

CROW WING COUNTY MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM

Ask the Master Gardener

AUGUST 2015 COLUMN

Dear Master Gardener:

Like so many others we lost many of the trees in our Brainerd neighborhood in the big July storm. The debris has been carried away and stumps are being ground out. My neighbors and I would like some help in choosing replacements. What are some things we should be considering? And would you suggest some specific trees?

Perhaps your top consideration is to strive for diversity. Neighborhoods that planted block after block of American elms were reduced to treelessness when Dutch elm disease struck. A decade later a similar scourge, oak wilt, decimated trees in other neighborhoods. Currently cities south of here are fighting the loss of ash trees to the emerald ash borer. If urban areas had planted a greater diversity of trees, the devastation may have thinned the "urban forest" but not eliminated it. Storm susceptibility is another consideration. In general fast-growing trees (silver maple, red maple, cottonwood, birch) are weaker trees and more susceptible to storm damage than are slower-growing trees. If there are power lines near where you want to plant, choose a tree that will be under 25 ft. tall at maturity or the power company will trim it, often resulting in an odd or unsightly tree. Other considerations are hardiness (here in the Brainerd Lakes area we are in zone 3), the mature height of the tree, the amount of shade on the site (some trees cannot thrive in the shade of other trees) and the tree's growth rate.

That being said, there are many trees that will thrive in our area, though local availability may be a factor. Some that the DNR recommends are little leaf linden (*Tilia cordata*), Japanese tree lilac (*Syringa reticulata*), Ohio buckeye (*Aesculus glabra*), crabtrees of various sorts (*Malus* species), hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*), river birch (*Betula nigra*), butternut hickory (*Carya cordiformis*), and American linden (*Tilia americana*). There are now some new elm varieties that have proven resistant to Dutch elm disease. Googling any or all of these will give you information on mature height and spread, growth rate, photographs and much more.

When you have made your tree choice, choose one that is straight, healthy and does not have girdling roots. Balled and burlapped and container-grown trees can be planted any time the ground is not frozen, though it is best to plant early in the fall, giving roots time to acclimatize before winter winds arrive.

Dear Master Gardener:

I planted honeydew melons, cantaloupe and watermelons in my vegetable garden and was wondering how I tell when they are ripe and ready to harvest. Also, is there a difference between muskmelon and cantaloupe?

Cantaloupe requires 35-45 days to mature from flowering, depending on the temperature. If you are using plastic mulch, which warms the soil, conserves water, helps to control weeds, allows earlier planting and maturity, and reduces ground rot of the fruit, harvesting could be 7 to 14 days earlier than if you are growing melons on bare ground. As your cantaloupes ripen reduce your watering amount to improve flavor. Even watering is very important, especially in the last two weeks of growth. When a cantaloupe is almost ripe, too much water will dilute the sugars and dull the flavor of the melons. In addition, excessive watering at this stage can cause the fruits to split.

As the fruit matures the skin surface netting gets coarse and rough, the background color of the fruit turns from green to yellow the surface color becomes dull, and the tendrils near the fruit on the stem dry and turn brown. Harvest the fruits by twisting the fruit to separate them from the vine. Do not wait for the melons to separate from the vine on their own. At full maturity and peak flavor the stem breaks (slips) away from the vine easily. This stage is called "full slip." Pick melons as they ripen because they will not all ripen at the same time. Commercial melons are harvested at "1/2 to 3/4 slip" to reduce shipping damage. This removes the fruit before it has reached maximum sugar content, and sugar content will not increase after harvest. If you find melons for sale at a farmer's market or store that have little stubs of vine sticking out of them, they were harvested too early and probably won't be very sweet. One of the biggest advantages of growing your own melons, is the opportunity to harvest at maximum ripeness.

Determining when watermelon and honeydew melons are ripe is a little more difficult as they typically do not slip from the vine. There are some indicators you can use to determine ripeness: tendrils near the fruit stem have become brown and dry; the fruit surface has become rough to the touch and the fruit color turned dull; the bottom of the watermelon, where it lies on the soil, has changed from a light green to a yellowish color. To make sure a honeydew melon is ripe, place the melon in a bag with ripening apples or tomatoes. The latter will release ethylene gas, which will complete the ripening process. Select melon varieties that will ripen under your conditions. Short season types ripen between 65 and 75 days. Full season types ripen around 85 days.

According to the University of Illinois Extension, there is technically a difference between cantaloupe and muskmelon, but often the names are used interchangeably. The term cantaloupe refers to two varieties of muskmelon. What we typically call a cantaloupe is *Cucumis melo* reticulatus, also called the North American cantaloupe. The variety name reticulatus refers to the net-like appearance of the skin, also called reticulated. The other variety, European cantaloupe, *Cucumis melo* cantalupensis, has ribbed light green skin and looks nothing like what we commonly call cantaloupe. While both of these cantaloupe varieties are muskmelons, not all muskmelons are cantaloupes. There are many different types of muskmelons, with a wide variety of shapes, sizes, flesh color and flavor.

Dear Master Gardener:

Miniature hostas are so cute and I would like to have some in my fairy garden. Are they just as hardy as the larger types? Are there certain characteristics miniature hostas have to be called miniatures?

The American Hosta Society has determined that to be classified as a miniature hosta, the leaf blade area can be no more than about six square inches. There is no restriction on clump spread. There are 342 American Hosta Society registered miniature hostas and at least 100 unregistered miniature hostas, so there are many from which to choose. Miniatures are just as hardy as their larger family members.

AUGUST GARDEN TIPS

- Continue to deadhead flowers and they will continue to bloom.
- Some vegetables, such as beans, lettuce and tomatoes, will continue to produce as long as they are regularly picked—until frost, that is.
- Collect cuttings and seeds from your garden to plant next spring.
- A brownish-black splotch on the end of a tomato is called blossom-end-rot and is caused by irregular swings in moisture. Cut off the black part and use the rest of the tomato.
- Mid-August through early September is the best time to plant grass seed here in central Minnesota. Use starter fertilizer or mild organic fertilizer and keep the area moist.
- Regularly pick up and compost overripe fruit and vegetable produce.
- Early this month plant lettuce, radish and spinach seed for delicious fall salads.
- White, powdery growth on cucumbers, squash and pumpkins is probably powdery mildew. Thinning foliage allows for better air circulation. It is unsightly but usually is not fatal. Next year look for seeds of those plants that are labeled “PM” (for powdery mildew resistance).
- Now is a good time to divide and replant bearded iris. Dig them up and brush or gently wash away the soil. Trim the foliage to about 4 inches. Fan-shaped trim is common but not necessary. Discard the oldest, woodiest parts of the rhizomes plus any bacterial soft spots caused by iris borer feeding. Replant rhizomes just beneath the surface with fans of leaves facing outward.
- Watch for sphinx moths early in the evening. They are similar in shape and size to hummingbirds, with which they are often mistaken. Like hummingbirds, they flap their wings extremely fast and can hover in mid-air. They are especially fond of impatiens.

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?

Crow Wing County Master Gardeners are trained and certified volunteers for the University of Minnesota Extension. All information given in this column is based on research and information provided by the University. To ask a question, call the Master Gardener Help Line at 218-824-1000, extension 4040 and leave a message. A Master Gardener will return your call.

UMN Extension Crow Wing County Master Gardeners' Website

<http://crowingmastergardeners.org/>