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April 2012

The Bluebirds of Happiness

Bonnie Toy, Amador County Master Gardener



Many of us have western bluebirds visiting our yards and gardens, but did you know that in addition to being beautiful and entertaining, they also can help control insect pests?

Dr. Julie Jedlicka recently published a paper⁽¹⁾ describing a study to measure the effectiveness of using western bluebirds to control insect pests in northern California wine grape vineyards.

Bluebirds nest in natural oak cavities, and a nesting pair can rear two broods with four to six eggs per clutch in a good season.

They forage for all types of insects, including grasshoppers, caterpillars, beetles, ants and scale insects in order to feed their hungry broods. They typically perch on low vegetation and strike insects on the ground, in the air, or on the vegetation. They tend to forage fairly close to their nesting sites, especially early in the season. Even when foraging with fledglings late in the season, they were usually within about 50 yards of the nesting site.



Because many acres of natural habitat for the bird have been converted to agriculture, nesting sites have been greatly reduced. Dr. Jedlicka placed nest boxes in several organically farmed vineyards. Nest boxes were installed in half of the vineyards. Bluebirds occupied 76% of the nest boxes (most of the rest



were occupied by tree swallows or violet green swallows, who are also insectivorous), and by the end of the first breeding season, the number of bluebirds in the vineyards containing nest boxes was ten time greater than in the vineyards with no nest boxes.

To test the effectiveness of the birds at removing insect pests, beet armyworm larvae were placed on the ground in both the

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Master Gardeners

Advice to grow by ...

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vineyards containing nest boxes and those without. 2.4 times more larvae were removed from the nest box area than the control area.

As a result of this study, Spring Mountain Vineyard has installed nest boxes in order to control the blue-green sharpshooter, and has seen a 90% reduction in that pest.



Although there are no studies on the effectiveness of bluebirds at controlling insect pests in home gardens, our gardens are attractive to a number of insect species - among them tomato hornworms and cabbage loopers. If you live in a rural area, it might be helpful to put up a bluebird nest box or two in or near your garden. The North American Bluebird Society (NABS) (<http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org/>) has fact sheets (<http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org/bluebirdfacts.htm>) with useful information and plans (<http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org/eastwestbox.htm>) for bluebird boxes.

We have enjoyed watching our bluebird families grow up over the past few years, and now will be even more appreciative of them knowing that they may be helping out with insect control. Our nest box has been inhabited by both bluebirds and violet green swallows in different years. The NABS fact sheet tells us that bluebirds and swallows will nest within 10 feet or so of each other. This year I will put up a second nest box hoping to attract both of these species to our garden.

⁽¹⁾Jedlicka, Greenberg and Letourneau (2011) Avian Conservation Practices Strengthen Ecosystem Services in California Vineyards. PLoS ONE 6(11)

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Fire Season: Be Prepared

Fire season is just around the corner and now is the time to start taking a serious look at the defensible space on your property.

Each year leaves and needles accumulate both in the vegetation and on the ground. Mulch also dries out. This accumulated debris contributes to increased fuels for fire and because many fires start at ground level, removing debris now is a good place to start making your property more defensible against wildfires.

Here are some guidelines.

Within 10 feet of any structure:

- Eliminate all dead leaves and needles down to bare dirt from gutters and from on or under decks.
- Retain very limited, if any, vegetation close to vents, and windows.
- Retain only groundcover or small "fire wise" irrigated shrubs so there is no ladder fuel.



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Fire Season: Be Prepared, Continued from Page 2

- Trim tree branches and limbs at least 10 feet from structure, chimneys, and heat exhausts.



10 to 30 feet (or to property line)

- Remove flammable vegetation including brush, weeds, dry grass, needles and leaves.
- Remove or move shrubs and trees, retaining only occasional, well-maintained (i.e., limbed up at least 10 feet and continually monitored for dead or dying debris) and watered plants or plantings that will not contribute to the spread of fire to structures.



