

Nursery owner channels Johnny Appleseed to keep plant-soil link going, reduce need to mulch

By Staff Reports

Friday, September 21, 2007

"If we throw Mother Nature out the window, she comes back in the door with a pitchfork."

That's wisdom from Masanobu Fukuoka, a Japanese soil scientist who was a pioneer in natural and no-till farming concepts.

After reading his book, "The One-Straw Revolution," nursery owner Diane Meucci decided to adopt several of his ideas in her own ornamental gardens.

"He said we should never let the soil go fallow," said Meucci, founder of Gardens Oy Vey in Arlington. "The soil seems to like always being connected to plants."

Just as many organic farmers and vegetable gardeners regularly sow fall and winter cover crops to replenish the soil and hold it in place, Meucci has been using a similar technique in her flower and shrub beds.

It greatly reduces the need to spread mulch in her expansive garden.

"Instead of schlepping enough mulch for 5 acres, it's easier to carry 20 pounds of seeds," she said. "And you get the magic and pleasure of being a Johnny Appleseed."

It's cheaper, too.

Around Nov. 1, she will be sowing cornflowers, Johnny-Jump-Ups, oxeyed daisies, rocket larkspur, tickseed and Mexican Hat between her perennials and shrubs. These will emerge in the spring.

Gardeners can also sow edibles now, such as turnip, mustard, collard greens and kale.

If your beds are relatively free of weeds and the soil is loose, you can sow directly on top of the soil with no further preparation. You can sprinkle a fine layer of topsoil over

the seeds, taking care not to bury them.

If you have lots of weeds, you will need to mow them or pull them and cultivate the soil a little before you sow. Deep cultivation isn't recommended because it brings weed seeds to the soil surface, where they can germinate.

Sow seeds when daytime temperatures are below 85 degrees consistently.

The very best time to sow is right after a rain and right before another shower. Given the current drought, that will be difficult. But you can water the soil surface before planting and then sprinkle it again the next day. Don't flood the beds with water or you will wash away the seeds.

Meucci orders seeds in bulk from Wild Seed Farms at (800) 848-0078 or wildseedfarms.com.

"Be sure to hold some seeds back because God is fickle," she said. If the first sowing doesn't germinate or only partially germinates, you will need to sow some more.

Meucci estimates it takes from 30 minutes to two hours to sow seeds in her large garden. Gardeners will spend about the same amount of time in the spring, pulling out the plants after they bloom.

"You can even sow seeds into your lawns," she said. "They will be up and done before the first mowing."

Fukuoka would recommend laying the old flower stalks on top of the soil as a straw mulch that will decompose and enrich it. Most of us won't do that in our ornamental beds.

"If you sow some of the short cover crops in with tall perennials, such as daylilies, you don't even have to pull them out in the spring. The daylilies will cover them."

Instead of buying flats of pansies for winter color, Meucci is sowing seeds for *Viola cornuta*, the Johnny Jump-Up she calls "the mother of all pansies."

Violas prefer partial shade to full sun. Seed-sown violas will not bloom until early spring.

Before throwing out seeds willy-nilly you need to think about size, color and texture, just as you do when you are installing plants.

"The more you think, the less you have to work," Meucci said. She's also sowing California poppies and Red Russian kale in the prominent beds that line the driveway into the nursery.

She chose the combination because the purple-blue foliage of the kale will contrast

with the orange-yellow poppies and the purple and yellow Johnny Jump-Ups.

You can learn more about how and when to plant ornamental cover crops at Meucci's Web site, gardensoyvey.com. Click on "search this site" and then "articles and information." Look for a heading called "Cover Crops."

Chris Cosby, greenhouse manager at the Memphis Botanic Garden, has taken Meucci's ideas and seeds sown in flats are being sold on Wednesday afternoons at the Farmer's Market at the garden and will also be available at the Fall Plant Sale Oct. 5-6.

Small wonders

If you give Paul Little an inch of soil space, he won't let it stay bare. He's sure to plant it with sedums, sempervivums or a carpet of native moss, the plants he grows at his wholesale nursery, Little Hill Nursery.

That's exactly what he's doing on some birdhouses he had custom-made by Max Goodrum of McKenzie, Tenn.

Goodrum made the birdhouses with gently sloping roofs edged by a 1-inch lip to hold soil. Little is making miniature roof gardens on them.

"I don't know if the birdhouses are functional," he said. "but you might have some birds who decide to nest in the roof."

He is selling the houses at the Wednesday afternoon Farmers Market and the fall plant sale, both at the Memphis Botanic Garden. They are \$35.

Horticulture at the fair

Don't forget to visit or enter the horticulture exhibits at this year's Mid-South Fair, which starts today and continues through Sept. 30. Admission is \$5; children 6 and under are admitted free.

You can take your entries to the horticulture building between 7:30 and 9:30 a.m. Sunday, and 7:30 a.m. and 9:30 a.m. Thursday for judging. See the competition categories and judging criteria at midsouthfair.org.

The horticulture building, which will be open from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. during the run of the fair, features examples of flowers, shrubs, vegetables and creative arrangements from home gardens all over the region.

Plan on lingering long enough to take in a program or two presented by area gardeners, many of them master gardeners.

Today: 10 a.m., plant propagation with Shelda Herring; 11 a.m., carnivorous plants

with Kitty Jungkind; 3 p.m., hostas with Reid Bowman; 6 p.m., herbal harvest with Laurie Williams.

Saturday: 10 a.m., winterizing your garden with Shelda Herring; 1 to 4 p.m., bonsai with Darryl Bailey.

Sunday: 10 a.m., wildflowers with Marilyn Ahr; 10:30 a.m., wildflowers with Martine Madlinger; 1:30 p.m., irises with Brad Miller; 4 p.m., Jerusalem artichokes with Katy Terrell, and 4:30 p.m., aloe vera and its uses with Matthew Ishee.

Wednesday: 10 a.m., sustainable gardening with Carl Wayne Hardeman; 11 a.m., how to get free plants with Susan Thompson; noon, cheap and easy vegetable gardening with Carl Wayne Hardeman; 1 p.m., daylilies with Libby Varner; 1:30 p.m., daylilies with Gwen Jones; 2:30 p.m., seedballs and seed greeting cards with Susan Thompson.

Thursday: 10:30 a.m., violets with Marian Zoller; 11 a.m., living wreaths with Paul Little; 3 p.m., hostas with Punk Davidson; 3:30 p.m., hydrangeas with June Davidson.

Saturday Sept. 29: 1 p.m., cacti with Don Klotwog.

Questions or comments? Contact Christine Arpe Gang at chrisagang@hotmail.com or call Home & Garden editor Peggy Reisser Winburne at 529-2372.



© 2007 Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers