“Treemendous” Trees – Chaste Tree

Looking for a beautiful little tree? Well, take a look at the charming chaste tree *Vitex agnus-castus* L. Originally from the Mediterranean and Western Asia, this shrub known as a tree thrives in hot dry climates and will grow up to twenty five feet high in the South. It was grown in English gardens as early as 1570, and brought to the Americas by European immigrants in the 1800’s.

Chaste tree is rich in history and is noted for many medicinal uses. Examples include concoctions to reduce fevers, stimulate perspiration, antidote for snake and spider bites, and for various female problems. The leaves were thought to have a sedative effect and the ground berries were touted as a must for monks trying to maintain their vows of chastity, thus the name chaste tree.

This delightful tree is easy to grow. It likes well drained soil, full sun, needs regular moisture until established but then becomes drought tolerant, has good salt and wind tolerance, has no serious pests, and is cold hardy through Zone 6. (Nassau County is Zone 8b to 9a). Leaf spot problems may arise but can be minimized with good air circulation.

The chaste tree will put on quite a show for several weeks, especially if the branches are allowed to cascade all the way to the ground. Starting in early summer it begins to bloom until the entire tree is covered with blue, pink, purple or white flowers. If harvested early in the bloom cycle, these may be dried for use in crafts. The flowers attract butterflies and bees so keep that in mind if bees are an issue with you or your family.

Maintenance involves regular pruning to produce an attractive multi-trunked tree. After bloom, remove spent flowers and a new flush of blooms will emerge. As the flowers of summer fade, small dark purple berries follow. In the past these berries have been dried and used as a rather weak substitute for pepper and as an ingredient in Mediterranean spice mixtures.

You may plant this tree as a single specimen, a border screen, or use as a small patio tree. Enhance the beauty of your landscape with this enchanting, “treemendous” little tree!
**Yellow Houseplant Mushroom**

by Christine Engelbrecht, Iowa State University Extension

What is that yellow thing growing in my houseplant pot? In most cases, the fungus in question is *Lepiota lutea*, sometimes called the yellow parasol or flower pot parasol. This species can be found outside in the summer, but is most commonly found year-round with potted plants or in greenhouses. The small lemon yellow mushrooms are about 1 to 3 inches tall with 1 to 2 inch oval or bell-shaped caps. They may appear singly or in clusters.

A mushroom is the reproductive structure of a fungus that spends the rest of its life cycle as a thread-like body in the soil or debris, not usually visible. That thread-like body, called a mycelium, could have been introduced to the pot in the potting mix. Alternately, a spore of the fungus (similar to a seed) may have floated through the air and landed in the pot, starting the fungal colony.

The *Lepiota lutea* fungus is a saprophyte, which means that it breaks down dead organic matter in the pot. It does not harm living plants and mushrooms do not need to be removed for the plant’s sake. However, the mushrooms are poisonous to people and animals, so if pets or small children are nearby it would be wise to remove the mushrooms as they appear. Fungicide treatments are generally not effective against mushrooms.
Being green in the garden can go beyond plants. Home gardeners can not only find used or environmentally friendly landscaping materials, but can also create their own from some non-traditional sources. This can often be cheaper, and it keeps waste out of landfills. Check the ideas below and look with a new eye at some of your own home items.

**Concrete**
Broken concrete is often leftover from construction and development. Improvise “stone” retainer walls with the broken side of the concrete on the outside. Over time, weather and watering will make the concrete look like real rock. Edge flower beds or create walkways or patios. Fill in between the pieces with sand for a mosaic effect.

**Carpet**
Lay down carpet over an area for a new garden bed and let it sit for several weeks. Afterwards, the grass underneath will be decomposed, making for easy digging. Use carpet for pathways and top with mulch or stone. Make sure you use woven and not rubber backed carpet.

**CDs**
Scratched CDs can become coasters for potted plants, candles, or other objects that can stain your deck or patio furniture. Discourage wildlife foraging by threading CDs with jute or fishing line and hanging them in your garden. Turn CDs into reflective mobiles or wind chimes using wire, hooks, and fishing line.