30 to 100 feet (or to property line)

- Trees should be spaced so there is at least 20 feet between crowns and limbed up at least 10 feet from the ground (higher if there is other ladder fuel below the tree or the property is on a slope), but no more than 1/3 the height of the tree.
- Shrubs should be widely separated, low growing, deciduous, and non-resinous. The recommended spacing between shrubs is at least two times the height of the shrub, increasing the distance if on a slope.

Finally dispose of all cut vegetation and debris in a safe and legal manner (such as chipping and composting) then enjoy the remainder of the winter and early spring knowing you are safer against wildfires.

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April In The Garden

Linda Hagye, Amador County Master Gardener



Warm days in early April might have you thinking that the cold and frost are behind us, but we can experience freezing temperatures into late April and early May. So plan for and be prepared for frost. Talking to a Master Gardener can help you come up with ways to protect your trees and plants from frost damage.

I have started my tomatoes and peppers inside for my raised boxes, but I always make sure I have enough room for more as I like to purchase quite a few from the Master Gardener Plant sale. That way my garden has a nice variety of tomatoes to enjoy over the summer.

I avoid planting anything in the garden until after the first of May so my plants are moved inside at night and kept under a fan on the days that they can't be

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outside. The air circulation strengthens them and prevents mold problems. The veggies and I are both glad when they get into the ground.

I plant my summer flowering bulbs like Lilies, Gladiolas and Dahlias in April. I wouldn't set out my Begonias or Canna until after the chance for frost has passed.

Our orchard is starting to take shape. We add a couple of trees each year. This year I have a space ready for one of the grafted apple trees the Master Gardeners usually sell at their plant sale.

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Just Beginning To Garden?

Kathy Keatley Garvey, UC Davis Communications Specialist



If this is your first year of gardening here is some quick advice to make it more enjoyable.

1. Stay small the first year and just plant a few vegetables. Learn the basics of planting, watering, fertilizing and harvest.
2. Water your plants religiously. All your efforts go to waste if the plants dry up and die from lack of water.
3. Fertilize your plants. All plants need some nutrients to grow.
4. Call the Master Gardeners with questions. We are here to solve problems in the garden and find answers to your questions.
5. Don't take it too seriously, just enjoy it.

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Fearsome Night Feeder

Have you ever seen this creature in your garden? At first glance it's kind of fearsome looking. It's big, has spiky feet and fierce body paint. It has large, heavy mouthparts. It can grow to 3" long.

Your first inclination may be to step on it. Resist the temptation because this is a Jerusalem Cricket; it is not harmful to humans, only to other insects and sometimes other Jerusalem Crickets. The males have much larger abdomens than the females, but that doesn't stop many of the females from eating their male after mating.



Jerusalem Crickets primarily feed on other insects. If you grow potatoes, you may occasionally find a Jerusalem Cricket feeding on your crop; they are also referred to as a potato bug. Other nicknames include "child of the earth", "skull head" and "old bald-headed man".

These fierce looking creatures live most of their lives in the ground, moving top side at night or in the early morning and evening. They are inactive during the fall and hide for protection. You may also find one while digging out a manure pile or other damp place.



Jerusalem crickets burrow in soil using their large, hard head and closed mandibles as a hoe to move dirt back and underneath them. They primarily dig in moist, light soils. The tracks they leave behind are unique, created by dragging their large abdomens.



If you find one, there's no need for a pesticide; just admire it for a moment, and if you need to move it, just scoop it up and put it out of the way. (If it's damaging your potatoes, then your chickens might enjoy the snack.)

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Amador County Master Gardeners Spring Expo and Plant Sale

The Amador County Master Gardeners' will host their annual Spring Expo and plant sale on Saturday, April 21st from 9:00 AM until noon. The plants have been grown by local Master Gardeners.

