

What's Coming Up:

Janet Macunovich and Steven Nikkila answer your growing concerns
Issue 93, May 15, 2010

In this issue:

Fine, shrub-free design at foundation, pp. 2 - 4
Keeping pots watered if you're away, pp. 4 - 6
Potting mix vs. soil: mix is a knock-out, pg. 6
Tree planting flashback, page 7
Buy annuals for no-clip roots, page 7
Cutting over-eager spring bloomers, page 7
Mulch enough to do weeds in, pages 7 - 8
Aim fertilizer where leaves are pale, page 8
Why to memorize frost damage, pages 8 - 9
Spring leaves that rival fall's color, page 10
Warm soil, strong transplant, page 10
Filling pots? No peanuts! Page 10

Who are Janet and Steven?

How do I contact them? Page 11
See Janet & Steven in-person, pages 12 - 13
Invite us to your town, page 12
Pretty pictures for your walls, page 13
Books, magazines and CDs, pages 14 - 15

Below: One teaspoon of polymers absorbs enough water that they expand to fill this strainer, and then hold that water against gravity's pull. More about polymers and why we like to package water this way for potted plants, on pages 5 & 6.



When the well's dry we know the worth of Water.

- Benjamin Franklin, in *Poor Richard's Almanack* -

Broader options for narrow space along a walk

Hey Steven and Janet,

Went to your landscape seminars. You convinced me to yank out overgrown shrubs in front of my house. I was shocked at first and things looked bare but I sure like the light inside



and after two weeks I'm thinking the outside looks better, overall.

Now I wonder what to do with all this empty planting space. What do you suggest I plant there, **between the walkway and the wall of my house**? It's sunny all day. I have a whole pile of loose compost-soil mix to dig into that area so I think it'll be good growing. I'm game for anything. - Tony -

Seen from straight-on, a narrow bed between walkway and the front wall may be nearly invisible. Can you pick it out in the top picture? Look again from another angle (and earlier in the year) in the bottom photo. Most of the height that draws your eye, including the ornamental grass and sedum 'Autumn Joy' comes from plants set well outside that walk -- no need to crowd them into that tiny wall-side bed.

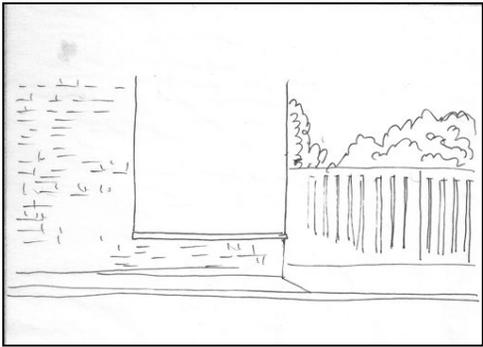


Most such beds are **too small to accommodate significant landscape elements**, Tony. That should not come as a surprise since those spaces are outlined by builders rather than designers. In addition, such beds may **offer very poor growing conditions**, given that the wall and overhanging eaves block rain, while also reflecting and/or radiating heat.

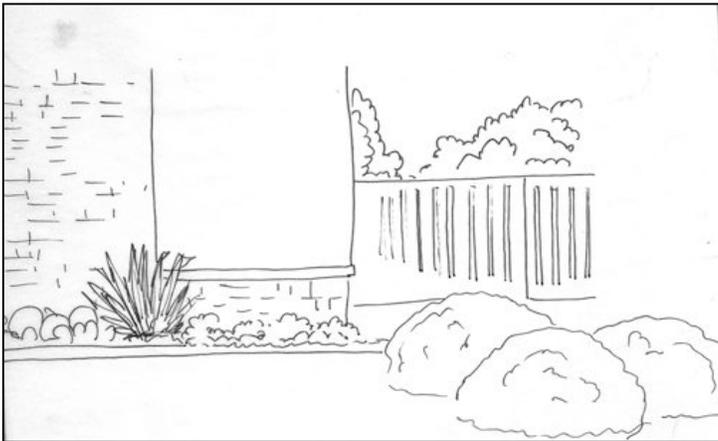
A minimalist approach is best. Steer clear of shrubs up against the wall in a traditional "foundation planting" pattern.

Even a dwarf shrub is sure to grow too large despite continual pruning. **Plant small and low**, perhaps a groundcover punctuated by sculpture, planters or boulders, or two or three kinds of year-round interest perennials in clusters.

