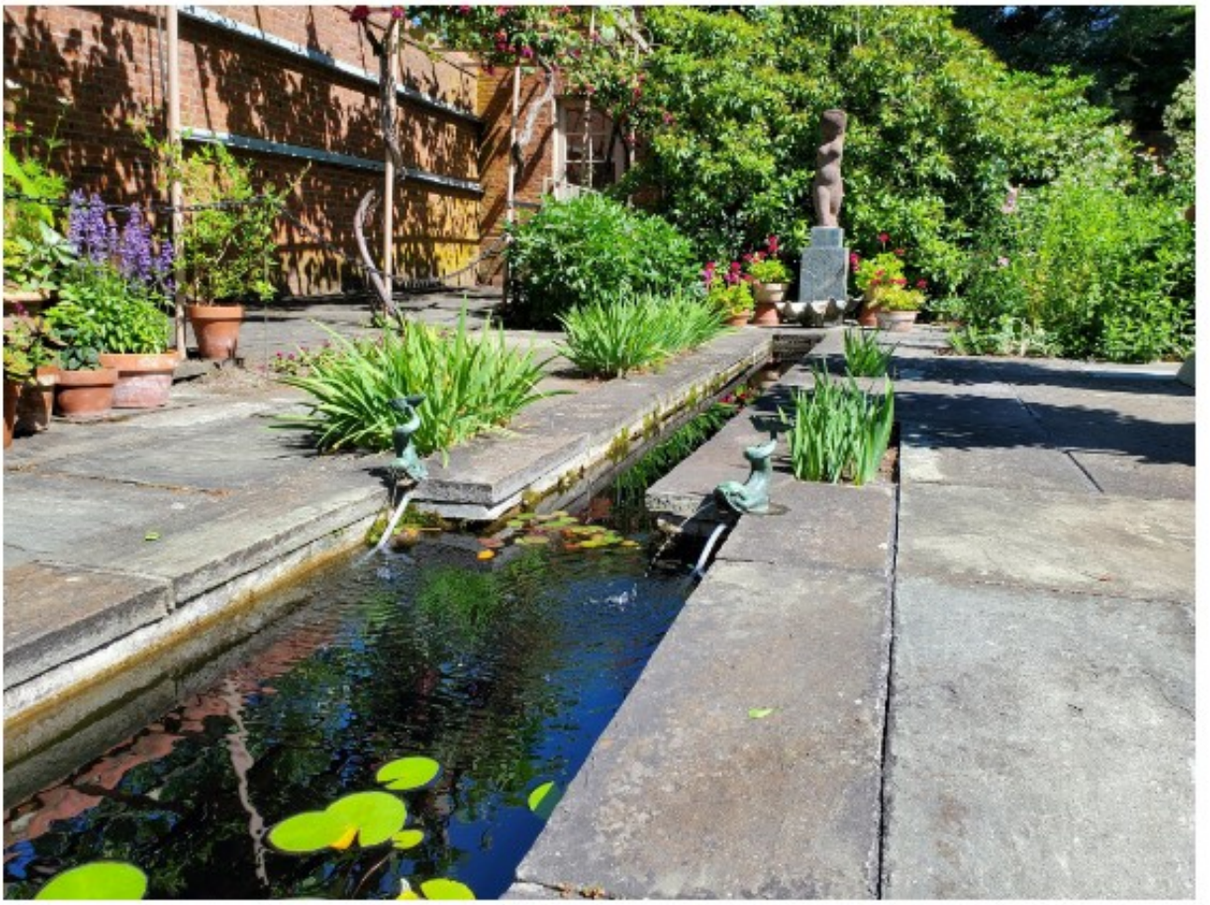
October 2024

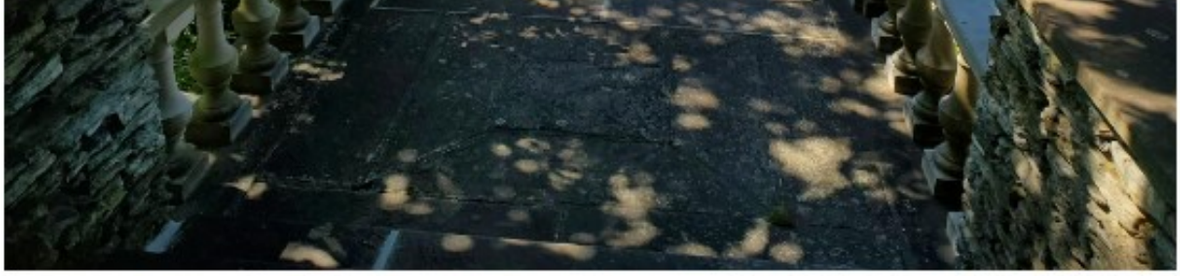
One Man's Vision, In Green

In my daydreams, I can picture my very own country estate. A lovely house and extensive gardens overlook acres of rural land with distant views stretching as far as the eye can see. A long driveway leads to stables with award-winning horses, a stunning carriage collection and a complete farmyard. While this dream will never come true for me, a man named Chauncey D. Stillman brought this vision to life in Dutchess County, and he called it Wethersfield.

Named for his ancestral hometown in Connecticut, Mr. Stillman started his grand plan in the late 1930's by building stables for his high-stepping Hackney horses, used to pull beautifully-kept carriages, which would eventually be 22 in number. Then it was on to the house, a Georgian-style "farmhouse" perched on the hilltop. I say "farmhouse" because most buildings of this type don't have private chapels, dining room murals and art collections containing works by Degas, Cassatt and Toulouse-Lautrec, to name just a few. Although grand, it is a house one can imagine living in, if only perhaps after hitting the Mega-Millions, because it is built on a human scale rather than being an overpowering structure. My favorite spot is the Gloriette, a room which features frescoes depicting man and nature, painted by the celebrated Italian artist Pietro Annigoni; truly glorious, it's rather beyond my power to describe.



Great care was taken to link the house with the garden. Windows in the main house slide away to become doors, allowing not only generous views but a direct path to the South Terrace. The dining room overlooks the Inner Garden, which is surrounded by a high brick wall, another nod to the Georgian. On the east side an arbor provides a shady home for blue-leaved succulents, coleus and colocasias, in shades of purple, blue and pink. This is fronted by a rill, a narrow pool of water often found in Islamic gardens. The north side contains a knot garden of celosia in hot shades of red, orange, pink and yellow, edged in clipped Arctic willow as well as perennial borders, while the west is bounded by the newly re-planted hornbeam tunnel, made of trees trained and pruned to create a shadowy passageway sometime in the future. All this would satisfy many a gardener, but there is more, much more.