**Styrofoam Peanuts**
Use them in the bottom of potted plants. First put in a chard or dryer sheet then a layer of peanuts. Add potting soil, then your plants. This will help reduce the weight of big planters. Larger Styrofoam pieces can be broken up as well and used as space fillers in larger pots or as bases for raised garden beds.

**Plastic Bottles and Containers**
Cut the bottom of gallon jugs and place over seedlings and young plants to protect them from cold (but take off during the day to keep plants from overheating). Turn them into funnels or scoops for garden amendments. Make a bird feeder by making cutouts with cross dowels for perches on the side of the bottle (keep the lid on to keep seed dry).

**Newspaper Bags**
Once you’ve laid down the newspaper as a weed blocking mulch in the garden, use the bag as a plant hanger. Double or triple the bags and fill them with soil. Knot it closed and lay flat. Cut "X’s" in the sides to plant small plants or herbs. Keep it flat for a week till the root system is established then put in a few small drainage holes and hang it up.

**Rainwater**
Collect rainwater to use in drier periods for your garden, houseplants, or mixing with garden amendments. Set barrels or large drums under downspouts, or just out in the garden. If you don’t have room or access to larger containers, use a small pail or any other container you have. Put a screen over the tops to ward off mosquitoes.

**Miscellaneous**
Put dryer sheets in the bottom of flower pots to keep soil from coming out of the drainage holes. Cut up snagged pantyhose for ties for vines and tomatoes. Cut up discarded mini blinds into six to eight inch lengths for plant id tags.

Look around your home to see what other items you might be able to use in your garden. Don’t forget that items can also be used for yard art: cans and old dishes as planters, utensils as markers and wind chimes, tree branches and trunks as sculptures, bed sets turned into benches (headboard as the back and footboard cut in half for arms). Recycling is a good way to bring out your creative side and build a uniquely beautiful garden area.

Adapted and excerpted from: Recycling in the Garden. The Green Thumb Script Booklets. Published by: St. Lucie County Extension. Garden Trash to Treasures. Published by: St. Lucie County Extension.
Nocturnal (night time) habits, affinity for eerie places, and silent, darting flight have made bats the subjects of a great deal of folklore and superstition through the years. Given their ability to function in the dark when and where humans cannot, it is no wonder that bats have long been associated with the supernatural. Bats remain poorly understood even today.

Humans’ general lack of understanding and appreciation of bats has contributed to alarming declines in bat populations. Some of the more important causes of these declines include destruction of habitat, use of harmful pesticides, disturbance of roost sites, proliferation of turbines used to generate wind power, and the spread of white nose syndrome. See http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw291 for more information on issues surrounding the conservation of bats in Florida.

Bats are the only mammals capable of true flight. Bats are not rodents. They are in the taxonomic order Chiroptera, which means “hand-wing.” The forelimbs of bats have the same configuration as other mammals, but the bones of the fingers of bats are extremely elongated to support membranous wings. The hind limbs are also modified to allow bats to hang, head-down, by their toes without expending energy.

Most bats are highly and uniquely adapted to catch night-flying insects. Nocturnal bats locate their food and navigate by uttering ultrasonic cries that return as echoes off solid objects. The large ears and oddly shaped nose and facial configurations of some bats assist in detecting these echoes. This form of navigation is termed “echolocation.”

This technique is also used by dolphins to detect prey and navigate in conditions of low visibility. Once bats detect prey, they use their wings, the wing membrane surrounding their tails, and their mouths to catch insects in flight or to pick them off vegetation. Although most bats are insect eaters, some bats specialize in eating other items such as fruit, nectar and pollen, vertebrates, and even blood. All bats resident in Florida eat insects, but a few of the species that occasionally show up in south Florida feed on fruit, nectar, and pollen.

All the bats of Florida rest during daylight hours, taking shelter in a variety of places such as caves, mines, buildings, bridges, culverts, rock crevices, under tree bark, and amongst foliage. Many species congregate in nursery colonies during the spring and disperse in July and August. The crowding of many bats into a nursery colony during spring and summer raises the temperature of the roost to more than 100 degrees (F). Because young bats have no fur, they need warm and humid conditions to survive.