If you feel the need for height, don't think you have to plant tall things within that old foundation bed. Play around with placing things so that they appear "in front of" that foundation but are planted in areas you create outside the walkway, even out in the lawn.



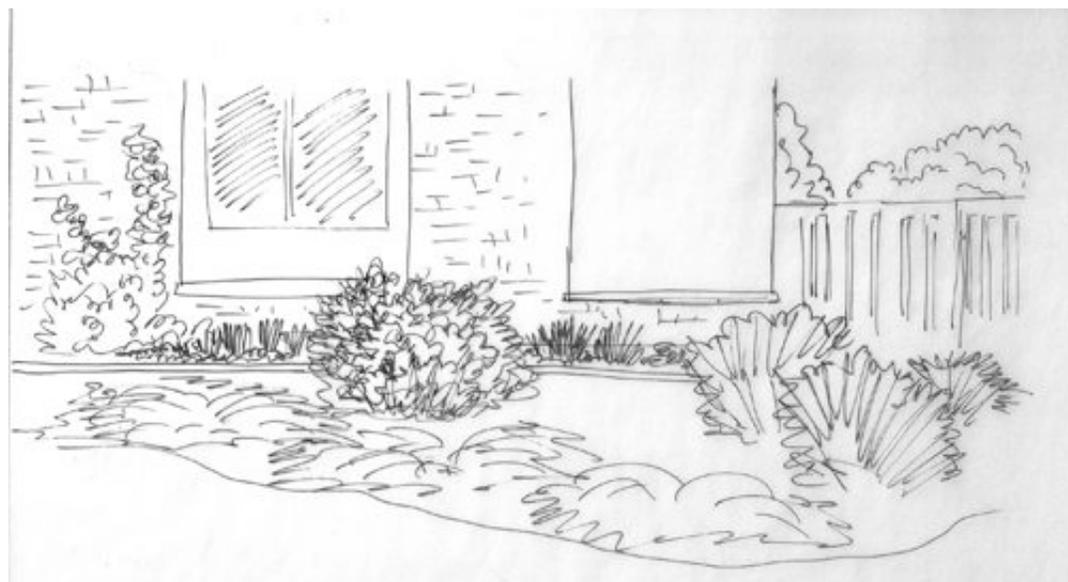
Imagine it: Put a stake in the ground where you think you need something. Then, go look at it from wherever your main viewer will be. You might pretend to be someone approaching from a parking area, or a passerby looking toward the house from the foot of your driveway or walk. Observe the stake and change its height and position to suit your fancy. Add others until you've plotted several points of interest to draw a visual path to the door or an entry court.



Once your work with stakes establishes the finished height and placement of what you need in front of the house, go put your garden center staff to the test. Say, "I'm looking for something that will look good with brown brick as its background, that will never be more than 3 feet tall and 4 feet wide. I like gold and blue." Better yet, go to a botanical garden and look for things that seem to be the right size and which appeal to you. Take names from the recommending staffer or from plant labels, then check a plant's worth and fit by looking it up at a library or on line.

Above: Consider that same foundation planting shown in the photos on page 2. Once you've stripped it to its bare essentials, think about planting only groundcover in the wall-base bed, and achieving needed height by placing loftier elements in a bed outside the walkway. The groundcovers in the space between wall and walk might be *Bergenia* (left side) and *Sedum kamschaticum*, and the singular tall item a variegated yucca, to create a mix of yellow, green and bronze foliage. Outside the walk, the dumplings might be 'Gold Mound' *Spiraea*.

When I plan a landscape, I doodle as you see below, not worrying about what the plants are so much as what height, width and shapes seem to be called for. Later, I might



decide that can be a grassy, evergreen *Carex* and dwarf lady's mantle (*Alchemilla alpina*) filling the area from under the garage window to the end of the walk, and a *Euonymus fortunei* 'Gold Spot' on the wall for height. Outside the walkway, it can be a single boxwood framed by rug juniper with several dwarf *Weigela* at the far right..

There are plenty of attractive low perennials and groundcovers to fit this bill, including the evergreen pinks (*Dianthus gratianopolitanus*) and catmint on the left of this public walkway, plus sedum and more pinks on the right. A mix of plants with varied foliage color and texture plus a few strategically-placed high points, can lead the eye pleasantly. Interrupting low plants with high points makes the eye skip from one to the next.



...between the door of your car and the door of the house... is where garden magic first comes into play.