Walking west, the garden changes tone, becoming more Italian in character. The Water Garden provides a hub, with towering clipped arborvitae forming the Allee to the north, which terminates in the Naiad Fountain. To the south are views falling down the hillside and flowing over miles of farmland: Wethersfield Farm has 1,200 acres, so much of what you see belonged to Mr. Stillman. Farther along the east-west axis are a series of terraces and garden rooms, including the East Garden, with more clipped trees, both evergreen and deciduous, and the Peacock Walk, with potted garden rarities and of course, peacocks. Another path to the north leads to the Belvedere, a six columned circular temple, while the southern terrace holds the Cutting Garden, which supplied an abundance of blooms to the house.

If any of this sounds like your own garden fantasy, travel the back roads of Amenia to Wethersfield Farm. To learn more, visit:

Wethersfield Estate and Garden

Text and photos by David Chinery

Dahlias *Do* Dazzle

Dahlias, with their vibrant blooms in a kaleidoscope of shapes and colors, are treasures for any garden. While some gardeners maybe apprehensive about fall digging or overwintering, the rewards far outweigh these concerns. Dahlias are low-maintenance flowers that will grace your garden with a stunning display of color from midsummer right up until the first frost.

In Zone 5, it's important to pay close attention to frost dates and winter storage. Gardeners can dig up and store tuber clumps or use containers that can be brought indoors during the colder months, which require no digging. You can also treat dahlias like your other annual flowers. Enjoy their vibrant blooms all season long, and then let the tubers add nutrients back to your soil as they decompose at the end of the year.

