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UC CE

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What is Low Maintenance Gardening?

Article and Photos by Marianne L. Calhoun, UC Master Gardener of Placer County

The answer to "What is Low Maintenance Gardening?" depends on a gardener's interest, energy, time, and budget. Desire for a manicured appearance often is the high end of the maintenance spectrum. The opposite end, no maintenance, is a myth for residential gardens with living plants. Many gardeners, including myself, aspire to be low maintenance gardeners. Wherever you are on the spectrum, there are ways to lessen watering, pruning, deadheading, and weeding. Consider making small modifications at a time.

Watering Plant health relies on proper irrigation. Learn the water preference of each plant, based on your city, from UC Davis' California Center for Urban Horticulture. To simplify watering, group plants sharing similar needs for water and sun into irrigation zones. Water-wise gardeners place plants preferring moderate or high amounts of water in small zones near their house and plants which thrive with low water in larger zones further away. To reduce the stress of deciding how often and how long to water each zone, set the irrigation controller with your optimum watering schedule from Be Water Smart Regional Water Authority. Consider upgrading your irrigation controller from a manual to a smart one that will automatically adjust the watering schedule based on your local weather. Lastly, try highlighting succulents rather than annuals in containers to reduce hand watering.

Aloe 'Johnson's Hybrid' attracts hummingbirds and thrives in containers with limited water.

Pruning Consider not pruning your ornamental woody plants. The easiest option is enjoying each plant's size and shape with minor shaping once a year (beyond removing dead, dying, and diseased limbs). The harder option is recognizing

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that a plant is too tall, wide, or inappropriate and should be replaced. Considerable pruning may be eliminated if large foundation plants are removed to ensure five feet from your home is easily defensible for firemen. (Click here for details.) Research plants that will thrive in your garden before driving to your favorite nursery and consider that plants might grow larger than advertised. Consider using Arboretum All-Star plants, which have been selected by UC Davis Arboretum and Public Garden for their low maintenance as well as long-lasting color and interest year-round to both humans and wildlife.

Deadheading Constant stooping and deadheading herbaceous annuals and perennials to encourage repeat flowering may become challenging for hands-on gardeners. Limit herbaceous plants to long-blooming ones near your windows and outside seating areas. Further, consider replacing some with evergreen woody plants for their flowers plus foliage. You can achieve year-round interest without constantly caring for herbaceous plants. Lastly, birds and beneficial wildlife will appreciate you prolonging food and shelter by postponing your fall cleanup for several months.

Weeding To reduce squatting and pulling weeds each spring, add mulch before seeds of unwanted plants begin to sprout. UC IPM's Landscape Weeds Quick Tips page advises applying several inches of organic mulch to prevent weeds from germinating. The weeds that do sprout will be fewer and easier to remove. In addition to preventing weeds, mulch decomposes slowly and improves your soil plus retains moisture. An easy way to increase your mulch is letting fallen leaves remain on the ground; mowing large leaves into smaller pieces speeds decomposition.

Hopefully you're inspired and not overwhelmed by these approaches, which ultimately lessen the maintenance of your garden. Hands-on gardeners are known to thoughtfully monitor and adjust their practices each year. Consider recording your practices via a journal, calendar, and/or spreadsheet. And look forward to worrying less about your garden as it becomes more established!

This low maintenance slope was transformed from extensive front lawn.

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Unusual Edible: Cocoxochitl

by Julie Lowrie, UC Master Gardener of Placer County

The dahlia, an herbaceous perennial plant with tuberous roots grown today primarily for its ornate flowers, belongs to the Asteraceae or daisy family, which includes artichokes, lettuce, sunflowers, and chrysanthemums. But, did you know that the indigenous people of Central Mexico cultivated and foraged for Cocoxochitl, the dahlia's original name in the Aztec language, as a food source for thousands of years? Dahlias are native to high elevations in Central America, particularly the highlands of Mexico, where they have been used as wild and semi-domesticated food plants for thousands of years, with different species used for different purposes, including food and medicine. Read more about the history and cultivation of dahlias here.

Dahlias are edible, and their tubers can be used in cooking. The common garden dahlia (*D.* x *pinnata* or *D. variabilis*) and *D. coccinea* are two species for which there is a clear record of human use. The tubers are starchy and can be boiled, roasted, or fried. They are also used as a thickener in soups and stews.