William H. Frederick, Jr., in *The Exuberant Garden*

Dry holiday for potted flowers at summer cottage

Hi Janet,

I add pots of annuals to my garden at my cottage in West Michigan. I am trying to find the best solution to keep my pots watered during the week days when I'm not there. Can you give any advice on self watering pots, self watering conversion kits, water sponges, etc. Do they work? What is the best thing to do? Thanks. – C.H. –

The **best absentee watering system is a trickle line from an automatic irrigation system**. If that can't be arranged, we give plants a water reservoir -- even if it's only an upended bottle of water pushed neck-deep into the potting mix to ooze out over a day or two.

As with **self-watering containers** that have a water compartment below the soil mix, the limitation is the size of the reservoir. On their own, the pots-with-reservoir we've seen for sale (search for "self-watering pots" on the Internet or in catalog indexes) hold water equal to about one thorough watering. That is **not enough to keep a plant from wilting during a hot week** in summer. In addition, the presence of the reservoir within the pot effectively reduces the space the plants' roots can occupy. Since a smaller rootball dries out more quickly than a large one, it might compound the watering problem.

A week during the growing season is a long time without water. It's true for plants in the ground, where evaporation at the surface may be draw up water from great depths through well-drained soil. For plants in pots, out of contact with groundwater, a week without help can be a death sentence even for the most drought tolerant succulents.

Plants that must be revived from near death every time we greet them are not our idea of fun.



A really **large, external reservoir is the better answer**, if bulkier. We've imagined but not tried a five gallon bucket of water fitted with tubing as for an intravenous drip or a pet hamster's water bottle and set at a level above the pot. We'd push the free end of the tube into the pot and let it drip. We've used a reservoir below the pot, with a wick between it and the potting mix to draw the moisture up. (See illustration at left#.) We used cotton piping from a fabric store as the wick. The arrangement worked, but next time we need such a thing we'll take it a step further and fit the bucket with an easy-refill vent. We had to lift the whole pot off the bucket to refill the reservoir. Ugh!

We **use water-absorbing polymers** (Watersorb, Soil Moist, etc.) in all our containers because we have seen them make a big difference. A sponge might do the same -- like polymers, a good sponge can hold 100 times its own weight in water, or more. Yet **a sponge is more limited** in that it can only be in one spot in the container. It can only serve roots in that one spot, whereas we mix polymers throughout the entire pot.

It's very important that polymers be thoroughly soaked before they're added to the soil mix. If you add them dry, when they do expand with water they can pop up out of the soil. If they're below a just-planted plug, they can push it right up and out, too.



We've rarely let pots go so long between waterings, and not regularly. So any test you run this year will be more directly applicable to this weekend-gardener situation. Write back to us at the end of this season and tell us what worked for you.

In the strainer is what began as one teaspoon of polymer. We soaked them for 30 minutes. We wet and then add about this half this much to the soilless potting mix for a pot the size of this pink catchfly (*Silene latifolia*).

Dry peat is hard to re-wet. We've dug into beds amended with dry peat and found chunks of peat still dry years later. So we wet any soilless, peat-based potting mix thoroughly before putting it into the container.

- Janet and Steven -

Soil or potting mix for planters at the cemetery

Can I put real soil in pots we plant for decorating a grave, so it stays wet longer? - M.P. -

In general, garden soil doesn't drain as well in a pot as soilless mix does, and can hold less water. Drainage and moisture are both critical factors for plant health, which is why we always **opt for soilless mix when we grow in containers.**

Yet we'd be glad if you put garden soil in one of two identical pots, and potting mix in the other, then check the results. Tell us about it later this year so we can share it around.

Flashback time: Tree planting

It's planting time and we're hearing lots of questions about giving trees a good start. Here's a flashback to issue 49 for a summary answer:

So the most important thing I can say **about tree planting*** is that the gardener should do it herself or at planting time **be there and be firm about how things should be done**. Look under the burlap to locate the tree's natural root flare. This often involves removing excess soil that's accumulated at the top of the ball. Check for remnants of older wraps, especially old plastic cord, and remove them. Dig a hole just deep enough to set the flare above the soil line but make that hole wide enough to accept the packaged ball plus allow room for a person armed with bolt cutters and scissors to remove the cage and burlap from all but the bottom of the ball.

This week in Janet's garden

Grow with me! This week I will:



Buy annuals. Check that they are well rooted but **not root bound** -- cutting or teasing out a matted bunch of root ends so they grow well is tedious and really adds up when it must be done to 100 or more transplants!