There are three main ways to start growing dahlias: from tubers, from cuttings and from seeds. Tubers are planted after the last frost in well-drained soil in a sunny location. Throughout the season, you can enjoy a continuous harvest of cut-and-come-again flowers. Tubers also produce new tubers by the end of the year, which gardeners can divide to increase their stock or share with fellow gardening enthusiasts.

Taken from tubers started indoors in early spring, cuttings can be rooted in just a few weeks. Once hardened off, they can be transplanted outdoors. Cuttings create tubers and blooms in their first season. They're the quickest way to increase your stock of a specific variety.

Seed-grown dahlias take a little longer to reach their full potential, but the element of surprise and discovery makes it an exciting experience. Seeds are a fantastic choice for a pollinator garden. Since open centers are a dominant trait, they offer easy access to pollen. Your garden will become a haven for bees and butterflies.

Started indoors in late winter, seedlings will reward you with beautiful blooms and tubers in their first year. Each seed holds the potential to produce a one-of-a-kind flower thanks to the dahlia's diverse genetics. Every seed-grown dahlia is a gift from nature, bursting with an extraordinary array of colors, shapes and sizes that have never been seen before. Gardeners can name their very own unique dahlias and share their blooms, tubers and cutting with other growers, becoming part of the dahlia's long-lasting legacy.

These fascinating flowers originated in Mexico and their ancestors were predominantly open-centered, eight-petaled blooms. Civilizations cultivated them for their edible petals and nutritious roots. Botanists brought them to Europe in the 18th century. They became desirable due to their striking beauty and variety. Fueled by the growing popularity of dahlias as cut flowers and garden showstoppers, hybridizers' efforts led to the development of the many closed-center varieties we enjoy today. Every named dahlia variety we grow can be traced back to a seed nurtured in someone's garden. Beyond their captivating blooms that grace gardens and vases, dahlias boast a history as rich and enthralling as the flowers themselves.

There's a plethora of information available on growing techniques, harvesting flowers and storing tubers, so explore resources by Monty Don, Kristine Albrecht and Erin Benzikein. Dahlias can be purchased at local garden centers and farms or specialty online retailers.

With a little effort, you can grow these show-stopping blooms, create your own unique varieties and bring a burst of color to your garden throughout the season. So why not add dazzling dahlias to your garden?

Text and photos by Caitlin Woolley-Horgan. Caitlin is a Master Gardener intern and grows dahlias for fun and for sale in Schodack, NY.

Compost Time!

Three bin composting is a common method of converting herbaceous garden waste into an excellent soil amendment. It also works for recycling kitchen vegetable waste, eggshells, paper towels, paper napkins and shredded newspaper along with the yard and garden materials.

The three bin system pictured above was constructed about 25 years ago using pressure treated deck lumber. It's due for replacement. Many boards are disintegrating, so exterior bracing is keeping it upright. The individual bins need to be a cubic yard in volume to effectively process the waste material into useable compost. The general idea is that raw materials go into bin #1, which are eventually turned into bin #2 to break down some more, then turned again into bin #3, where finished compost is finally achieved.

The decomposition process requires oxygen. Turning and mixing the bin materials accomplishes that. Weekly aerating can result in completed compost in one growing season. A new tool to do this task is a bulb planting auger attached to a battery powered drill. A firm grip on the drill is required to avoid being pulled into the bin.

The three bin process can develop enough significant heat to kill weed seeds and plant disease organisms. Temperatures measured in early October were up to 150F in bin #2. The thermometer indicated bin #3 cooled down to 64F and the compost was ready for the gardens. But first, a final sifting to remove any undecomposed bits was in order!

Getting the finished compost ready for use involves some cardio exercise with digging, sifting, hauling and spreading the finished product. This sifter has one-inch openings.

Some compost falls through when dropped by shovel, but most requires push and pull with a garden rake. The compost can be used without sifting. The results will be messy in finished beds due to sticks, stones and other chunky stuff. However, if you are creating a new garden bed the coarser material maybe beneficial. The coarse material that accumulates on the sifter is thrown back into bin #1 for another attempt at decomposing.

Distributing the sifted compost can be done directly from the wheelbarrow by shovel. A five-gallon pail is also helpful with getting around the interior of finished garden beds.