Here's what's available for you to purchase:

- Many varieties of tomatoes and other vegetables
- Favorite landscape perennials, shrubs and trees of the Master Gardeners
- UC gardening books
- Drip irrigation tubing



We'll also give mini demonstrations on how to design your own drip system. Master Gardeners will be available to answer your gardening questions or pest problems; please bring samples if possible. Get in line early for the best selection and availability of plants.

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!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Plant Sale !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Magic words to every home gardener—plant sale. And it is going to be a good one. The El Dorado County Master Gardeners have been working throughout the winter (if it can be called that) to propagate, transplant, nurture seedlings and do some special projects so we can offer you a bang up sale. Let’s see if 3 times is truly a charm for our 3rd annual spring plant sale. This spring, the sale is being held on April 28th, from 8-3. The location will be the parking lot at the Veterans Memorial Building.

One of the biggest sellers at our spring 2011 sale was heirloom tomatoes; so much so that we sold out by mid-morning. To avoid that this year, we have over 50 heirloom varieties to offer.



Tomatoes grown by MGs for the plant sale

Even if tomatoes are not on your shopping list, there will be many other items to pique your gardening interests. In the spring, we like to offer a broad array of annuals and vegetables, but they are by no means the only items we will have. We have been growing a wide selection of perennials, shrubs and trees. Additionally we will have a special booth just for plants that attract birds and butterflies and another booth that will feature native plants.



One of many plant sale propagation areas at an MG’s home

A slogan often seen these days is “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle”. As Master Gardeners, we support the efforts indicated, particularly in reusing and recycling. We will be featuring a wonderfully versatile shopping bag that busy Master Gardeners have made over the winter out of empty chicken and horse feed sacks. The sacks make great shopping bags; not only are they large enough to carry store purchases but they are also water proof so that plants can also be safely carried.



As if that isn’t enough, we will also show you how to “recycle” your kitchen and garden waste. Two of the presentations we are holding throughout the sale cover worm composting (perfect for kitchen waste) and general composting for all other green materials. Master Gardener/Master Composter Cindy Young will cover both of those topics.

Cindy will speak at 11 and again at noon. She will jointly cover general composting with MG Kate Halvorson and will be assisted with worm composting by MG Trainee Jeff Ellis. Other presentations are:

- 10:00 Tomato Growing Tips & Tricks - MG Zach Dowell
- 1:00 Growing Giant Pumpkins & other Vegetables - MG Albert Stevenson

We haven’t forgotten that Mother’s Day will only be a week away when the sale is held. We have a couple of items any mother would be happy to have: wire baskets with flowering plants and succulent bowls. Either of these would be a great gift for Mom.

Because the El Dorado County Home and Garden Show is on the same day, we have reserved the parking lot at the Veterans Memorial Building for plant sale shoppers only. If you plan on shopping and attending the H&G Show, we will not be able to handle the long-term parking. We will work with you, however, to get your plant show purchases to your vehicle.



SEE YOU ON THE 28TH!

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Public Education Classes & Events for Amador and El Dorado Counties – Free!!



Most classes are from 9 a.m. – Noon. Please call ahead to confirm locations.

Amador County

Unless otherwise noted, location for all Amador classes: GSA Building, 12200-B Airport Road, Jackson.

April

14: Color in the Garden, Annuals, Perennials, Cut Flowers, and Bulbs

Join Amador County Master Gardeners to learn how to create a colorful landscape around your home. Find out how to plant hanging baskets and window boxes and keep them lush and vibrant throughout the seasons. See what kinds of colorful perennials are available right now from nurseries. Learn about which bulbs grow happily in our foothill setting. Keep your garden alive with color from the last of winter to the first frost of fall with these magical storehouses of easy-care perennials. Lastly, come learn about the best annuals and perennials to grow for cutting. See how to stake plants and how to get larger flowers.