Most bat species in Florida produce one offspring per year, although several species produce litters of two to four pups. Species that roost in caves, buildings, and tree hollows tend to be gregarious and have
**Cave-roosting bats resident to Florida**

- Gray bat (*Myotis grisescens*)
- Southeastern bat (*Myotis austroriparius*)
- Rafinesque’s Big-eared bat (*Corynorhinus rafinesquii*)
- Tricolored bat (*Pipistrellus subflavus*)

**Tree- and building-roosting bats resident to Florida**

- Brazilian Free-tailed bat (*Tadarida brasiliensis*)
- Velvety free-tailed bat (*Molossus molossus*)
- Florida bonneted bat (*Eumops floridanus*)
- Big Brown bat (*Eptesicus fuscus*)
- Evening bat (*Nycticeius humeralis*)
- Northern Yellow bat (*Lasiurus intermedius*)
- Eastern red bat (*Lasiurus borealis*)
- Seminole bat (*Lasiurus seminolus*)
- Hoary bat (*Lasiurus cinereus*)

Only one pup at a time. Foliage-roosting species tend to be solitary and have more than one pup at a time. Foliage-roosters often possess thicker and more colorful fur than colony-roosting bats. Like other mammals, all young bats are fed milk from their mothers until they are capable of foraging on their own.

Bats are an important part of natural ecosystems. They prey upon insects, some of which are agricultural or human pests. For example, the Brazilian free-tailed bat (*Tadarida brasiliensis*), consumes several species of moths that are agricultural pests, such as the fall armyworm (*Spodoptera frugiperda*), cabbage looper (*Trichoplusia ni*), tobacco budworm (*Heliothis virescens*), and corn earworm or cotton bollworm (*Helicoverpa zea*). The Brazilian free-tailed bat is common throughout Florida and typically lives in very large congregations. Recent research in south Georgia has demonstrated that these bats consume many of the insect pests that afflict pecan groves, suggesting that bats may play a role in integrated pest management (IPM) planning on pecan farms. (See [http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/UW289](http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/UW289) for more information on the role of bats in pest management). Bats also create nutrient-rich guano (feces) that acts as a fertilizer, supporting ground-dwelling life beneath roosts in caves and improving soil quality wherever bats defecate.

Bats are important animals in scientific research, providing insights into such diverse topics as hibernation, sonar, and blood clotting.

All twilight and free-tailed bats that occur in eastern North America are insect eaters and can be divided into two groups: those that spend at least a portion of the year in caves and those that roost in other types of structures. When caves and trees are scarce, bats may roost in man-made structures such as buildings, culverts, bridges, or bat houses.

Historically, caves provided safe environments with stable temperatures ideal for bat colonies. Because cave-roosting bats may congregate in large numbers (hundreds of thousands) and because cave habitats suitable for bats are limited in number, cave-dependent bat species are extremely vulnerable to human disturbance. Human disturbance, such as that caused by recreational caving activities, stresses bats and causes them to waste valuable energy, which may result in abandonment and mortality of young. Destruction of suitable cave habitat through vandalism, commercialization, flooding by reservoirs, and other causes has resulted in population declines to the point that several species face the threat of extinction. The need for cave conservation and protection of bat colonies (natural and urban) from human disturbance is critical for the continued survival of these fascinating animals.

**Selected from:**
*Bats of Florida by Holly K. Ober, Martin B. Main, and Ginger M. Allen*

**How to Build a Bat House:**

Hello everybody!

With this issue of Horticulture News, we are introducing a new column: “Harvest Gold”. We realized that our newsletter had quite a bit of information about what to plant, and when to plant it, but not much about what is currently being harvested, and what you could do with it once harvested. Hopefully, you will find this column interesting and informative, and will be able to use some of the information you find here.

First of all, let me introduce myself. My name is Joseph Smith. I am a Master Gardener volunteer with the Nassau County Cooperative Extension Office. I live in Hilliard, and am a native Floridian, as well as a native of Nassau County. (There are not too many of us around anymore!) I garden on land that has been in the family for over one hundred years. My mother likes to brag about my grandmother being born in 1909 in the main bedroom of the house where she currently lives. Then 29 years later my mother was born in the same bedroom. I have been gardening practically all my life. I plant and harvest on the same land my father, grandfather, and great-grandfather farmed before me. Farming is in my blood, and a lot of sweat and tears have gone into the soil at the family homestead. Of course, I would not have it any other way.