The finished compost is suitable for all gardens. An inch or so can be spread around perennials, shrubs and vegetable beds. It can be lightly raked into the soil or left on the surface to be naturally incorporated by rain and soil organisms.

If there are tree roots starting to show near the lawn surface, as with river birch trees, compost can be spread in a thin layer to cover them as a base for grass seed. It's not a one-time fix and has to be repeated.

The four-bin composter created by Master Gardener Bob Sherwood at the Demonstration Garden was processed and sifted this October (photos above and below). This is a cold composting system. There is no need to turn the compost at all. Over the year the garden waste decomposes into compost with excellent texture. Since this is cold composting, there isn't enough heat generated to disable weed seeds.

There is a significant amount of upper body exercise preparing the compost for sifting. The bins become full of vegetation that grows from seeds in the bins and compost left in the sifter also sports a good crop that must be pulled and rotated back to the compost bins. The benefits of this system include no need for maintenance during the year and complete processing of the finished compost in a few hours in October.

The general process and results are similar to the backyard untended compost pile. Compost making is recycling, retaining carbon and excellent exercises.

Story and photos by Rensselaer County Master Gardener Richard Demick

GREENSHOTS: Notable Gardening Pictures

In addition to falling leaves of many colors, autumn is berry season!

Thanks to Richard Demick for these photos of some of the berry-bearing species growing in Rensselaer County.

Red chokeberry, *Aronia arbutifolia*, is a favorite for American Robin and Cedar Waxwing in early spring. The berries over-winter on the branches.

Gray Dogwood, *Cornus racemosa*, produces distinctive white berries on red stems. Local and migratory birds feed on the berries.

Winterberry, *Ilex verticillata*, is ready for birds to eat this fall. Bluebirds and Cedar Waxwings often strip the bushes clean.

FREE!

Gardening Webinars

Happy Fall! Our popular "Lunch In The Garden" webinars are back on November and December Wednesdays at Noon on ZOOM

"Gardening Under The Icicles: Frosty Seed Planting Techniques" ***Wednesday, November 6 at NOON.*** Have you ever sewn seeds in the fall, and nothing came up the following spring? Are you left scratching your head when there's no sign of sprouting after caring for seedlings over 6 weeks? Join our seminar to learn techniques for better success using cold stratification or pre-chilling seed to improve germination. Also covered are some winter sowing methods with a variety of mini greenhouses. Master Gardeners Marie Hankle-Wieboldt and Bob Wieboldt will lead the discussion.

"Plants For An Autumn Garden" ***Wednesday, November 13 at NOON.*** With warm weather carrying on into September and even October, gardening can continue on later than ever before! We'll take a look at some of the herbaceous perennial plants which bloom after Labor Day, giving your garden weeks more color and interest. Presented by David Chinery, Extension Educator, with photos from Master Gardeners.

"Learn How To Beat Inflation: Money-Saving Techniques To Jump Start Garden Plants" ***Wednesday, December 4 at NOON.*** Would you like to learn all about feeding your family for the cost of a seed packet? Join our seminar to learn how to minimize cost and maximize yields through proper seed selection and propagation, better use of seed catalogs, interpreting seed packets, seed sprouting, seedling care, and hardening off before planting. This program will be taught by Master Gardeners Marie Hankle-Wieboldt and Bob Wieboldt.

Save the dates! You can get our Zoom invitation by visiting the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Rensselaer County website at **https://rensselaer.cce.cornell.edu/**, emailing dhc3@cornell.edu or calling (518) 272-4210. Go to Zoom.us for the free Zoom app.

FREE!

The Final Dig

"The marigolds were planted late this year, but they seem more fitting as autumn flowers, when all things, even sunsets, eschew pastels. The garden is like a fire going out, dying from its center, but burning clear to the last."

Robert Finch (American naturalist)

"Root Concerns: Notes From The Underground" is a publication of Cornell Cooperative Extension of Rensselaer County. For more information, contact David Chinery at 518.272.4210 or dhc3@cornell.edu.

Websites mentioned in Root Concerns are provided as a courtesy to our readers. Mention of these websites does not imply endorsement by Cornell University, Cornell Cooperative Extension or by the author.

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