Ornamental dahlia 'Pink Bubble Gum'. Photo by Julie Lowrie.

Despite their edible qualities, dahlias are more commonly grown for their ornamental value, which the Spaniards recognized in the 16th century. They shipped seeds from the flowers to Europe, where European botanists and horticulturalists quickly discovered the dahlia could be bred into an ornate double form. Today, they come in various shapes, sizes, and colors, making them a favorite and popular cut flower among amateur and professional growers alike. Read more about dahlia hybidization here.

Another Threat to California Oaks—Mediterranean Oak Borer

Article and photos by Nicole Harrison, UC Master Gardener of Placer County and ISA Certified Arborist

Background:

Back in 2019, a tree in Napa County was found to have an invasive beetle not seen before in the United States. A mere 5 years later they are spreading here in the Sacramento area killing many healthy, mature trees in as few as 3 years. We should all be on the lookout for the signs and symptoms that our trees may be infested by the Mediterranean Oak Borer (MOB) *Xyleborus monographus*.

According to the *USDA Field Guide to Insects and Diseases of California Oaks* (2006), the common insect pests of our native oaks include wasps, moths, beetles, and borers. Wasps and moths lay eggs that result in larvae that damage trees. Beetles and borers damage trees as larvae and also as adults.

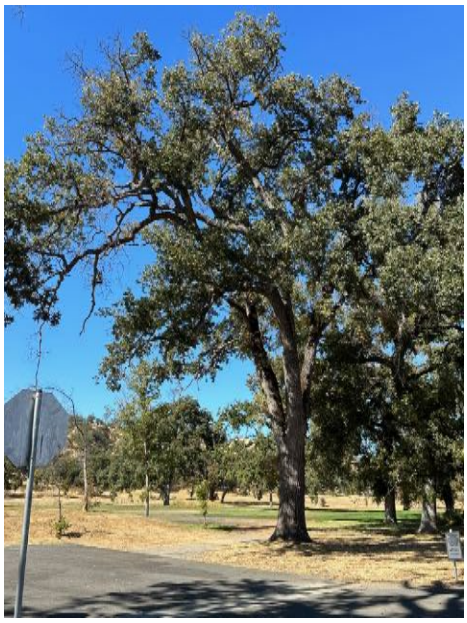
(Bark) Beetles. A diverse group of insect adults that tunnel into the sapwood and generally feed on the cambium layer. En masse these insects rapidly kill trees by interfering with the trees vascular system.

Borers. Also a diverse group of adult insects that tunnel into trees, mainly into the heartwood causing structural damage. Trees attacked by borers may live and borers are well known for their colonization of dead and dying tree parts including firewood.

The MOB is an 'Ambrosia' beetle. Ambrosia beetles cross over between the beetle and borer groups in an ingenious way. The female has specialized leg cavities and carries an inoculum of fungi that will infest the cambium layer of the tree, blocking the trees transport system. These beetles feed on the fungus AND bore tunnels into the wood of the tree. The result is large dead trees with a high likelihood of failure from structural inadequacy.

Signs and Symptoms:

Year 1. Dieback in the upper canopy of branches 4 – 6" in diameter, generally on one side of the tree. It is important to distinguish the pattern of dying branches to rule out drought stress which also causes dieback in the upper canopy.



1st year, some dead branch tips on one side of the tree.

Dieback from drought or other stress (for comparison) shows leaves all the way to the branch tips distributed evenly through out the canopy

Year 2. Dieback in the upper to mid canopy of branches 6 to 15" in diameter. It can still be only on one side or in larger branches in the original area of the infestation and in smaller branches where new infestations are beginning.

2nd year into an infestation. Entire scaffold branch is dead but the rest of the tree appears fine or has a new infestation on branch tip, roughly the same side of the tree.

Year 3. Substantial decline. Up to 50% of the canopy is dead and boring dust can be found in the trunk. Like a Christmas tree with the roots severed, these trees are the standing dead. Since these beetles like 'live' trees, it is important to remove trees before they are completely dead and destroy the wood and insects. Otherwise, allowing a tree to die releases a large population looking for a new home into the community.