One thing Master Gardener Jackie Tarchala just loves is to have flowers to cut and arrange for her house. She will teach the cut flower segment of the class and has obtained plugs of special cut flower varieties available for purchase. These varieties are hybridized to be taller and sturdier than their garden relatives so they will work well in bouquets. They are varieties you can't usually find in nurseries and will be reasonably priced.

The varieties available are Asclepia 'Cinderella', Campanula 'Champion Blue', Gypsophilla 'Snow White Double', Helenium 'Helena Mixed', Craspedia 'Drumstick' and Delphinium 'Summer Nights'. Most of these selections will be hardy throughout our counties.

21: Spring Expo and Plant Sale

In addition to providing a wide variety of plants that grow well throughout many parts of Amador County, Master Gardeners will be available to answer your gardening questions or pest problems; please bring samples if possible. Get in line early for the best selection and availability of plants.

El Dorado County

Unless otherwise noted, location for all El Dorado classes: Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Drive, Placerville. Questions? Call 503-621-5543.

April

14: Irrigation

With summer coming soon it is very important to preserve our water resources while protecting the investments in our plants and landscaping. Join Master Gardeners Debbie Hillel and Bob Sherwood as they discuss the basics of home sprinkler and drip irrigation systems. Learn how to provide your plants with the water they need and reduce your water bill.

21: Trees & Shrubs

Join Master Gardener Steve Savage as he shares his extensive knowledge about the various trees and shrubs that are well-adapted to El Dorado County's climate. His presentation will focus on the integration of these plants into a pleasing and balanced landscape design, as well as planting techniques and ongoing maintenance.

28: Spring Plant Sale 8 a.m.– 3 p.m.

The Master Gardeners again bring you a wide assortment of perennials, annuals, herbs, and summer vegetables. Join them as they provide information about the plants, put on demonstrations for you, and have a few special offers for all gardeners.

Check out the El Dorado Master Gardener Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/El-Dorado-County-Master-Gardeners/164653119129>.



Need some help knowing when to plant your favorites? Your county Master Gardeners office has a great form called the Foothill Vegetable Planting Guide that breaks down the planting times for your elevation. A great planning tool, laminated and only \$5.00.



2012 Master Food Preserver Class Schedule is Posted!

Mark your calendars for July 7 when the El Dorado County Master Food Preservers kick off their free public classes for 2012. Plan now to learn how to safely preserve your garden's bounty for your family and enjoy the produce all year.

The Master Food Preservers are repeating several very popular classes from last year: Basic Cheese Making, Meat Preserving—Deli Meats, and Low Sugar. Of course they still offer a wide variety of core classes to help you preserve the bounty from your garden or your local farmers' market!


Download the full schedule from our website at <http://ucanr.org/edmfpclasses>. Here's the full list of class topics:



- Food Safety & Basic Water Bath Canning
- Jams and Jellies
- Christmas in July: -Gifts From The Kitchen
- Pickles, Relishes & Sauerkraut
- Tomatoes, Basic & Fancy
- Pressure Canning
- Dehydrating & Freezing
- Low Sugar
- Cheese Making
- Meat Preserving - Deli Meats
- Vinegars, Condiments & Chutneys
- Conserves, Butters & Marmalade
- Apples, Pears & More
- Cranberries, Winter Squash & Turkey
- Olives
- Persimmons, Kiwi & Nuts *

Pest Notes

Free Pest Notes are available on a variety of topics. For more information, call or email your local Master Gardener office.



To explore the Pest Notes on the UC Integrated Pest Management (IPM) website, go to <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu>.

Get Answers to Your Gardening Questions Online

http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.org/Master_Gardeners

- Information about Master Gardeners and even how to become one
- List of public classes
- Calendar of Master Gardener events
- Useful links to gardening websites
- Home gardening publications

Got a specific question? Just email us!
 Amador: mgamador@ucdavis.edu
 El Dorado: mgeldorado@ucdavis.edu

Amador & El Dorado Counties Master Gardener Newsletter
 Editor: Linda Hagye
 Layout Editor: Kim Cohen

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