Cut down early spring blooming shrubs if they are in places where I can't permit them to reach their full size. Spice bush (*Lindera benzoin*), *Forsythia*, bridal wreath spirea (*Spiraea prunifolia*) and flowering almond (*Prunus cerasifera*) are some that I've just reduced to stubs. There's time for them to grow back and that new wood to mature with next spring's flower buds, even though I leave them less than a foot tall right now. They come back with as much as several feet of new growth.

Mulch, using enough to make the weeds stay down. That's a two-inch depth of bark and similar materials, or 2- to 3 inches of faster decomposers such as leaves and hulls.

I put a double handful of cypress mulch between two perennials, then pat it level and check that it's an inch or two deep but clear from the crown of the perennial. Notice the weed seedlings in the foreground? I pull or hoe any weeds that are close to a desirable perennial's crown but to young-uns

between perennials where I can place the full depth of mulch, I say "Die!" and cover them. A few may survive to rise above the mulch, but will be simple to pull if that happens.

The photo on page 7 and these below are from a demonstration series Steven and I shot recently to illustrate a single bed mulched different ways; I don't generally use shredded wood (on page 7) or cypress mulch (below, left) because I think those materials are too pale in color and coarse in texture to complement most perennials. I prefer to use something fine and dark like bagged soil conditioner (below, right), also sold in bulk in some places as pine bark fines or premium red pine bark



Fertilize what's pale. Clematis, Delphinium and exotics such as Rhododendrons trying to get by in local alkaline soil are on my list. This application may be late, if it's all I've done so far this year, and some parts of plants have already formed which will simply live with any resulting deficiencies. Yet some nutrients including nitrogen are mobile in a plant and can find their way even into existing tissues to increase their photosynthetic power. Also, new growth is still coming that can use what I apply. I may apply slow release materials now but include at least some water soluble forms, such as Ironite, fish emulsion or a blue powder salt form product.

There are some situations where pale leaves stem from root trouble or chronic, recalcitrant soil deficiency, in which case what I give the plant now may make no difference. That's why follow-up is a good idea any time I do something meant to correct trouble.

Try to **be aware of which plants were touched by frost this spring**, so the lingering effects don't confuse me later on.

In other years when woody plants leafed out earlier than usual, and soft new foliage and twigs had to withstand late frosts, I'd forgotten about it by summer and was mystified by distorted twigs, tip dieback and shot-hole damage in leaves. My failure to make the connection between long-past weather and what I was seeing in July resulted in time lost looking for which insects or diseases could have caused the problem.



Photo ©2009 Margot McCormack. See description on next page.

The dark undertones in the canopy of the callery pears (*Pyrus calleryana* on page 8 and below, right) is from damage done to the emerging foliage by what we call an invisible frost. When the ground is quite warm it can radiate so much heat that the cold air warms as it gets near, but that warm envelope only goes so far on a really cold night. Even though there may be no white patches on the ground and low-rise plants may be unaffected, foliage further up may feel the cold and be blackened in this way.



The frost-darkened sections of these *Viburnum* leaves (left) may dry and fall out, leaving holes. That pattern of damage is known as shot-hole damage for its resemblance to something blasted by pellets. It can fool you into thinking a leaf-munching insect is at work, until you recall the spring cold and/or notice that the edges of the holes are dry and cracked, not chewed.

Left: Photo ©2009 Judy Root

Below: Photo ©2009 Margot McCormack

Frost damage that ripples into summer and future years

Cold damage to delicate new tissue may be ugly in spring, but have **varying long-term effect**. Consider a plant that's frosted and:

- Loses 1/3 of its leaves to frost.
- Or, has damage all over so that each of its leaves loses tips or other parts, totaling 30% of the greenery.
- Or, thus has leaves just 4" long that should be 6".



This callery pear lost young growth to frost that was not shed. Seen first in summer, it may look like a disease.
Photo ©2009 Margot McCormack.

In each case the result is less energy production because there's less green surface. Yet foliage only partially damaged may not be enough of a liability for the plant to shed and replace. A 30% loss of leaves or leaf surface may be okay if a typical whole leaf can make enough sugar to replace itself plus fuel creation of two additional leaves or equivalent new wood the next year.

Frost that damages tender new twigs may have a more enduring effect. Opportunistic fungi or insects, too weak to enter healthy tissue, may take hold there. Once given an entry point, the pests may destroy a bit more cambium each year or a fungal canker may develop. There will be a weak spot in the wood.

So plants that were frosted in spring generally deserve a bit of extra attention in summer and may need some help fending off secondary problems.

The 45mph garden: Spring leaves raise the question, "What season is it again?"

You can put a gardener behind the wheel but you can't take the flowers out of his eyes. Look at what's catching driver's eyes and raising questions this week: Spring leaf colors that rival fall



Spring flowers are glorious but the rich, saturated colors of emerging foliage are often as beautiful as anything fall has to offer, and longer lasting than flowers. Here's a scene we caught along I-80 this week, where red maples are bronze and the varying greens of poplars, sugar maples and just-budding oaks hint at the tapestry effect "leaf peepers" tour to see in fall.

Green thumbs up to transplanting during periods when the air is cooler than the soil. Top growth waits while the air is cool, but roots grow with gusto where it's warm. So a transplant in that circumstance keeps its head down near the warm ground, avoids drying wind and is meanwhile developing a great root system to keep the plant hydrated once it must head up into summer heat and drought. Think about warming the soil in an annual flower bed or vegetable garden before you plant, by covering the bare ground for a few sunny days with clear plastic. Press down the edges of the covering or bury them to seal in any solar warmth it traps.

Green thumbs down to filling space in planters with materials that roots can't use, such as packing peanuts or plastic bottles. We often hear people say they do this to save money on potting mix. Yet by doing so they deny the plant the chance to develop the largest root system it can and reduce the planter's overall water-carrying capacity. We'd rather have the big pot, a bit more leeway between waterings, and the biggest, healthiest plant so we never use filler.

Who's Janet? Who's Steven?

Janet's a lady who gets a lot of mileage out of a garden. That's how Macunovich was once described by a client of her business, Perennial Favorites. "I love what you plant for me, Janet," she explained. "I even think I get to know the plants pretty well but then you come here with your stories about the plants and *why* something is growing a certain way. I love it, it's like you open up windows I didn't know were there." Janet brings the same depth and enthusiasm to books and articles she writes, classes she teaches and practical how-to materials she develops.



Steven Nikkila's a garden- and nature photographer who likes his job so much that a waterproof camera case hangs right alongside his fishing tackle box and waders. Of this arrangement he says, "I used to think that if I somehow knew a day was going to be my last day on Earth, I would simply take my pole and waders and go fishing, preferably up Schlotz Creek where Dad and Poppa and I fished. Now, I know I'd have to have my camera, too!" His love of the natural landscape shows in some of the plantings he and his wife do for clients of their gardening business. There, he might customize a rocky channel made to lead water away from



downspouts to add "eddies" of small stone and an occasional larger rock "where a big trout could lurk." In the rain garden that receives that runoff water he favors plants he's admired along the edges of "his" fishing streams: turtlehead, cardinal flower, Joe Pye and marsh marigold.

Nikkila didn't bring home any trout one day but did bag this scene from a stream in Michigan's upper peninsula or "U P." Fishing's a part of his family's "yooper" blood, and a camera's part of his fishing tackle.

Email questions to Janet or Steven at JMaxGarden@aol.com or call 248-681-7850.

Where to catch Janet, Steven in-person:

Saturday, **May 22, 11:00 a.m. to noon:** Janet's in **Oak Park, Michigan** at Four Seasons Garden Center to suggest *Great Plants and Combinations*. Here are specific trees, shrubs and perennials that work well together, and how to develop your own winning combinations. Settle in after this presentation for *Herbs in the Garden* by Janet and Steven's friend, designer and educator Pamela Palechek (more about Pamela below). \$5 donation (goes to forgotten Harvest); walk-ins welcome but seating is limited so call 248-543-4400 to reserve a seat.

May 29: Steven's in **Oak Park, MI** at Four Seasons Garden Center

June 1: Janet's in **Bloomfield Hills, MI** for a *Garden By Janet* wetland native plant workshop

June 2: Janet's in **Birmingham, MI** for a *Garden By Janet* renovated-landscape workshop

June 5: Janet's at the **Detroit Zoo, MI** for a *Garden by Janet* workshop

June 26: Janet & Steven at **Marquette, MI**'s annual Beautification Extravaganza

And more, during summer. Details will be posted here. For more, email JMaxGarden@aol.com.

Invite Janet or Steven or their expert friends to your club or community.

