What vegetable, long prized for its beauty as well as its unique taste and texture is not a vegetable? The eggplant! It is a berry.

Eggplants belong to the plant family of Solanaceae, also commonly known as nightshades, and are relatives of the tomato, bell pepper and potato.

The ancestors of eggplant grew wild in India and were first cultivated in China in the 5th century B.C. Eggplant was introduced to Africa before the Middle Ages and into Italy in the 14th century. It then spread throughout Europe and was brought to the Americas by European explorers. Today, China, India, Egypt, Turkey and Indonesia are the leading growers of eggplant.

There are many different varieties of eggplant which produce fruit of different size, shape and color, especially purple, green, or white. There are even orange varieties. While different varieties vary somewhat, the eggplant can be generally described as having a somewhat bitter taste and spongy texture. In many recipes, it plays a complementary role, balancing other stronger flavors and ingredients.

The name eggplant, used in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada refers to the fact that fruits of some 18th century European cultivars were yellow or white and resembled goose or hen’s eggs.

For centuries after its introduction into Europe, eggplant was used more as a decorative garden plant than as a food. As a result of the overly bitter taste of the early varieties, and its relationship to the nightshade family, people believed that it would cause insanity, leprosy and cancer. Not until new varieties were developed in the 18th century, did eggplant lose its bitter taste and bitter reputation, and take its now esteemed place in European and American cuisines.

In tropical and subtropical climates, eggplant can be sown directly into the garden. In temperate climates it is better to transplant into the garden after all danger of frost is passed. Seeds are typically started eight to ten weeks prior to the anticipated frost-free date. Eggplant is injured by frost and does best in warm seasons, including the summer in Florida. Usually six plants will produce all the fruits that can be used by a family of five. Flowers are self pollinated, but bees are helpful. Harvest fruits when glossy and shiny. Green or mahogany fruits indicate overmaturity.

Many pests and diseases which afflict tomato, pepper, and potato, are also troublesome to eggplants. For this reason, it should not be planted in areas previously occupied by its close relatives. Common North American pests include the potato beetle, flea beetle, aphids, and spider mites. Many of these can be controlled using Bacillus thuringiensis (Bt). Good sanitation and crop-rotation practices are extremely important for controlling fungal disease, the most serious of which is Verticillium wilt, causing yellowing, wilting and death of plants.

If you are going to buy your eggplants, peak season is August to September but plants are readily available year round. Choose firm, glossy skinned fruits and store refrigerated up to two weeks. As your eggplant ages it will become more bitter.

Cooked eggplant soaks up a lot of oil. Many cooks prefer to salt and press the air and water out before cooking. If you salt prior to cooking, rinse and pat dry to prevent excessive salt in the end product and adjust final seasoning as necessary.

Eggplant can be baked, grilled, steamed, or sauteed. It is versatile and works well with tomatoes, onions, garlic and cheese. The only way eggplant is unacceptable is raw.

Eggplant is a very good source of dietary fiber, potassium, manganese, copper and thiamin (vitamin B1). It is also a good source of vitamin B6, folate, magnesium and niacin.

So be berry good to yourself, and enjoy this versatile, nutritious, and beautiful berry!
Program Announcements

Landscape Matters

Bulbs
Wednesday September 14 10-11AM
Master Gardener Shirley Lowman

Winter Gardening
Wednesday October 12 10-11AM
Master Gardener Kay McAllister

Plant Clinics
Monday September 19 10AM-2PM
Monday October 3 10AM-2PM
Monday October 17 10AM-2PM

Location
Demonstration Garden
Nassau County
Government Complex
96135 Nassau Place
Yulee, FL

Spotlight on Nassau Gardens

August Winner - Susan & Connie Casillias
At “Casa Casillias garden”, Connie, 89 stands among gardenia shrubs, hollyhock vines, hydrangea and giant liriope plants. Other plantings in the garden include a brilliant red velvet 10” platter hibiscus bush, pink azaleas, white African irises and fig trees. She provides daily care and keeps their garden blooming. Garden colors are as diverse as the plants which occupy the space and bloom in different seasons. A large oak tree shades a bocce court. It’s a bit of heaven on earth.