What can you do?

All of our science indicates that stressed or already diseased trees are more likely to be colonized and that there is no current treatment once a tree has MOB. Research is underway to find effective methods to manage MOB, but for now preventing the movement of the insect and infected wood is the best method of control. Do not move firewood; buy it where you burn it.

If you have an oak tree you believe to be infested, please call the California Department of Food and Agriculture

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Pest Hotline: 1-800-491-1899 or go online to file a report.

Remove any dead parts of your tree and verify the interior wood at the cut location is clean and not showing any sign of colonization (insects or black staining from the fungi).

"From other similar invasive insects, …options like chipping (≤1" size), solarization, burning, or burying infested material will likely be crucial in mitigating spread" according to Michael Jones of UC ANR Forest Research and Outreach.

MOB beetle hole is same size as the tip of a ball point pen.

The adult female MOB is about 1/8" long. Photo credit: Curtis Ewing, CalFire.

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Myths of Winter Fruit Tree Care

by Kathleen Wiersch, UC Master Gardener of Placer County

If you search the internet looking for advice on what to do with your fruit trees in the winter, you may find a great deal of conflicting advice. One of the most important things to remember is, we in Placer and Nevada Counties live in a Mediterranean climate with a great diversity of microclimates from valley floor to high Sierra. Let's address some misunderstandings many people have:

MYTH #1 All fruit tree pruning should be done in winter.

There are two big seasons for pruning deciduous fruit trees, winter and summer. Pruning in each season causes the tree to respond differently. In our wet winter climate, there are some trees that should not be pruned in the winter (notably apricots and cherries) because this increases their susceptibility to certain diseases. Winter pruning for deciduous trees like peaches, apples and plums should focus the structure of the tree. Removing diseased or dead branches, rubbing branches, and suckers can be done any time of the year.

MYTH #2 Winter pruning is the best way to control the size of a fruit tree.

When you prune a tree that is dormant, it has energy stored in its roots and trunks just waiting to burst forward with new growth in the spring. If you do too much pruning in a single winter, especially making big heading cuts that shorten the length of branches, you are actually stimulating growth. You may also encourage water sprouts that are less likely to grow fruit and will shade out fruit producing buds. Periodic summer pruning is best to keep a fruit tree to a manageable size. Pruning is a big topic, please see this excellent UC ANR pruning handout for detailed information.

MYTH #3 It's bare root season. Buy the tallest tree you can find.

Those tall bare root trees in stores have been dug out of the ground with significant amounts of their roots removed. No matter what size bare root tree you buy, the best advice is to prune it after planting to knee height. Wait, what? Yes, you want that tree to be healthy and established so it can produce fruit for you in future years. Right now you want its energy focused on roots and establishing a scaffold of primary branches. It's the toughest pruning cut you'll ever make, but you'll be grateful you did. This major prune at planting will also help you keep trees to a size most suitable to backyards and will result in easy harvesting. For more information on keeping trees small, read up on backyard orchard culture and see video demonstrations here.

Pruning of main stem of newly planted bare root tree to knee height. Photo by Kathleen Wiersch.

MYTH #4 Buying low chill varieties of fruit trees sounds like a good idea.

Master Gardeners love to say "It depends" and that is definitely the case here. So called "low chill" varieties of fruit trees were developed primarily for coastal and southern homeowners who do not have sufficient chilling hours

