

# A SPRINGTIME PERSPECTIVE

by Becke Davis

*TWG Editor: My friend Becke Davis, a prolific and oh-so-talented garden writer, sent me the following letter last spring (1999). I've saved it for a year. Isn't it wonderful that God has granted us another spring, just so we can read Becke's article when we most need to renew our spirits? I hope this energizes you and sets the tone for the rest of this edition of TWG.*

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Spring, having arrived Tuesday evening, drew me into my back garden with the mail. It is very muggy and overcast but, canceling out all the negatives, it is 70 degrees! My garden is begging for a major clean-up. Instead of grabbing my gardening gloves, however, I find myself browsing *The Weedpatch Gazette*, contemplating last year's mistakes in the garden, and mentally planning all the things I will do in the garden this year, should I suddenly inherit a million dollars from a long-lost relative.

I don't know how other people read *The Weedpatch*, but I always carry on a silent dialog with you. (It's a sign of advancing age—first the memory goes, then you find yourself talking to the dog, then the authors of various gardening

books and periodicals, and occasionally yourself...) The first comment of your's to hit home was in "From the Editor's Garden", when you used the phrase "until the first time I move them", referring to some perennials.

Years ago I read an interview with a British gardener who said that he kept his perennials "on roller skates," moving them until they seemed to find a home in his garden. Apart from the plants like peonies and poppies that don't seem to enjoy the nomadic life, my plants often change homes as I rethink different parts of the garden.

Unfortunately, it doesn't stop with perennials—I was just debating whether it would be worth the effort to move a 'Profusion' crabapple and an 'Ivory Silk' Japanese tree lilac from my backyard "woodland" to the sunnier front. Since I cleared a lot of dead and diseased trees from the back a few years ago, it is certainly sunnier, but I am not convinced it is sunny enough. Besides, one day the cornfield behind my house will undoubtedly be developed, so it would make sense to plant a privacy hedge along the back. Maybe four 'Vanderwolf's Pyramid' limber pines [*Pinus flexilis*]?

Then again, I would really like a blue, blue, blue spruce, but the front yard is riddled with cables from electric, cable and telephone companies—the bane of any sensible landscape design at my house. If I get the spruce, I would also like to get a Christmas tree holly—the kind that Chicago winters would kill—since I am living almost in a zone 6 here.

My biggest mistake last year (1998) was a protracted visit to see friends and family in Dallas and Albuquerque in August. Cincinnati had a long, wet spring last year (nothing unusual about that) but the trees I planted that spring weren't ready to be left on their own for weeks in the heart of August. It rained three times while we were in Albuquerque, but it didn't rain once in Cincinnati. This spring, landscapers are hauling away dead pine trees by the truckful. My bargain basement white pine started turning white the first week of December. Within a week every needle had been stripped of color, before gradually turning brown. My common witchhazel may still have a thread of life, but it's becoming less likely as the surrounding trees leaf out. On the other hand, my baby beech tree always looks dead in early spring. I've learned to be



An "all year" garden designed by landscape architect Robert McGoodwin of Philadelphia. Featured in *The House Beautiful Gardening Manual*, 1926.

patient and the leaves eventually appear.

I had three baby Norway spruce trees that my kids started as tiny cuttings passed out to schoolchildren by McDonald's on Earth Day about six years ago. We moved them from Illinois to Ohio with us, moved them from pot to soil about four years ago, and, while they are the slowest growing plants I've ever seen, they are still alive and the deer and rabbits haven't touched them. (They eat my sumacs, *Cornus mas*, cotoneaster and hostas on a regular basis.) The best of the trees was shaping up to become a nice little Christmas tree last year, so I planted it into a large hole in a part of the yard where the soil is nicely mixed with organic matter. I mulched it carefully, watered it carefully, kept the weeds away. It was dead within weeks. The other two stragglers, in a raised bed where I have a struggle keeping the soil from drying out (but that flooded regularly before I raised the planting area), are doing quite fine. This time I'm going to leave well enough alone.

I have a perfect spot to put in a small water garden (well, probably not all that small), but I hesitate because my neighbor's young children like to poke around in my garden. I finally have my long-awaited deck, along with several built-in planters, and now I have to figure out the best way to plant them. But what with. Oh, dear, I seem to have wandered from the subject, if there ever was one in the first place.

I enjoyed the "color" feature written for you by landscape architect Jan Little (Spring, 1999). My only added note is this: I think people must have different perceptions of color much as we have different perceptions of what makes a pleasant fragrance and what makes us reel back in dismay. I'm not just referring to taste, but actual color perception. It doesn't help when garden books, magazines and catalogues use filters to enhance (or blatantly change) flower

colors. I am constantly amazed when I grow a new flowering plant to see how different the flowers look in comparison to the way they appear in photographs. My pet peeve, that said, is houses built of orange brick with hot pink crabapples planted in the front. It can work—with just the right shade of brick and just the right crabapple, but so often a white flowering tree would look so much better!

In her article, *TWG* contributor Eileen Kostock mentioned the beautiful 'Apricot Beauty' tulip—one of my favorites! 'Coral and Gold' peony is not quite coral, either. That cultivar and several others with similar names are stunning.

I wrote an article for *The Landscape Contractor* a few years ago on tree planting basics, and we ended up doing a second article to cover new trends, new research and conflicting ideas. Your feature and Jeff Iles' article brought it all back home. The biggest problem with amending the planting pit with large amounts of peat is that the roots will eventually reach the bounds of the amended soil area. There is some evidence to show that trees decline when they hit the "real" soil after being spoiled in their early years with the amended soil. Many landscapers now simply dig the planting pit and amend the soil enough to loosen it without extensively changing the soil structure.

It's interesting that you mentioned root balls and wire cages, too. I have talked to several experts who recommend cutting all binding ropes around the root ball, even clipping the wire from the cages. This can be especially important if the burlap is not true, degradable burlap but a nylon look-alike that can girdle the trunk. I haven't found a contractor yet who will go to the trouble of removing a wire cage, and most give me strange looks when I even ask about it. But I have read some research suggestion that wire cages may restrict root growth.

From my own experience and from speaking to others, I believe that trees and shrubs planted too deeply—either at the nursery or on site—are headed for problems, either death or decline. There is evidence to show that in the case of maples, trees planted too deeply also suffer from increased likelihood of girdling roots. The rule of thumb is never to plant deeper than the tree was originally planted; if it was originally planted too deeply, you may still have problems even if you do everything right.

I have rambled on long enough—your closing article regarding your search for a source that sells toads had me flashing back to many similar information searches I have pursued as a writer over the years. Eventually, we become fonts of trivial knowledge and the possessors of phenomenal phone bills, but at least our lives are never boring!

Keep up the great work!



**Rebecca "Becke" G. Davis** is a prolific garden writer and generous person. Her newest book, due out in September, is called, *At Home in the Garden: Creating Stylish Outdoor Rooms*. She lives in Cincinnati, Ohio. You may reach Becke at (513) 753-0378.

Reprinted from the National Garden Bureau's newsletter, August 1997:

**"NEW VARIETIES FOR 1998!"**

*Cynoglossum amabile* 'Jeans': The colors of the nineties, stonewashed denim blue. Rich flowering border-plant of 35 cm. This *Cynoglossum* is an excellent choice for trendy near-natural plantings."

*TWG Editor:* Whaddya have for 2000? How about a plant for "IPO, totally financially insane gardens"?