

FOUR LESSONS I'VE LEARNED FROM MORE THAN 50 YEARS OF GARDENING

By Maritta Perry Grau, Frederick County Master Gardener, November, 2024

Even after 50-plus years of gardening, I'm still learning. Here are just four lessons I've learned the hard way: watch out for invasives; leave some fall debris for overwintering wildlife; label harvested seeds and roots; and don't be afraid or too embarrassed to ask for advice.

1. I've learned to watch out for invasives

Several years ago, I fell in love with Russian sage (*Perovskia atriplicifolia*). I loved its tall, slender stalks of grayish-white with small, lavender-colored, tubular flowers; I loved the minty smell; I loved that it was a perennial; that it grew easily and didn't need much care. Well, like the bad boy in school, good looks aren't always the best choice: as for the sage, wind blows its many tiny seeds everywhere, and its underground runners soon take over the garden.

2. I've learned to minimize the fall clean-up in garden beds

A lot of gardening magazines, websites, and master gardeners advocate not making a clean sweep of every leaf and dead plant in the garden, but rather removing just diseased material, keeping most leaves, dead flowers, and other plants in place until late spring. I've learned that this practice has many advantages, not the least of which is less work for the gardener on those cold days of fall and deep winter! But most importantly, leaving much of the garden debris provides shelter and food for birds, insects, and other small wildlife. Many solitary bees and some other insects like to lay their eggs in the broken, hollow stems of some plants, so much so that some gardeners even hang in their gardens bee houses made of bundles of hollow tubes. And of course, providing shelter for insects helps you have more pollinators for next year's flowers and vegetables.

3. I've learned to label, label, label seeds and roots

In my early days of gardening (in Annapolis), I was surprised and delighted to see that marigolds had apparently reseeded themselves and were coming up in quite a few places. It wasn't until they began to bloom that I realized my "marigolds" were, in fact, common groundsel, *Senecio vulgaris*. Talk about being red-faced!

You'd think I would have learned from that mistake and would have made sure to recognize or at least confirm through pictures the names of any seeds or roots I was saving. But oh, no! Last fall, I gathered seeds from zinnias, marigolds (I do at least recognize marigold seedlings now!), feathery coxcomb, and other annuals; and dug up my elephant ears and canna lilies. I dried lots of seedheads on paper towels, then placed the gathered seeds in paper envelopes, species and colors carefully labeled. I didn't bother to label the roots, sure that I would remember which was which.

Needless to say, when planting this past spring, while I guessed correctly for some of the roots, for others I did not. So in the next few days I will dig up several elephant ears from back-of-the-border misplacement and a couple of canna lilies that mistakenly ended up in small pots. And by golly, I'll make sure that this time I put the roots in labeled paper bags!

4. I've learned to ask someone more experienced for advice

One of the first things we learn as master gardener interns, when we don't know the answer, is to say, "I'll find out whom to ask." When stumped, I often put out a plea to my fellow Frederick County master gardeners—with more than 120 members, someone almost always knows the answer. I've also learned to look for -edu and -org sites to find answers.

You can learn more about gardening, too: Check the UM Extension Frederick County Master Gardener website for upcoming seminars, Master Gardener certification classes, or other announcements; and the University of Maryland Extension for answers to your gardening questions or call us at 301-600-1596

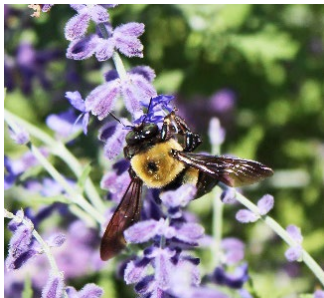
Master Gardeners' web site: bit.ly/FCMG-Home-Gardening

Facebook, <https://bit.ly/FCMGFacebook>

Instagram: <https://bit.ly/FCMGinstagram>

University of Maryland Extension Home and Garden Information Center for gardening information and advice: bit.ly/UME-HGIC

Frederick County Master Gardeners Publications: <http://extension.umd.edu/locations/frederick-county/home-gardening>.



Bee on Russian Sage

From late spring to late fall, Russian sage attracts many species of bees and other insects. (Photo by the author)

Russian Sage tubular flowers

Russian sage can be somewhat invasive, spreading quickly by underground runners. However, its 3-4-foot tall thicket of stems loaded with small tubular flowers feeds many insects, even into winter. (Photo by the author)





Groundsel

Groundsel is a weedy herbal annual that spreads quickly in the garden and usually grows less than a foot tall. (Photo by the author)

Groundsel Vs Marigold

A novice gardener may occasionally mistake early-growth groundsel for marigold. On the left is groundsel; dwarf French marigold on right. Note that groundsel leaves are not nearly as finely serrated as are the edges of marigold leaves. Also, marigold leaves grow in opposite pairs on thin stems that are also paired offshoots from the main stem, while groundsel leaves are mainly alternating outgrowths from the stems. (Photo by the author)



PVC-bambootubes4bees

Create your own bee house: Fill a length of PVC pipe with hollow bamboo tubes and hang it near or in a pollinator garden or other area where you want to attract bees. In this picture, you will note that most of the bamboo tubes are sealed at the end—solitary bees have laid their eggs in the tube and sealed it off with mud. When the new bees hatch, they will break through the mud to begin searching for pollen. (Photo courtesy of Frederick County Master Gardeners)

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