View more photos online at http://nassau.ifas.ufl.edu/horticulture/spotlight/spotlight.html. To be considered for Spotlight on Nassau Gardens, send a digital photo, with a description of your garden, along with your name, address and phone number to atwoodca@bellsouth.net. For more information contact Rebecca Jordi at 491-7340.

Vegetable Casserole Amandine

1 cup slivered almonds
1/4 pound bacon, cut into 1 inch lengths
1 pound zuccini squash, sliced
1 pound eggplant, diced
1 large onion, cut into wedges
1 tablespoon flour
1 pound tomatoes, peeled and diced
1 teaspoon minced garlic
1 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon pepper
1 teaspoon basil
1 6 ounce package sliced Swiss cheese

Saute almonds with bacon in 10-12 inch skillet. When almonds are lightly roasted and bacon crisp, remove both with a slotted spoon. Put zuccini, eggplant and onion into skillet. Cover and cook over medium low heat for 15 minutes, shaking pan or stirring often to prevent sticking. Mix in flour, then add tomatoes, garlic, salt, pepper and basil.

Layer vegetable mixture, almonds, bacon and the sliced cheese in a two-quart baking dish, ending with bacon and almonds in a ring on the top.

To serve immediately, bake uncovered at 400 degrees for about 15 minutes. To serve later, cover and refrigerate. To reheat, uncover and bake at 400 degrees for 30 minutes or until hot in the center. Makes 4-6 servings.
Converting Yard Wastes Into Landscape Assets

by Gerald Kidder professor emeritus, Soil and Water Science Department UF/IFAS Extension

Little if any of the so-called "yard trash" should be taken from the landscape where it is produced. Fallen leaves, grass clippings, shrubbery trimmings, and tree limbs are all valuable plant material which can be used in a variety of ways to enhance your home or community's landscape. We will explore some on site uses for these natural organic materials. Your ingenuity can undoubtedly add to the list. Please consider on-site recycling as an alternative to your present means of yard trash disposal.

Municipalities realize significant savings of time and energy when plant materials are used on-site rather than concentrated in landfills or other disposal sites. The cost of collecting, hauling, and handling yard trash is a large share of the solid waste management expense. Yard wastes currently represent about 15% of the total municipal solid waste collected in Florida. Since 1992, Florida's Solid Waste Management Act has prohibited placing yard wastes in lined landfills. Twenty-three states now have restrictions on landfilling of yard materials.

Here are some ways in which you can convert your current "yard waste" into an asset. You and your landscape plants will reap the benefits -- and all of society will be spared the cost of disposal.

**Fallen Leaves & Pine Needles**

1. Shred with a mower. This breaks up leaves for faster decomposition; no raking or gathering needed; nutrients and organic matter returned directly to the soil.
2. Rake or collect with bagging lawn mower and use as mulch for tree and shrub beds. Leaf mulch reduces water evaporation and protects the soil from erosion and crusting; provides weed control; prevents soil from splashing on buildings and side-walks; provides weed control; protects soil from splashing on buildings and side-walks; reduces need for purchased mulch; recycles nutrients as the leaves decompose.
3. Collect with bagging lawn mower and add to compost pile. Same as if used as mulch; same as for making compost with leaves.

**Shrub prunings, remains of garden plants and weeds**

1. Break or cut into small pieces (e.g., 6-12 inches) and spread as mulch on shrub and tree beds. Nutrients and organic matter are kept on premises. Disadvantages: generally needs to be reduced to fairly small pieces to be acceptable in landscaping; requires more work than simply hauling to curb.
2. Shred with lawn mower, chipper, or shredder and use as mulch on beds or paths. Materials lose appearance of "trash" and look like mulch; succulent materials decompose rapidly while more woody materials decompose more slowly. Note: safety precautions needed when shredding woody materials. Dulls lawn mower blades.

