

Gardenmaster Report for November

The storm clouds moved in here a short while ago, the temperature dropped and the presence of moisture in the air is apparent to even the touch. It reminded me of Kansas when I was a boy and the weather in spring or fall would turn suddenly from warm to cool. Work would stop and we would gather on Grandpa's porch which faced west to watch the storm roll in. These storms always moved from the southwest to the northeast and from Grandpa's porch on a hill, we had a clear view of the approaching clouds.

They would roil in, black and turbulent. To a young man's fascination, they appeared as the motion of spirits writhing in a forsaken agony – an agony that might lash out and ravage the bucolic farming town. Sometimes, here and there, the clouds would begin a whirl and sometimes they would whirl into a spiral and then sometimes that spiral would begin to stretch down from the sky in a terrifying funnel, that, no matter how small, spun wickedly downward. More than once, the wicked spirits touched the ground not far from where we watched – too far away to make sense of running to the shelter below and too close to not fear the awe of nature.

No funnel here, but another storm is arriving from the coast. For Southern California, it is a very cold day; it was down to 36° earlier this week and for the first time since I've gardened in the LA Basin, I see plants killed outright by the cold. I had been hoping to actually make a few more saleable jars of pesto, but the basil plants are mostly gone. Some of the medicinal plants were also damaged by the cold, including *Glycyrrhiza uralensis* and *Polymnia sonchifolia*.

The Chinese Medicinal Beds:

I have one intern from Yo San this term and she's done a good job of cleaning these beds up, weeding and watering. She will be learning some propagation in the next few weeks as I work to propagate some plants from cuttings including lyceum and the *Rosa rugosa*. We already have propagated the daylily from the TCM beds and more of the ligustrum.

The Ayurvedic Beds

Many of these plants are tropical and are fairing poorly in this cooler weather. I am concerned about them – this is promising to be a cold winter and I don't really have a sheltered place to overwinter them. I have some ideas to try – but, I have to keep an eye on the weather more closely – I, among other gardeners, don't recall seeing this cold snap – at least THIS cold – predicted in any weather reports. The cardamom is still looking good which is confusing but I'll go with it.

The Food Forest

Two of our peach trees show evidence of Fire Blight which is a viral affliction of *Rosaceae* and, if this is what I'm seeing, is fatal and we have to act aggressively to prevent it from spreading. I am going to leave things be for the moment: I have to make sure it is Fire Blight and if it is, rogue the plants out to the trash and not allow it to spread. The first step will be to cut away the parts that appear infected and see if the condition returns. If it does, I would rather take the entire plants out at that point. Because it is a viral, internal, condition, I don't believe any organic methods can cure it because no organic method is systemic, which is what one needs to be effective with this kind of condition.

The rest of the berm, however, is filled with happy plants. We have several ornamentals out to spice up the berm until the trees fill in; most often we are getting comments on the towering hollyhocks that are obviously happy as all get out and strutting their stuff to the world. We have nine baby figs out there right now.

Sometime in late January, or soon thereafter, I will begin to prune and shape the trees. We have allowed them their first year to become acclimated and now we can see how the tree has settled into its new home, so shaping is a matter of visualizing the plant in place and not according to a textbook. All these things are taking place at the plant's rhythm and our patience will be rewarded.

We have vines of sweet peas and the shrubbier fava beans planted on the berm where their roots will help convert nitrogen into a form usable by other plants and will provide us with flowers and food respectively. This type of planting will be progressively scaled back as the trees fill in.

I set out about 100 onion plants into the berm and then about that many or more garlic bubils. In the east berm, I put Spanish Roja; the center berm was Korean Red and the west berm got Incheulium Red. I still have more bubils of the first and last left. I'd like to use all the Spanish Roja, I've grown that in the past and it's an excellent culinary garlic. I have many other varieties of garlic I would like to put out, I'm just not sure where I'll do it.

The High School Gardens

Vinegar works!!! I poured half a cup of good old cheap white vinegar on two false garlic (*Nothoscordum gracile*) plants in the high school gardens and those two plants have bitten the dust! False garlic is one of the most horrendous weeds to deal with in gardens. If it gets established here, we can never be the kind of garden I envision. Getting rid of false garlic is very high on my target list. As this plant begins to grow, at once, baby bulbs, called bubils, form around the parent bulb and are part of the reason this is such a difficult weed to eradicate – if you simply yank the plant that shows above ground, all these little bubils fall off and soon you'll have a dozen plants from where you pulled one! The challenge now is to keep checking that area to see if the bubils from those plants

are also killed, but my guess is they have to be; vinegar significantly raised the pH of the ground in the immediate vicinity of the mother plant and so must have also affected the babies. I hope so: if this works, I've solved a horrid problem.