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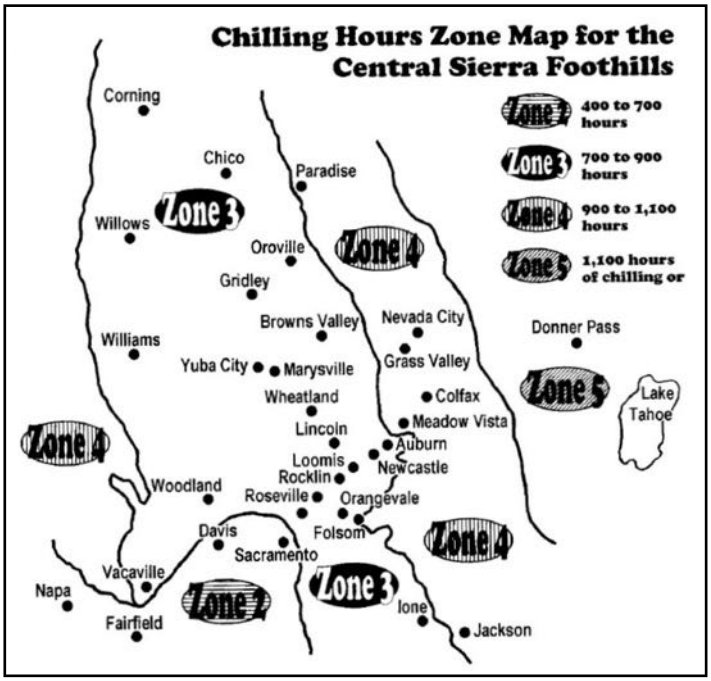
each winter, generally below 45 degrees F. The Chilling Hours Zone Map below shows that the lower elevation portions of Placer County have historically averaged 700-900 chilling hours while higher portions of Placer County and most populated regions of Nevada County have averaged 900-1100 chilling hours per year. So, in our areas, if you buy "low chill" fruit trees, they might bloom early, especially when there are warm late winter days. Those early blooms could then be lost to cold or wind. Local retail nurseries usually carry stock suited to your region, but do check the plant descriptions! Read more information on fruit tree selection and chill hours on the UC ANR home orchard website.

Find even more fruit for thought in these Backyard Orchard Top 10 presentation slides.



Chilling hours map from A Guide to Home Orcharding for the Sierra Nevada Foothills, UCCE Placer/Nevada Publication #31-701.

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- *Tree Selection*. University of California/The California Backyard Orchard. 2023. https://homeorchard.ucanr.edu/The_Big_Picture/Tree_Selection/#chill/

Ribbon cutting ceremony. Photo by Dee Ann Dinelli.

Master Gardeners of Nevada County Demonstration Garden News

by Ann Wright, UC Master Gardener of Nevada County

September 23 was a bright, beautiful day in Nevada County. With a brass band playing and the Grass Valley Chamber of Commerce assisting us in a ribbon cutting ceremony at the Demonstration Garden, the Master Gardeners of Nevada County's 40th birthday celebration commenced. After months of refurbishing buildings and raised beds, planting new plants, weeding, and adding new plant identification and interpretive signs, the Demonstration Garden was ready—and was the star of the party.

In 1983 two volunteers were trained as Nevada County Master Gardeners and in the fall of 1990, the Nevada Irrigation District and the UC Cooperative Extension, MGNC entered into a long-term agreement where an open area of about 1.4 acres on the NID business grounds was allotted to Master Gardeners for a Demonstration Garden. NID officials said the partnership would provide valuable gardening education to the community while encouraging efficient use of irrigation and water management. So, in addition to celebrating our 40th birthday, we celebrated 33 years at our Demo Garden and our collaboration with NID.

After a wonderful celebration with over 600 visitors on those garden paths that day, the garden is now resting as we anticipate the spring growing season. This fall we hosted our two final public workshops, one to demonstrate fruit tree pruning on our very own apple and pear trees. We are looking forward to more projects in the garden to continue to provide science-based public education for the community.

Hotline FAQs

Leafcutter bee damage on western redbud. Photo by Laurie McGonagill.

Have gardening questions?
Contact a Master Gardener!

Placer County
530-889-7388
or submit a question electronically

Nevada County
530.273.0919
or submit a question electronically

Small circles are cut out of my redbud leaves, should I be concerned? What about other leaf damage?

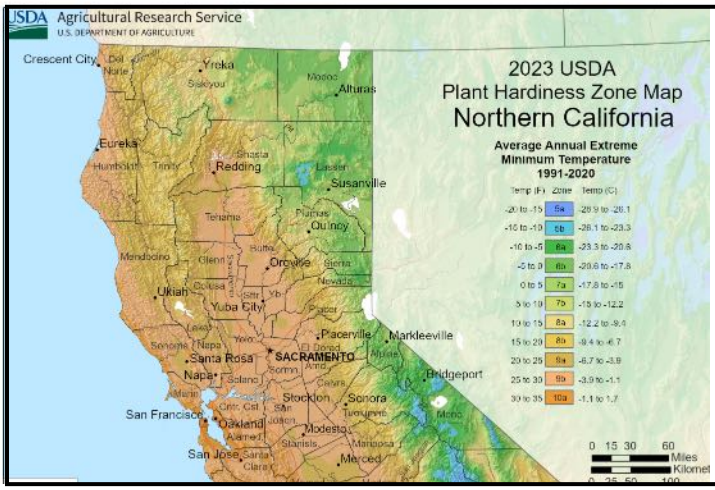
by Laurie McGonagill, UC Master Gardener of Placer County