**Tree limbs and woody shrub prunings**

1. Saw into firewood lengths. Disadvantages: are that firewood is not needed in many parts of Florida; leafy material and smaller branches must be handled separately.
2. Chip or shred and use as decorative mulch or for path making. Reduces need for purchased mulch; saves cypress trees and pine bark for other uses.
RESTON, VA. - The National Wildlife Federation (NWF) has recognized Bea Walker's property in Fernandina Beach as an official Certified Wildlife Habitat site. The property attracts a variety of birds, butterflies and other wildlife by providing a wildlife-friendly landscape.

Bea Walker is an active Master Gardener volunteer with the Nassau County Extension Service and the University of Florida/IFAS. Master Gardeners serve under the direction of Rebecca L. Jordi, County Extension director and UF/IFAS Nassau County Horticultural Extension agent.

"I'm excited about certification as a Wildlife Habitat because it provides me an opportunity to share information about how homeowners can have attractive, healthy landscapes that protect Florida's natural resources," said Walker, who added that she "probably had all the elements for several years now" and just didn't focus on the designation.

"As a Nassau County Master Gardener volunteer, we're taught the nine principles of 'Florida-Friendly Landscaping.' One of those principles is 'Attracts Wildlife,'" Walker said. However, she noted, "You don't have to be a Master Gardener volunteer to do it! You just need to provide a food source (plants that bear seed, fruit, foliage or flowers); water (a pond, creek or other freshwater, such as a bird bath or water-filled saucer); and shelter (trees, shrubs, birdhouse, bat house). Many of us already have these elements and don't realize our landscapes are a wildlife habitat."

NWF began the Wildlife Habitat certification program in 1973, and has since certified almost 150,000 habitats nationwide. The majority of these sites represent the hard work and commitment of individuals and families providing habitat near their homes, but NWF has also certified more than 3,000 schools and hundreds of business and community sites. The average habitat is between 1/3 and 1/2 an acre, but certified sites range from urban balconies to those with many acres.

Like Walker, any habitat enthusiast can create a certified habitat and learn the rewards of gardening for wildlife. NWF teaches the importance of environmental stewardship by providing guidelines for making landscapes more hospitable to wildlife. In order to become certified, a property must provide the four basic elements that all wildlife need: food, water, cover and places to raise young; and must employ sustainable gardening practices.

In addition to providing for wildlife, certified habitats conserve our natural resources by reducing or eliminating the need for fertilizers, pesticides and/or irrigation water, which ultimately protects the air, soil and water throughout our communities.

Habitats not only nurture year-round resident birds but also migratory birds by providing stopover sites for birds traveling between their summer and winter ranges. Biologist Mark Hostetler of the University of Florida says "urban environments are an important factor in the future conservation of many species. Not only has urban sprawl grown into the paths of stopover sites on bird flyways, but the sheer volume of human development has changed the amount of area available for nesting and over-wintering."

Creating habitats not only helps wildlife, it can help reduce global warming pollution and save energy costs as well. Burning fossil fuels to heat and cool our homes and maintain our lawns releases carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, which is the main greenhouse gas responsible for global warming. Replacing lawns with strategically located trees and other native vegetation can insulate our homes from heat, cold and wind, reducing our heating and cooling needs and thus our carbon dioxide emissions.

Unlike lawns, wildlife-friendly native plants don't need constant maintenance from gas guzzling lawn mowers or fertilizers that require fossil fuels to manufacture. An additional benefit is that plants actually absorb carbon dioxide, helping to further reduce the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

All of this adds up to increased areas available for wildlife habitats, reductions in levels of carbon dioxide that cause global warming, and reduced energy costs. More information about how gardeners can reduce the effects of global warming can be found at
David Mizejewski, NWF naturalist and spokesperson, says, "It's easy to feel that there is no hope for wildlife in our modern world of smog, traffic and asphalt. But there is hope. Each of us can make our own piece of the Earth a healthy, green space that helps restore the ecological balance. Encouraging your neighbors to join with you can lead to a neighborhood or community habitat that provides wildlife with greater incentive to call your piece of the Earth home."