We go where we're invited! That's taken us all over the country and then some over the past 20 years. We address many topics, drawing from our list of **100+ talks**. We also continue to **meet groups' needs** and expand our horizons by developing new material or "hybridizing" from what we already have.



So, whether it's...

- a **how-to lesson for a garden club**
- a **hands-on workshop** at your site, or
- a **multi-part class** for small group, ...we're game!

We can also connect you to one or a whole line-up of other experts who know how to explain how-to. So give us a **call or send an email** to make a date, request our list of classes and talks or get a referral. **JMaxGarden@aol.com or 248-681-7850**. Our

calendars fill about a year in advance for spring weekends, and six months ahead for most other weekends and evenings. So give us some lead time. Then we can meet you in *your* garden.



Steven Nikkila and Janet Macunovich have been digging, shooting and teaching how-to as a team for 22 years. They began producing conferences in the early '90s and ran a gardening school from 1995 through 2008, featuring experts who know their stuff in the garden as well as how to get their messages across in front of an audience. Janet and Steven are glad to help you yourselves for presentations but also pleased to connect you to experts they know or send you their list of people, topics and contact information. Designer Pamela Palechek (left, and above, with Janet collecting ideas at Ball Seed's display gardens), is an expert friend who has been a key player in Janet and Steven's educational efforts for 20 years. Palechek designs landscapes and gardens through her business, Petal Pushers. She's a gifted communicator who helped develop the curriculum for Janet and Steven's school, then served as one of its senior instructors, teaching all aspects of gardening from soil preparation to bringing the flavor of French Riviera to gardens in the Midwest U.S. Hear from Palechek on May 22 in Oak Park, MI. Email JMaxGarden@aol.com or call 248-681-7850 for a speaker/topic list or to set up a talk, workshop or class.

About attending *Garden by Janet* sessions:

We're let-me-see, hands-on people. That's how we learn best. From time to time there are *Garden by Janet* sessions listed here to afford you that kind of chance to grow. You visit us where we're working to either watch or work with Janet. Generally, there is no charge and we're in one of two kinds of locations:

1) At the **gardens we tend through our business, Perennial Favorites:** Our clients understand our enthusiasm for teaching. Some open their gardens to small groups who want to see and practice "how to." When the work we're scheduled to do may be of interest to you, we invite you in.

2) In the **Detroit Zoo, Adopt-A-Garden** program where we're 22-year veterans. Many people have worked with us there, some for a day and others for years. We have fun, learn, and accomplish much. You can check out this program by coming in with us on a temporary pass. **To join Janet at the Zoo,** email mstgarden@yahoo.com with the subject line "Help at zoo."

Time to garden your walls...

Steven's decorated many walls with great garden and Nature images. He can help you do the same with photos in frames or on canvas that capture garden beauty and stories you love.



You can own any of Steven's images you've seen in *What's Coming Up*, or request almost any flower or type of scene you can imagine. His library includes tens of thousands of plants and nearly as many natural images, including this show down in which an otter pack made a seagull re-think stealing a young otter's fish.

If you have an image in mind, describe it to

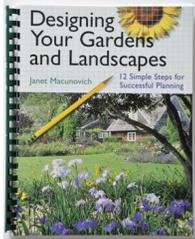
Steven. He'll assemble a customized photo sampler for you. Email us at JMaxGarden@aol.com for details.

There is so much clear detail in these images that they can be enlarged to cover a wall and still be crystal clear. So prices depend on your choices in format and size. For example:

Matted in 11" x 14.5" frame	\$48.00
On museum-grade cloth* 36" x 48"	\$215.00

*Janet's favorite: "I change our display by rolling up one tapestry and unrolling another."

You asked for our advice "on paper". We wrote and sell these books plus CDs:



Designing Your Gardens and Landscapes

First published in 1990 as *Easy Garden Design*, a 150-page step-by-step recipe that's become a design classic. Janet developed, uses and has trained thousands of others to use this process. People say: "This is exactly the simple, clear approach I need!" This design process is applicable world-wide.

Soft cover, spiral bound. B&W illustrations by Janet. \$19.00

Caring for Perennials

Janet's unique approach to perennial care how-to, the real-time story of one bed from early spring to season's end. The 180 engaging and fact-filled pages make you part of all Janet does and you might ever need to do in each task's appropriate season and sequence. Includes a chart of what to do, when for 70 top perennials. Advice in this book is applicable in all of temperate U.S. and Canada. The perennial chart includes a key to adapt its timing for far southern or northern edges of that range.

