks don't break down, and therefore provide a semi-permanent mulch (even rocks get dispersed over time). Rocks will not improve your soil and may look untidy when dead plant material accumulates on them.
4. **Rubber Mulch:** If you're worried that your mammoth sunflowers or hollyhocks might fall and hurt themselves, use rubber mulch. Otherwise, save this product for playground areas. Rubber mulch does nothing to amend the soil, and the pieces have an unpleasant way of migrating all over the landscape, creating a debris field that never goes away.
5. **Sawdust or Fresh Wood Chip Mulch:** Horticulturists warn of the dangers of fresh wood chips robbing nitrogen from the soil as the wood decomposes. Fresh chips are safe to use as mulch, as long as they aren't mixed into the soil. Finely ground sawdust can mat in the rain or blow away in dry weather, and may make a better mulch when blended with straw or shredded bark.
6. **Living Mulch:** A living mulch is another term for cover crops, most common in agriculture. Plants like clover, buckwheat, annual rye, or alfalfa are grown in an empty garden bed and then tilled into the soil for enrichment. Also known as green manures, these crops are usually used in fallow vegetable beds. Flower gardeners preparing a new bed may find a living mulch useful.



Other mulches include straw, pine needles, and landscape fabric, but given these choices, when considering my garden, my choice has been compost. It's not a joyful chore, but one which is fundamental to a healthy garden.

What the Heck is Neem Oil Anyway?.....



Neem oil is often recommended when gardeners ask what to use to get rid of garden pests, but have you even wondered what in the world it is?

Here is what I found: Neem oil is a natural pesticide pressed from the seeds of the neem tree (*Azadirachta indica*), an evergreen native of India with leaves, flowers, and fruit that have many agricultural and medicinal uses. Neem oil is yellow or brown in color, and smells like garlic or sulfur. Gardeners typically like the smell of garlic, because it reminds them of their favorite Italian restaurant. But sulfur is so objectionable that a person just wants to run away and hide.

(Note: While writing this article, I went outside to my shed, reached up and got my neem oil, and sprayed it to determine its odor. I couldn't smell anything at all; however, it's been very windy, and my nose is very stuffy. Going back into the house, my nose began to run, so my recommendation is to use the product without intentionally smelling it).

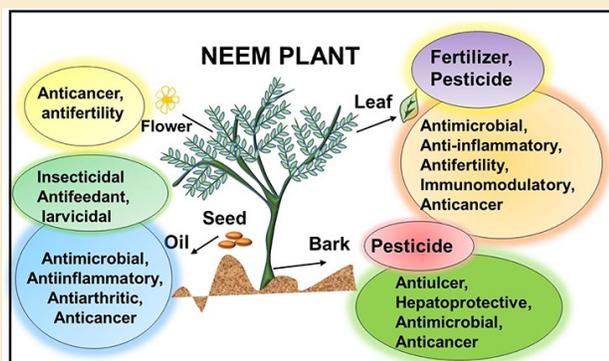
In addition to its scent which is apparently objectionable to garden pests, neem oil contains a naturally occurring substance called anadirachtin (*this is another word you can use to impress your friends*) that kills insects, as well as fungal diseases including powdery mildew and leaf spot. Below is a list of common pests that neem oil kills:

Aphids	Beet armyworms	Caterpillars	Fungus gnats
Japanese beetles	Leaf miners	Locusts	Mealybugs
Moth larvae	Mushroom flies	Nematodes	Thrips
White flies			

The best use of neem oil is to use it off-season, but it may be used in a pinch in case of infestation. For trees and gardens, apply neem oil in the winter when plants are dormant to kill any hibernating eggs or larvae.

Despite working to prevent harmful insects, neem oil is perfectly safe to use around ladybugs, bumble bees, butterflies, and other pollinators. These insects do not eat the plant's foliage or fruit, so they won't ingest oil the way harmful bugs will.

In addition to the beneficial effects of neem oil on our plants, it is also apparently beneficial for both skin and hair health. It is actually used as a medicine for some skin diseases, although there was no mention as to where in the world this practice takes place.