Other than that one thing, the high school gardens are some of the best looking gardens at TLG at this point.

Christine's Corner

By late in January, my bet is that Christine's garden of California native plants will be beginning its annual show. I'll keep you updated, but Christine has excitedly reported the stirrings of growth that will be this year's marquee event in that corner of the Garden.

The Pond

We have counted about ten fish left after the marauding birds have had their way with our pond. Now that the birds seem to be on the wane, we'll clear away the excess foliage from the pond, creating new plants or drying some herbs for use. Right now, the winds have loaded the pond up with pine needles and leaves from adjacent trees.

The Patio and Environs

The extreme shade of the patio is about to be scaled back. We have a working chain saw and we won't be afraid to use it. In the time the students are on their holiday break, we will go to work on some of the overgrowth of the pepper tree and work on getting a few other trees out of the way as well.

Events and Procedures in the Garden

Thanksgiving in the Garden was wonderful. In a week of cool weather, a three hour window of perfect California weather arrived. We had about 12 attendees to our Thanksgiving for the Program for Torture Victims. We had participants from Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Congo and Rwanda. There were staff representatives - including the program's main physician - and several of our Garden volunteers and a couple Master Gardeners. The food was wonderful - we had such Americana as the stuffed turkey, mashed potatoes, a cranberry chutney and pumpkin, cherry and apple pies. Casey was the perfect host. What with all that food around, I didn't think I needed to keep a hard eye on him, but at one point I thought, I haven't seen him in a long time and jumped up to call him. One of the ladies from Cameroon, said, Oh, you mean your dog? He's here, sleeping on my feet! Now that's a social Scottie!

I did my usual Thanksgiving ritual of tool cleaning, oiling and sharpening the day following. Mind you, I do cleaning and sharpening during the year too, but that's on an "as need" basis. Sometime near Thanksgiving, I pull all my tools out and give them a fair scrub down, sharpening, oil the metal with appropriate oil and sand and oil the handles

with boiled linseed oil. This is my way of saying "thank you" to my tools for their good service over the year just past. Good tools are like good friends and they have to be cared for with love.

I extended the idea of cleaning up to the rest of the office too, trying to clear way the debris of the mice rampage through our seeds - I took what hadn't been shredded and put it a metal filing cabinet I brought in from another shed. I am hoping, if I can destroy their food source, I can encourage them to move on - also hoping that Casey's barking will have a deleterious affect on them - he barks at the corner where he thinks they are hiding (it changes - I believe they live under the floor and so could very well be in ALL corners at any given time - at least, that's how he'd hear them) and "obsessive/compulsive" doesn't do Casey justice! We joke that he's going to bark them into submission - I have visions of the mouse family coming out from the hole waving a white flag and all their little arms in the air. I've cleaned all the debris I can find and we are feeling like we've reclaimed our office.

I wrote last month of things slowing down in the Garden in the cold and that has really come to be true about our event calendar. As I write this my fingers are freezing even with the warmth of a laptop under the keyboard. We will probably have some sort of Equinox celebration, although what it would be, I'm still unclear about, unless we set a fire to huddle about and sip hot toddies held with mittened hands... There is a surprise birthday party for Pops, who comes out with Emi on Mondays. His birthday is Monday the 20th, so we'll have a little get together for lunch. He doesn't read the newsletter so if he finds out about the surprise, it's not my fault.

We did get a call from UCLA Extension requesting to have their Practices & Techniques class back in our Garden this coming spring. I like having them at the Garden, I think it's a good place for them and I love having a large area cultivated that I don't have to deal with at all.

Diane, Brian and I are going to sit down on a warm afternoon and take a look at the whole upcoming year and set out a vision for our events through out 2005. We'll begin to promote our events much earlier. I may be a slow learner, but I AM a learner and we have gotten better at event coordination with each successive event. We promise not to schedule any events on High Holy Days. Chinese New Years will be in early February and Valentine's Day follows. I expect to have red sweet peas in time for both those, but this cold might just thwart that plan. Even plants that prefer cool weather don't grow fast in temperatures this low.

We would like to remind everyone that the year is coming to a close and if you need a tax write off, The Learning Garden qualifies as a tax-deductible donation as 503(c) organization. Your money can go to support the government in Washington to implement their policies of pillage and plunder or your money can come here to improve the quality of life in Venice California and for the students of Venice High School. I know I speak for our volunteers, the students of the high school and the schools of Chinese medicine, for countless folks who honk and wave from their cars as

they drive by, we and so many more are grateful for the support the Garden has received. The work is ongoing and so it needs your support. I believe in this work and I know the blessings it holds for all.