Walker heartily agrees. "Most of us enjoy seeing birds feeding, nesting, bathing in an area that has attracted them. Most children and adults can be entertained by butterflies or hummingbirds feeding among the plants. With a little planning, each homeowner can have a landscape that attracts wildlife," she said.

"Florida is fortunate to have the third most diverse population of any state. Each homeowner can help replace some of the native wildlife habitat that is lost due to development. We can each have a landscape that is desirable for plants and wildlife," Walker noted.

Gardening for wildlife Participants who achieve Wildlife Habitat certification for their properties receive membership in the National Wildlife Federation, a one-year subscription to the National Wildlife magazine, a personalized certificate and quarterly e-newsletters. They also are eligible to purchase NWF's special outdoor sign designating their yard or garden as wildlife-friendly. NWF currently offers the most comprehensive guide to date on gardening for wildlife, the 128-page Attracting Birds, Butterflies and Other Backyard Wildlife, full of practical how-to information to make your yard a wildlife haven and certify your property as an official NWF Wildlife Habitat site. It is $12.95 at www.shopnwf.org.

For information about gardening for wildlife and how to have your yard certified visit www.nwf.org/habitat or call 1-800-822-9919.

St. Fiacre, the patron saint of gardeners, watches over the backyard plantings and birdbath of Bea Walker. Her Fernandina Beach yard has received certification from the National Wildlife Federation as a Wildlife Habitat. Photo by Van Dyke Walker Jr.
“To Do” List for September

**Citrus:** Depending on citrus fertilizer label, apply fertilizer every six weeks or as directed. Check for citrus insects and disease. Weed as needed. Water as needed. Last month to fertilize citrus.

**Fruit:** Weed as needed.

**Flowers:** For instant color plant marigolds and garden chrysanthemums.

**Bulbs:** Bulbs to plant now include amaryllis, Aztec lily, calla, elephant ears, grape hyacinth, iris, leopard lily, narcissus, snowflake, watsonia, and zephyr lily.

**Roses:** Apply organic materials (same as February). Water, water, water. September 1, apply granular rose fertilizer. September 1, prune back just beyond previous cut (about 1/3 down the stem).

**Herbs:** Plant anise, basil, borage, chervil, marjoram, parsley, sesame, and thyme.

**Lawns:** Use a slow release fertilizer such as 15-0-15. Most Florida soils are high in phosphorous, the middle number, so this nutrient is rarely needed. Keep mower heights on highest level all year to promote deep roots. Watch for large patch fungus disease, which attacks lawns when the weather is cool and wet. It is most commonly found in St. Augustine, centipede and Bermuda lawns. The grass dies in roughly circular areas 5 to 6 feet in diameter. In St. Augustine grass, the leaf blades rot where they attach to the runner. Apply an approved lawn fungicide according to label directions.

**Perennials:** This is the time of year to prune. When pruning, make cuts back to the branch angle, or to the ground. If you want the plant to fill in from the base, make the cut about 1 foot above where you want the new branches to begin.

**Trees:** Palms should have a “palm special” fertilizer applied over the root system under the spread of the fronds. The configuration should be 8-2-12-4 (N-P-K-Mg). Ideally this would also include manganese, boron, sulfur, etc. with appropriate formulations. Use a slow release fertilizer. If not using slow release, make monthly applications during the warmer months. Many palms are deficient in potassium, in spite of using palm fertilizers. Apply Muriate of Potash to correct this deficiency. For fall color plant deciduous trees such as bald cypress, Chickasaw plum, crape myrtle, redbud, red maple, river birch, sugarberry, sweet gum and winged elm. Trees to plant include black olive, dogwood, golden raintree, hollies, loquat, southern juniper, sugarberry, and wax myrtle.