Believe it or not, during my research on this topic, I read a question so odd that I wondered if it had been submitted by a robot. Here it is: *"What happens when you put neem oil in your belly button?"* Answer: It can cure skin problems like blemishes, and can prevent acne and pimples. Oh boy. I guess that's okay, as long as a person doesn't mind smelling like garlic or sulfur.

For me, I'll stick with using neem oil in my garden.

Springtime at Crystal Hermitage Gardens



Colorful blasts of tulips in bloom at the Crystal Hermitage Gardens

Those who attended the Crystal Hermitage Gardens Tour in Nevada City reported that it was a truly breathtaking experience. Imagine gazing at over 20,000 tulips, all blooming in a stunning array of colors simultaneously.

According to its website, the Crystal Hermitage Gardens is a place of meditation where visitors feel a sense of peace while experiencing spectacular views.

A lovely chapel is available onsite for meditation and prayer, if one wishes to do so. The chapel design is based on the Porziuncola, the little church rebuilt by St. Francis of Assisi in Italy.

Cherry blossoms bloom in abundance in April and May. Visitors enjoy the terraced gardens, the peaceful koi pond, and the lovely rose garden with a pool. The gardens feature awe-inspiring views of the Tahoe National Forest and the Yuba River Canyon.

Unlike most public gardens, Crystal Hermitage offers yoga classes and experiential nature activities, as well as a vegetarian lunch at The Expanding Light Retreat. Visitors may also choose to picnic at Master's Market.

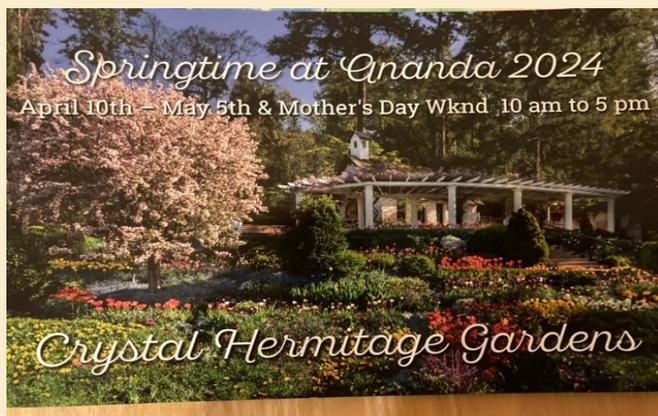


The Crystal Hermitage Gardens is a part of Ananda Village, an intentional community founded more than fifty years ago. The more than 200 residents are devotees of Parahansa Yogananda, who was a leading teacher of yoga in the West, and author of the influential spiritual classic, "Autobiography of a Yogi."

Those who are mesmerized by the colorful and peaceful surroundings, and wish for a longer stay will be happy to learn that an onsite guest house provides beautiful accommodations, complete with kitchen, bath, and two bedrooms for the affordable price of \$139 per night.

According to local weather reporting, there was apparently some concern this year that the snow covering the tulips might inhibit their bloom, but reportedly they pushed through the snow and are stunning as they have ever been.

This tour was so lovely that perhaps we can look forward to another visit so even more of our members may attend and enjoy these fabulous gardens.



Awesome Raffle Items at the Plant Sale

Peggy DeMello, our Amazing Raffle Chair, has announced the items that will be raffled off at our **Plant Sale Extravaganza**, and you won't want to miss an opportunity to be the proud owner of any one of these gorgeous and substantial gifts!

Check out these wonderful items below and be prepared to come and purchase raffle tickets!

Item #1



A Cara-Cara Orange Tree with two orange gazania plants donated by Chris Strutz

Item #2



Taukeyama Laceleaf Japanese Maple — about 3 ft. tall — with Coleus Kong Lime Sprite

Item #3



Succulent bench, approximately 40" long, created by Steve and Peggy DeMello. Bench donated by David Sobon

Item #4



Framed print donated by Margaret Watson-Hopkins accompanied by a bottle of Rombauer chardonnay wine and a hand-painted wine glass ensconced in a wrought iron carrier. On the bottom of the wine glass is a wine recipe!



And for the final raffle item.....turn to the next page.....