Well, enough about me. Let’s get on to more interesting things—gardening (and of course, harvesting!). Here we are in the dead of winter. But we are really lucky to live here in Northeast Florida, because even in the “dead” of winter, our gardens are alive! The fall and winter garden is really my favorite time of year to garden. Walking through my garden, I see the various types of greens growing. Mustards, turnips, cabbages, radishes…. I try to plant a little bit of it all. And the “green stuff” is really easy to grow! Sprinkle a few mustard or radish seeds on the ground, and they will be up in no time.

So, what can you do with all of the greens you are growing? Well, greens are different than most of the vegetables planted in a spring garden. Unlike corn, beans, squash, and other spring vegetables harvested at maturity, greens can be harvested at any point in the growing cycle. While the plants are still young, I like to cut a few young and tender leaves off to mix into a salad. I am especially fond of young mustard and radish leaves in a fresh salad. Mix the greens in with some home grown romaine and bibb lettuce, a few slices of white icicle radish, and a green onion or two and you will have a salad worthy of any five star restaurant!

Cabbage is another winter vegetable which does not require waiting until it matures into a full head to use. Clip off a few of the lower leaves and cook them the same way you would cook collards, kale, mustards, turnips, or any other leaf crop. Delicious and so good for you! Just keep the windows closed while you are cooking otherwise you will have a kitchen full of the neighbors – especially once they get a whiff of the heavenly aroma from your kitchen.

As we are entering the New Year, I would like to share couple of traditional Southern New Year’s Day recipes. But before the recipes, a little bit about the New Year’s Day meal itself.

The traditional Southern New Year’s Day dinner consists of black-eyed
peas and rice, greens, hog jowl, and cornbread. The hog jowl is used to flavor both the greens and the black-eyed peas, but it is sometimes also fried up like bacon. (And believe me, once you get a taste of fried hog jowl, you will never go back to regular bacon!)

The origins of the traditional Southern New Year’s Day meal go back to the time of the War Between the States. Back during the Civil War, Northern troops on the march, raided the local farms and countryside for food. What they could not use, they destroyed so the Confederates could not benefit from it. Greens and field peas, such as blackeyes, were looked down upon by the troops as being only good enough to feed to livestock, so they did not waste their time with them. The only meat they left behind was the fatty parts of the hog, such as hog jowls and fatback. Little did these soldiers know they left the best behind, for a good Southern cook can turn anything, no matter how humble, into a meal fit for a King!

There is also much symbolism associated with the New Year’s Day dinner. The black-eyed peas are said to represent coins, the greens represent paper money, and the cornbread represents gold. So, eating this traditional meal on New Year’s Day was said to guarantee you wealth, luck, and prosperity throughout the coming year. After years of eating this meal I may not have a lot of money but I do count myself as blessed with a wealth of good friends and family. I guess, but one thing I can guarantee is the meal is quite a good and your family will leave the table happy and content.

In addition to being considered a “lucky” meal, the New Year’s dinner is packed with nutrition. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, black-eyed peas are low in fat, contain no cholesterol, and are low in sodium. Black-eyed peas are also high in potassium and iron, and a ½ cup serving contains more than 20% of the recommended daily allowance of fiber. In addition, a one-half cup serving of cooked dry black-eyed peas counts as 2 ounces of lean meat in the USDA Meat, Poultry, Fish, Dry Beans, Eggs, and Nuts Group, or as ½ cup in the Vegetable Group. If the peas are good for you, the greens are nutritional powerhouses! Mustards, Turnips, and all green leafy vegetables contain no fat or cholesterol, are naturally low in sodium and high in fiber, and are high in vitamins A and C, calcium, iron, and many other vitamins and minerals.

Well, here’s what you all have been waiting for. The recipes! These recipes are not mine, so they are safe for you to try out. They came from my mother, and they carry the Master Gardener volunteer Mom’s Seal of Approval!