**Vegetables:** Snap beans, pole beans, beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, endive/escarole, lettuce, cucumber, bulbing onions, bunching onions, radishes, summer squash, and turnips.

Selected from *Florida Vegetable Guide* by JM Stephens, RA Dunn, G Kidder, D Short, & GW Simone, University of Florida and *Month-by-Month Gardening in Florida* by Tom MacCubbin
“To Do” List for October

**Citrus:** Check for citrus insects and disease. Apply horticulture oil if insects are detected. Weed as needed.

**Fruit:** Weed as needed. Apply azalea fertilizer to blueberry shrubs at 1/2 pound per 3’ of shrub.

**Flowers:** Buy spring flowering bulbs (narcissus, tulips, etc.) and store in the refrigerator for 60 days. Plant bulbs immediately upon removal. Keep them away from ripening fruit during storage. Plant cool season flowers like dianthus, pansy, petunia, shasta daisy, snapdragon, viola, million bells, status, thunbergia, flowering kale and cabbage. Bulbs to plant include agapanthus, gladiolus, kaffir lily, marica, moraea, society garlic, spider lily, anemone, hyacinth, pineapple lily and Star-of-Bethlehem.

**Roses:** Continue spray program. Water, water, water. Cut and remove spent blooms. Fertilize with liquid fertilizer (same as March).

**Herbs:** Anise, basil, bay laurel, borage, caraway, cardamom, chervil, chives, coriander, dill, fennel, garlic, ginger, horehound, lemon balm, lavender, lovage, marjoram, Mexican tarragon, mint, nasturtium, oregano, rosemary, sage, savory, thyme and watercress can be planted now.

**Lawns:** Do not fertilize the lawn this late in the year. For a green winter lawn that will have to be mowed, overseed with annual ryegrass. Watch for large patch fungus disease, chinch bugs, sod webworms, army worms, and mole crickets.

**Trees:** You can remove diseased or dead limbs any time of year. If you plant a tree this month, remember water is the most important part of early tree care. Be sure to dig the hole wider than deep. Do not fertilize now, wait until next spring. Let the tree put its effort into producing roots.

**Vegetables:** Plant strawberries in late October through November. Plant in rows 36” apart and 12” apart within the row. Elevate rows 6” above existing soil to ensure good drainage. Use pine straw to reduce weed problems and slugs. Beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, Chinese cabbage, collards, kohlrabi, bulb ing onions, bunching onions, radishes, spinach, and turnips may also be planted this month.

*Selected from Florida Vegetable Guide by JM Stephens, RA Dunn, G Kidder, D Short, & GW Simone, University of Florida and Month-by-Month Gardening in Florida by Tom MacCubbin*
Ornamental gourds are quite popular this time of year. They are closely related to the pumpkin and squash we eat. Some of the ornamental gourds are edible such as luffa gourd (sometimes called running okra) as long as it is immature. A few of the edible squashes are quite ornamental when mature, such as the yellow crookneck squash and the turban (Turk’s cap) squash.

Ornamental gourds are prized for their unusual shapes and often painted and carved into useful household objects such as birdhouses, baskets or planters. They can be grown throughout Florida but in northeast Florida, they should be planted after the threat of frost is over. If possible, ornamental gourds should be allowed to mature on the vine and once matured they should be cut from the vine using a sharp knife. If they are blown off the vine, only mature gourds should be used because immature ones will rot. The outside of the mature gourds should be washed with mild soap and water then allowed to dry. Placing them on a screen or strong netting allows air to circulate completely around the whole gourd. Be sure none of the gourds are touching each other and rotate the gourd every few days.

If soft, black spots develop on the outside, it is an indication of rot and the gourd should be thrown away. Once you hear the seeds rolling around inside you know the gourd has completely dried, which may take several months. Keep them out of direct sunlight as the color of the gourd may fade. Mold may develop on the outside but that provides interesting patterns. I have a gourd with a mold pattern that mimics bird’s-eye maple – very pretty.