Item #5



Here it is! Our garden cart, donated by Julie and John Davis, proprietors of Rancho Murieta ACE Hardware, decked out with a snazzy watering can (check out the color, Joyce!), 11 piece set of garden tools, a bag of soil, garden hat and gloves, a rain gauge, a flag and flag holder, seed packets and bulbs, a fun daisy plant — and a few surprises!

Yes — wonderful, incredible, amazing raffle prizes — but come on out and see what else we have....

Veggies

Herbs

Spider plants

Sago Palms

Huge amaryllis

Camellias

Garden Art

Bouquet arrangements

Lots and lots of succulent arrangements

Cabbage palms

Aloe bella donna

Dahlias

Geraniums

Zinnias

Jade plants

Dogwoods

And...a Kids Activity Table and a Silent Auction! Saturday, May 11th 9 a.m.—2 p.m. in the RMA Parking lot.

You will definitely not want to miss this party! Get your Mother's Day gifts here, chat with the Master Gardener, come and enjoy shopping in the beautiful out-of-doors!

Three Los Rios Community College Horticulture Students Win \$1000 Scholarships.....



Scholarship winners Erin Harris, Britney Carpenter, and Stephanie Estrada

Margaret Watson-Hopkins, Scholarship Chair, proudly announced this year’s scholarship winners and stated that this group was truly exceptional in achievement and in their aspirations.

Further, Margaret stated: “A garden club has many missions. One is to provide resources for members to improve their gardening skills and environmental knowledge. Another is to encourage social opportunities with others who have like interests. A third is to help beautify local open spaces and community gathering sites. However, a very important fourth mission is assisting those who have horticultural aspirations to meet their goals.”

The River Valley Garden Club is proud to support our Rancho Murieta community and surrounding areas with grants for local beautification projects and scholarships for horticulture, agriculture, and plant science students at two Sacramento area community colleges: American River and Cosumnes River colleges.

Britney Carpenter, who works at Green Acre’s Elk Grove store and attends CRC, enjoys helping neighbors and family members to design efficient landscapes and gardens. She is currently working with a community member to redesign his yard and replace it with a more environmentally conscious landscape.

After she receives her associate degree at CRC, Britney plans to transfer to either U.C. Davis or Cal Poly Humboldt for a Bachelor’s degree so she can help increase general public knowledge about drought tolerant landscapes and encourage cooperation with our surroundings in order to conserve fragile water resources.

Britney’s Professor of Horticulture at CRC wrote: “Britney has a positive work ethic and is an active student in class...and the lab. (She) continues to grow as a horticulture professional...developing the skills and habits that will make her a good candidate for...our industry.”

Erin Harris, a busy mom and student, also has high aspirations. Though she received a Bachelor’s degree at Asbury University, she returned to community college in order to pursue her dreams. She’s working on her degree in Horticulture and Landscape Design Technology, and since 2022 has worked as a landscape designer using practices that enhance soil and plant health, reduces overall water usage, and encourages companion plantings in order to reduce the need for toxic pesticides.

(continued on the following page.....)



Scholarship Winners.....continued from previous page...

Current goals include becoming a certified arborist through the International Association of Arborists and a certified Qualified Water Efficient Landscape professional

Erin's overarching goal is to develop an online platform to help answer questions and concerns from homeowners and gardeners, and to teach others how to plan, maintain, and install their own landscape dreams.

Stephanie Estrada has spent the majority of her life working in agriculture with gardens and plants. Watching seeds sprout and seedlings grow, and then seeing those herbs, vegetables, and flowers ultimately bring beauty and sustenance to others gives her great joy. And, "It's fun," she states.

Although Stephanie's immediate goal is to gain an Associate degree in Horticulture from American River College, her ultimate goal is to have her own business,



own a farm, and be able to teach others about horticulture and plant sciences. Her instructor also mentioned that, "One of the best predictors of success is passion. Stephanie possesses this passion."

We are proud of all of our 2024 scholarship recipients. Giving to others to help them realize their dreams is why we work so hard to raise money in the River Valley Garden Club during the year. Our gardens, plant sales, raffles, informative outside speakers, and volunteerism in the community help others. Like Stephanie, that is our passion. We possess it.

