March 2014 Newsletter

From the Director...

2014 is the "Year of Cucurbits" for the Grow It Eat It program. This family includes squashes, cucumbers, melons, and gourds. Learn tips on how to grow and use these crops on the GIEI website and blog. The website also lists Grow It Eat It classes and information on Maryland’s community gardens.

Vegetable gardeners should have their soil tested for lead. The University of Delaware lab now routinely tests for lead in their basic soil test. Click here for a list of regional soil test labs for home gardeners.

Check out UME’s new Stormwater Management and Restoration Tracker (SMART) tool. The SMART tool tracks 20 different best management practices (BMPs) that property owners can implement to reduce stormwater run-off and create a healthier landscape. Enter your practices and a SMART Team member will contact you to arrange a site visit to SMART Certify your practice. SMART Certification is currently being piloted in Howard Co., St. Mary's Co., and Talbot Co. Individuals outside of those counties can also enter their BMPs into the SMART tool but they will not be SMART certified until after June 2014.

We love to identify weird bugs like this one sent in by Beth Mathie. She’s had it on her phone since last summer hoping someone could ID it for her. It was feeding on her lemon verbena, basil, and blueberry plants (not a picky eater). It was identified by our entomologist as white-marked tussock moth, a native. Send us photos of your weird bugs this year for a positive ID.

- Jon Traunfeld
HGIC Center Director

Grow100 Challenge: What Can YOU Grow in 100 Square Feet?

If winter has you down, sign up for GROW100, Grow It Eat It’s vegetable gardening
Sweet box
This groundcover shrub is prized for its impeccable good looks and restraint but it also provides a little surprise.

Bulb fennel
Eaten raw in salads, roasted until caramelized, steamed, or stir-fried, it adds a slight licorice flavor to dishes.

I'm Lichen It! - Peak Season for Lichen Peeping
By Sara Tangren

Dormant oil sprays are very effective at reducing populations of some tree fruit pests, including scales, spider mites, and aphids. Read more

Several species of insects are waking up from their winter dormancy. No chemical controls are recommended. They are harmless and can be swept up or vacuumed. Read more

Vegetables

Grow It Eat It classes are offered in most counties and taught by Master Gardeners. You can take classes in any county, regardless of the county you live in. Take a class and get growing!

New to growing your own? The Basics will help you Start a Vegetable Garden in 5 Steps. The bottom of our vegetable page has a suggested list of vegetables for the first-time grower.

Don’t have room to plant in the ground? Container Gardening is for you! 20 Recommended Crops for Container Gardens publication can take out some of the guess work. Watch the video below for a great introduction!

Click here to find out more and sign up!
The wet, gray days at the end of winter seem like they may never end. But this is actually the perfect time of year to get out and appreciate those mysterious ‘plants’ encrusting everything from sidewalks to treetops – the lichens.

There is a lot to be said for simply enjoying the natural beauty of lichens without trying to label them. However, lichens are easier to identify, at least to the family level, than you might think.

Read on for more about Lichens and a cool timelapse video of lichens reacting to water on a log

Common or interesting questions from last month. Ask your own question online here or call:
800-342-2507 in Maryland
410-531-1757 outside Maryland.

Compiled by Debra Ricigliano

**Q** We would love to grow edible plants in our yard and were considering starting with blueberries. Are they easy to grow in our area? Would it be better to plant them in the ground or in containers and what kind of conditions do they prefer?

**A** Blueberries do produce well in Maryland. However, careful site selection and soil preparation are important before planting them. They can produce for many years and therefore planting in the ground is recommended. Select a site that is not in all day sunlight; full sun and then some late afternoon shade is ideal.

Blueberries have a fibrous root system but have few root hairs and they suffer in droughty conditions. So, also select a site with easy access to a water source. Drip irrigation works very well to keep them deeply watered. On average, plants require at least one inch of water per week. Berry production increases with cross-pollination of two different varieties. Therefore, it is recommended to plant more than one cultivar that are in bloom around the same time.

Take the time to test the soil before you plant. Blueberries require an acidic soil in the 4.3 - 5.3 range. If the pH is too high sometimes it is necessary to add sulfur or iron sulfate. Soil test results will help guide you with this. Prepare the soil by incorporating compost, leaf mold and peat moss. Blueberries do not like heavy, clay soil. Providing the proper conditions will ensure that your plants produce for many years to come.