One of the beauties of good old fashioned Southern cooking like this is you do not have to stick hard and fast to the recipe. My mother never uses a recipe. I had to beg her to write these down to share with you. You can always adjust the recipe to suit your and your family’s tastes. A little more of this, or a little less of that, and the dish will still turn out just fine.

Well, I guess that’s about enough for today. I hope to see you all back here again at Horticulture News in a couple of months. Until we meet again, take care, God Bless, and Happy Harvesting.

Peace and Goodness

Joseph

Grandparents Bessie & Joseph Scussel with grandchildren Joe (our columnist) & Bettina in 1964. Bessie was born in the family home in 1909. Daughter Alice Marie was born in the same house 29 years later.
Wash the peas. If you wish, you can soak the peas overnight, then drain and rinse the peas before cooking. Place the peas, hog jowl, tomato, onion, and garlic into a pot. Add water, covering the peas by about two inches, and add salt and pepper to taste. Place the lid on the pot, and bring to a boil. Then reduce the heat down to low and simmer for at least two hours, stirring occasionally. Stirring them is important as it will prevent them from sticking to the bottom of the pan. Soaking the peas overnight will reduce the length of cooking time. Since dried peas tend to require high amounts of water, keep an eye on the pot while cooking and add water if necessary. Serve over rice.

Notes: The longer you cook peas the better they seem to taste. Some even say peas taste better the second or third day, they seem to absorb the seasonings with age. So, cook a big pot, and enjoy them for several days. In the recipe above, ham hocks, or pieces of lean smoked ham, could be substituted for the hog jowls but most Southern cooks wouldn’t dream of doing it on New Year’s Day!

*Recipe courtesy of Alice Marie Smith*
Traditional New Year's Day Greens

• 1 large bunch of fresh mustard greens
• 1 large bunch of turnip greens with roots
• ¾ lb. hog jowl, cut into several chunks
• Salt and pepper to taste

Wash and cut up mustard and turnip greens together. Peel and cut turnip roots into bite sized pieces. Put the greens, turnip roots, and hog jowl into a pot. Add about 6 cups of water, and salt and pepper to taste. Cover and bring the greens to a boil. Then reduce the heat to low and simmer until tender. These greens are very good served with a little hot pepper vinegar.

Notes: It is possible to substitute other greens for mustards and turnips in the recipe above. The wonderful thing about leafy greens is they can be mixed and matched or simply use only one type of green. It is entirely up to you – be daring and try some new combinations – add kale or collards. Have fun! If needed, ham hocks or lean smoked ham could be substituted for the hog jowl.

Recipe courtesy of Alice Marie Smith
**TO DO** LIST FOR JANUARY

**Citrus:** Water as needed - especially 24-48 hours before a freeze. Protect above and below grafted area on the trunk when freezing temperatures occur.

**Fruits:** Major removal of twigs and branches should occur before spring. Weed as needed. Keep grass away from root areas. Apply 6-6-6- or 8-8-8 fertilizer to Pears.

**Flowers:** Annuals to plant are carnations, pansies, petunias, snapdragons, delphiniums, larkspur, dianthus, and foxgloves. Be ready to move less hardy bulbs inside. Most others, like ginger and amaryllis, may show foliar damage during severe cold, but they can be left in the ground and they should survive. Tulips, hyacinths, and daffodils can be planted now if you refrigerated them for 8 weeks to meet their chilling requirements.

**Roses:** DO NOT Fertilize. Water as needed. Prepare sites for new plants 1/3 top soil, 1/3 dehydrated cow manure, 1/3 peat moss, ½ cup super phosphate or bone meal. Roses should be pruned once each year. In north Florida the best time is around Valentine’s Day, February 14th. A little sooner or later doesn’t really matter. If you want roses to bring to a show, you should begin pruning seven to eight weeks before the show. Some varieties take a little longer and some will bloom sooner, but eight weeks is a good rule of thumb.

**Herbs:** Plant anise, borage, chives, chervil, coriander, fennel, garlic, lavender, marjoram, mint, parsley, rosemary, sage, sesame, sweet marjoram, and thyme.