Soft cover book. Color illustrations by Steven Nikkila. \$20.00



Asking About Asters CD.

A digital library of six years of Janet's work: weekly columns, newsletters and over 200 extra Q&A letters to individual gardeners. 1,681 questions answered about soil preparation, fertilizing, pruning, design, choosing plants, foiling bugs and much more. No repeated topics. Fully indexed; the entire collection can be searched from this one file.

1 CD in jewel case, Windows- and Mac compatible. \$20.00



Potting Up Perennials CD. New for 2010

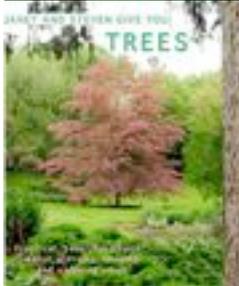
A digital collection of 2009's *What's Coming Up*: 52 issues, over 750 pages with more than 150 articles, 500 images and 250 quick-look lists and reports. Includes a comprehensive index of this collection plus Janet's previously-released digital library, *Asking About Asters*. If you own both *Potting Up Perennials* and *Asking about Asters* you can search all the *What's Coming Up* newsletters plus six years of *Growing Concerns* columns and books from this new index.

Bonus on this CD: Steven Nikkila's Daydream Screen Saver, 74 of his most vivid works from gardens and nature.

1 CD in jewel case, Windows- and Mac compatible. \$15.00

Janet's complete digital library New for 2010

Set of two CDs: *Asking About Asters* and *Potting Up Perennials*. \$30.00



Janet and Steven give you: Trees. New for 2010*

A choice collection of Janet and Steven's advice for tree selection, planting and care. Each article made its debut in *Michigan Gardener* magazine and has been on hold since, awaiting completion of its fellows until this comprehensive compilation became possible. Topics include: Selecting trees; fall color; what's happening to ash trees; replacing a big tree; descriptions, lists and photos of great trees; why starting small is a good idea when planting; planting how-to, why's and why not's; staking, watering and fertilizing; mulching; rescuing a tree from the lawn; preventing construction damage; pruning to keep trees and shrubs small; removing suckers; detecting girdling roots; and dealing with maple tar spot and lecanium scale.

10" x 13" magazine, 48 pages. Color illustrations. \$12.00

New for 2010* Janet and Steven give you: Landscape Ideas.

Janet and Steven's favorite articles on landscape design and renovation: Designing with foliage color; covering up after the bulb season; doubling up perennials for 3-season color; shady solutions; using usual plants in unusual ways; designing hypo-allergenic gardens; Murphy's Laws applied to gardens; renovation how-to; fragrant plants and designs; attracting wildlife; rockwork; invasive plants; discovering a site's hidden assets; using herbs in a landscape; and how to cheat to improve a garden quickly. These articles appeared first in *Michigan Gardener* magazine individually between 1999 and 2010. Now they're collected in this set for your design library.

10" x 13" magazine, 48 pages. Color illustrations. \$12.00



Janet and Steven give you: Garden Care. New for 2010*

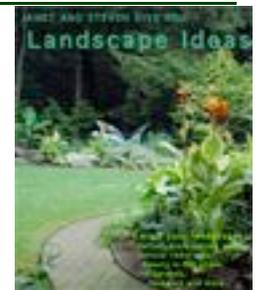
Vital how-to for tending a garden, from Janet and Steven's favorite articles on: bed preparation; soil testing; making a weed-free bed; spring start-up; improving hard-packed soil; fertilizing; watering; cutting back and deadheading; repairing irrigation; drought-tolerant plants; sharpening tools; tweaking in summer; staking; and the art of fall garden clean up. Items in this collection were selected from among Janet and Steven's ten years of *Michigan Gardener* articles. Each made its debut in that magazine, waited for its companion pieces and now they all join your library in this more durable and comprehensive form.

10" x 13" magazine, 48 pages. Color illustrations. \$12.00

Janet and Steven give you: Trees, Landscape Ideas and Garden Care New for 2010*

Set of three 10" x 13" magazines, 48 pages each. \$30.00

***For a look inside, email JMaxGarden@aol.com with the subject line "Magazine peek."**



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Potting Up Perennials CD

with Steven Nikkila's Daydream screen saver qty. _____ @ \$15.00 ea.=\$ _____

Books

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