Be happy, because the circles are caused by the beneficial leafcutting bees (*Megachile* spp.)! They have chosen your leaves to use in their nests and do this by cutting circles with their mouthparts (see photo at left). This bee is a bit smaller than a honey bee and is blackish with white or yellow hairs separating the dark segments. Unlike honey bees, which transport pollen on the hair on their legs, these bees carry pollen under the abdomen.

It is true that we like beneficial insects, but don't care for the damage to our plants–leafcutter bees that cut holes out of our leaves or caterpillars that eat leaves and stems. It's one thing when bees, butterflies, other insects and birds gather nectar and pollen from the flowers or eat the seeds, but another to see what caterpillars, which turn into those beautiful butterflies, or leafcutting bees do to 'deface' our plants. The amount of damage or imperfection that we tolerate is an individual matter. If we have provided appropriate cultural care—correct watering, pruning to let in air and sunlight, and mulching—we may see some damage but our plants aren't likely to suffer long. So, if we offer the proper cultural requirements and know which insects are beneficial, we can rest easy if we see damage due to leafcutting bees or most caterpillars. Read more about these little bees here.

Another insect that commonly causes damage to redbud trees is the redhumped caterpillar. They will eat all but the toughest veins in a leaf. You can read more about them and see a photo of their very different chewing damage on redbud here.

Larvae of the redhumped caterpillar feeding on walnut, and their chewing damage to leaves.
Credit: Jack Kelly Clark



USDA Updates Zone Map

On November 15, 2023 the USDA released an updated version of its Plant Hardiness Zone Map. Based on 30-year averages of the lowest annual winter temperatures at specific locations, the new map is more accurate and detailed than previous versions. Their website also includes information for gardeners on how to use the information in the map.

Enter your zip code to find your plant hardiness zone on an interactive map.

Add Grasses for Winter Interest

By Peggy Beltramo, UC Master Gardener of Placer County

Winter is a slow season in the garden. How about adding some grasses now to lend structure to your space? Two favorites of mine are deer grass and eyelash grass.

Deer grass *(Muhlenbergia rigens)* is a clump-forming grass. It adds structure and spiky majesty to your garden. This grass clump can grow to four to five feet tall and can get up to four feet wide. Its inflorescences (flowers) can be up to six feet tall. The genus name of this grass, *Muhlenbergia*, gives credit to Gotthilf Henry Ernest Muhlenberg who was an amateur botanist. *Rigens*, the specific epithet for deer grass, denotes its rigidity. Deer grass is a confusing common name. It is not used as food by deer, but they do like to lie on the mounds and will hide their fawns among its tall leaf blades. Learn more here.

A much smaller grass, at only 12-15" tall, eyelash grass *(Bouteloua gracilis)* has wavy eyelash-shaped seed heads at the top of its curving stems. They look like little waving flags in the garden. The genus of this plant is also based on the plant's discoverers. It honors two Spanish brothers, Claudius Boutelou, a professor of botany, and his brother Esteban, who was a professor of agriculture. The specific epithet, *gracilis*, is from Latin denoting graceful or slender. Read more about eyelash grass here.

Both of these grasses benefit from groupings of multiple plants to extend their impact. Why not see if you have room in your garden for one or two or even more of these two grasses?

Photos at left by Tece Markel. Top: Eyelash grass (Bouteloua gracilis); Bottom: Deer grass (Muhlenbergia rigens).

Ground Broken for Demonstration Garden in Placer County

By Donna Olson, UC Master Gardener of Placer County

After two years of planning and waiting, the UC Master Gardeners of Placer County are happy to announce they have broken ground on a new garden officially called the UC Master Gardeners of Placer County Demonstration Garden at the Loomis Library and Community Learning Center. The garden will be open to the public as a place of education, relaxation and inspiration for all.