**Lawns:** This is fertilize free month. Check the soil to determine water needs. When the grass blades fold it’s time to water. Water once every 10-14 days in the winter unless we receive rainfall. If mowing, keep your mower height at the highest level.

**Perennials:** Water during morning hours only, when surface soil is dry to the touch. Make sure you have 2-3 inches of mulch around the roots. Outdoor plants require less water in the winter months.

**Trees:** Remove dead limbs, trim off suckers, lanky growth, and crisscrossing limbs; remove old seedpods. Don’t perform major pruning on any flowering trees producing blooms during the spring months.

**Vegetables:** English peas, beets, broccoli, potatoes, cabbage, celery, carrots, bunching onions, radishes, turnips, and cauliflower can be planted now.

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.
Citrus: Water as needed. Prune any water sprouts, suckers, rubbing or crossing branches. Weed as needed.

Fruits: Major removal of twigs and branches should occur before spring. Weed as needed. Check irrigation to ensure it is working. Make repairs.

Flowers: Remove all dead plant portions of annuals. Baby’s breath, calendulas, carnations, dianthus, dusty miller, Marguerite daisies, pansies, petunias, and snapdragons can be planted this month. Prune out declining foliage of bulbs as needed. Use insecticidal soap for aphids.

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

Roses: Water as needed. Apply organic materials around each plant. 1 cup cow manure, 1 cup fish meal, ½ cup Epsom salts. Begin spray program every 7-10 Days with appropriate fungicide but remember to rotate types of fungicide; spray entire plant including underside of leaves.

Lawns: Cut St. Augustine lawns as needed; keep the mowing height highest level for your grass variety. Cutting grass too short encourages insect damage and disease. No fertilizer this month.

Perennials: Do not rush to prune out the dead or declining portions, as some cold may linger until March. Leaving dead portions on may provide some protection in case another freeze occurs.

Ornamental grasses: Remove all dead stems on deciduous grasses by cutting stems to 6-12 inches above ground. Remove only dead stems on evergreen ornamental grasses, leave green portions intact. Fertilize ornamental grasses at the end of this month!

Trees: Existing well-established trees and palms do not normally need special watering - the nearby irrigation of lawns, shrubs, and flower beds normally supply adequate moisture. Some exceptions may be dogwoods or red maples.

Vegetables: This month you can plant beets, broccoli, carrots, cabbage, collards, cauliflower, celery, endive/escarole, lettuce, mustard, bunching onions, parsley, turnips. Before you start your garden, be sure to have the soil tested. The University of Florida will do a full nutrient test for only $7. Come by the office to pick up a soil kit or call us at 904 879-1019 for more information. Put raked leaves and grass clippings in a compost pile. As they rot, they make an excellent organic material to add to the soil when planting vegetables and some ornamental plants.

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
Want a conversation piece for your herb garden? How about the walking onion, Allium cepa var. proliferum? It is also known as tree onion, topsetting onion, Egyptian onion or Catawissa onion. It originates from Canada, and became popular in kitchen gardens in the 1790s.

Do these onions really walk? Well, they definitely amble. The name comes from the plant’s ability to self propagate. A mature plant forms a cluster of small bulblets on the top of its stem similar to a flower. It then sends out a second stalk with more bulblets which weighs the stalk down to the ground several inches away from the mother plant. These bulbs take root and produce more onions. Thus the plant may stroll all over your garden if not harvested.

The whole plant is edible, though most people eat the mother bulb from under the ground and use the “walking clusters” for planting for the next season. The small bulbs have a very pungent, wonderful onion flavor, from the onion tips to the bulblets, with much more interest than your every day regular size onion. The bulbs can be kept for up to 12 months.

Growing walking onions is not difficult. You can start a new plant from the bulblet sets or from the basal onions in spring or fall. Plant in rich, well drained soil about ½ to 1 inch below the surface. It is important to keep weeds away from plants, so the roots have enough room to grow under ground. These plants are are cold hardy to Zone 3 (-40°), and can remain evergreen through a Zone 5 winter. They are some of the first plants to show their face in spring and can be counted on year after productive year. So give these wonderful plants a try. Take a walk with some onions!