The groundbreaking took place on September 19 and was attended by many representatives of the town of Loomis, the PCWA, and people from the local community. The very next day infrastructure work began and we are happy to report that sod has been removed to make way for flower and vegetable beds, an orchard, and a composting area. ADA compliant paths have been laid down, and planting areas have been laid out. Master Gardeners have begun installing plants in the hope of having a beautiful garden for you to visit in the spring. As the late actress Audrey Hepburn once said, "To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow."

If you would like to help us in our fundraising efforts, please consider making a donation online to the UCCE Placer County Master Gardener Fund. Alternatively, you can participate in the Buy-A-Brick fundraising drive sponsored by The Friends of the Loomis Library. You can purchase a personalized commemorative brick that will be installed around a fountain near the entrance to the garden. "By purchasing a brick, you can be a part of a new exciting demo garden, with a brick displaying your gift to both the Loomis Library and Learning Center and the University of California Master Gardeners of Placer County," said Jenny Knisley, Friends of the Loomis Library President.

Apis mellifera: Things You Might Not Know About Honey Bees

By Linda Menge, UC Master Gardener of Nevada County

Honeybees are a species in the order Hymenoptera, like wasps and ants. Honeybees, *Apis mellifera*, (*Apis* from Greek meaning "swarm", and *mellifera* from Latin meaning "honey bearing"), aren't the only pollinators, but they are the only insects that make food that humans eat.

Although it is a fallacy to say if we lost honeybees, we wouldn't have any food, *Apis mellifera* is the most frequent pollinator for crops worldwide. So, would we die if we lost the honeybee population? Maybe not, but the world wouldn't be as sweet as it is!

Adult honey bee.
Photo Credit: Jack Kelly Clark

Worker bee takes flight.
Photo Credit: Linda Menge

There are three different kinds of bees in a hive. The most prominent is the worker bee. The worker bees are all female. They are the ones with the stingers and will sting if they feel threatened. When the workers are young, they are called nurse bees. The nurse bees take care of the combs, keeping them clean for the queen to lay her eggs. They feed the larva and the queen special foods (which they make with secretions from their bodies), drag the dead bees out of the hive, and transition to guard bees which guard the hive from predators until they are ready to forage.

The foragers, or worker bees, are the ones that go out and pollinate plants and bring the nectar back to the hive. They magically turn the nectar into honey using their mouths, honey stomachs, and wings to evaporate the water out of the nectar; make the combs to store the honey and eggs; are the special attendants to the queen; and drive out the drones in the winter. They live about 45 days while foraging, fly up to seven miles from the hive at 15 miles per hour, beat their wings 750,000 times per hour, visit over 100 flowers each trip out, and produce about 1/12th of a TEASPOON of honey in their LIFETIME!

The drone bees are the only male bees in the colony. They do not have fathers because they are from eggs that have not been fertilized. Their main job is to mate with the queen. Their secondary job is to help keep the hive temperature at an even 94-96 degrees, using their wings and great body mass. They do not have stingers. They do not help with the work of foraging or keeping the hive clean or building comb. The only time the drones fly out of the hive is when they mate with the queen in the springtime.

When the time is right for the mating flight, the drones fly out of the hive, and when the queen feels the time is right, she flies out and joins them. About 15 drones mate with her in the air flying at 22 miles an hour. The process pulls the drones' genitalia out of their bodies, and they fall, lifeless to the ground. The rest of the drones return to the hive, get fed by the nurse bees, and live about 45 days. In winter they are kicked out of the hive and die from starvation or cold.

The Queen, AH! The Queen! The queen rules the hive. She starts off as a worker larva that is fed royal jelly, not pollen and honey, and that special food makes her a queen. Royal jelly is made by nurse bees who are five to fourteen days old. They make the jelly from a glandular substance from their head, and salivary glands. The queen hatches from her egg in 15 days. Her pheromones direct the hive. If she leaves the hive either by death or swarming, the hive knows it within 15 minutes, and they start making a new queen. The queen's sole job is laying eggs. After mating, she lays about 2000 eggs each day for three years. She holds the sperm in her body for those three years, determining if she is laying drone eggs or worker eggs by the undulation of her abdominal muscles. She has a stinger, but only leaves the hive once or twice in her lifetime to mate or move to a new hive. She is the only bee who poops in the hive. The attendants keep her clean, bathe and feed her, and see to her every need.

The honey bee hive is a successfully organized honey making body that is very important to our world food production and our gardens!

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UC Master Gardeners of Placer and Nevada Counties Workshop and Events Calendar

Always check our websites for the most up to date event information.

Nevada County: ncmg.ucanr.org Placer County: pcmg.ucanr.edu

Follow Us on Facebook:
Placer County https://www.facebook.com/PlacerCountyMasterGardeners
Nevada County https://www.facebook.com/UCCEmastergardeners.nevadacounty/

December

Happy Holidays!

We're taking a break in December, but you can watch recordings of past workshops

Master Gardeners of Nevada County here

Master Gardeners of Placer County here

January

January 13
10:30 am to 11:30 am
Seed Saving Flowers & Vegetables
Loomis Library, 6050 Library Drive, Loomis. Details here.

January 20
10:00 am to 11:30 am
Designing Water-wise Gardens
Roseville Utility Exploration Center, 1501 Pleasant Grove Blvd., Roseville
Please pre-register in advance by clicking here.

February

February 10
10:00 am to 11:30 am
Sweet, Nutritious & Wildly Popular —Grow Your Own Blueberries
Loomis Library, 6050 Library Drive, Loomis. Details here.

February 17
10:00 am to 11:30 am
Compost & Mulch
Roseville Utility Exploration Center, 1501 Pleasant Grove Blvd., Roseville
Please pre-register in advance by clicking here.

March

March 9
10:00 am to 11:30 am
Straw Bale Gardening
Loomis Library, 6050 Library Drive, Loomis. Details here.

March 16
10:00 am to 11:30 am
Tomato Mastery: The Art and Science of Growing Delicious Tomatoes
Roseville Utility Exploration Center, 1501 Pleasant Grove Blvd., Roseville
Pre-register in advance here.

Nevada County Master Gardeners and Friends Talk Radio:

Listen live on Saturdays from 10:00 am until noon

at KNCO 830AM

Or, live stream at http://www.knco.com

Call in to ask your home gardening questions:
(530) 477-KNCO (477-5626)

On dates Master Gardeners are not available for a live broadcast, past shows will be played from previously recorded podcasts (if this is the case, the call-in feature is not available).

Miss the show? Download a podcast!

- Go to the KNCO website
- Click on the Podcast tab
- Scroll down to find the previous Saturday's date
- Look for "Master Gardeners—The First Hour" and "Master Gardeners—The Second Hour"

Follow Us on Facebook

Ask home gardening questions, read gardening tips, and find out when our events resume.

Placer County
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Read Past Issues of *The Curious Gardener*

Ten years of past issues can be accessed at http://pcmg.ucanr.org/Curious_Gardener_Newsletter/?newsList=3648

About UC Master Gardeners

Our mission as University of California Master Gardener volunteers is to extend research-based gardening and composting information to the public through various educational outreach methods. We strive to present accurate, impartial information to local gardeners so they have the knowledge to make informed gardening decisions in regard to plant choices, soil fertility, pest management, irrigation practices, and more.

The Master Gardener volunteer program was started in the early 1970s at Washington State University. Farm Advisors became overwhelmed by all the incoming calls from home gardeners and homesteaders so they trained volunteers to answer these questions and the "Master Gardener Program" was born. The first University of California Master Gardener programs began in 1980 in Sacramento and Riverside counties. The UC Master Gardener of Nevada and Placer Counties Programs began soon thereafter in 1983.

Serving Placer and Nevada Counties for Over 40 Years

Production Information

The Curious Gardener is published quarterly by the University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners of Placer and Nevada Counties. All information presented pertains to the climate and growing conditions of Nevada and Placer Counties in California.

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UC Master Gardeners of Placer County

Have a Gardening Question?

Contact Us!

Placer County Residents

530.889.7388

or contact us through our website or Facebook

Nevada County Residents

530-273-0919

or contact us through our website or Facebook

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