

What's Coming Up:

Janet Macunovich answers your growing concerns
Issue 51, July 25, 2009

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This stunning blackeye Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*) is a wildling Steven Nikkila noticed while tramping through a meadow. Since most of its kind are solid yellow it was truly "outstanding in its field." Yet its kind are not rare. Professional growers have long recognized this species' potential for diversity, and have been crossing these plants, selecting and promoting the best offspring for many years. For instance, my friend Karen Bovio of Specialty Growers in Howell, Michigan (www.specialtygrowers.net) has tried a number of the new offerings and is currently steering her customers to 'Prairie Sun', 'Cherokee Sunset' and 'Chimchiminee.' Given so many wonderful, untapped genes in our native *Rudbeckia* species it's a shame most gardeners know only a single clone -- solid yellow 'Goldsturm.' Now as 'Goldsturm' falls to fungus trouble in many gardens, why not try some of its many fine cousins? Pages 1 and 2. Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila



Leaf spot ruins the reign of 'Goldsturm' blackeye Susan

Why are the **blackeye Susans turning black on the leaves**? Is there anything I can do about it?
- Diane -

My bet is that you're growing the ever-so-popular blackeye Susan variety named 'Goldsturm' and seeing the end result of a **leaf spot disease**, Diane. In that case the culprit is probably a fungus in the *Septoria* clan, which first shows up as **purplish brown, angular spots** on the leaves. It becomes worse during the season and over years, so that eventually whole leaves and stems and even the crown are infected so quickly and to such an extent that they become **blackened, shrivel and die**.

'Goldsturm' was a rock solid, "carefree" plant for many years but in the 90's it met its match in this leaf spot. I wrote about it in '01 and again in '06 as this condition that had at first appeared just here and there spread quickly and showed itself to be **very tough to beat**.

Poor 'Goldsturm' became a victim not only through its own **genetic weakness** but because of how we handle the plant. Consider two things: One, that fungal problems like this become **worse when infected plant parts are left in place over winter**. In such a bed the number of fungal spores is so great that new spring growth has hardly a chance of escaping infection. Two, that many of us bought 'Goldsturm' in the first place for its winter interest -- to leave its good-looking, sturdy stems standing over winter



The fungal disease that's ruining the reign of 'Goldsturm' blackeye Susan begins as a spot, then spreads and kills the leaf, stem or crown of the plant. Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila

Anyway, if the surviving leaves on your blackeye Susans look like this picture (left, Photo©2009 Steven Nikkila), you're going to find that disease is pretty hard to control. It's hard to reach all the nooks and crannies of 'Goldsturm's' ground-hugging, close-packed leaves to keep them coated with prophylactic fungicide during the spring infectious period. Once the spots show up in mid-summer, fungicides do little. The **diseased foliage must be removed**. Yet most gardeners can't bear to cut out the affected parts to stem the tide. I've seen

colonies of this plant that are nothing but black, leafless stems, left unclipped simply because they supported a few flowers, sad echo of what 'Goldsturm' could do when healthy.

If you **catch this problem in the first year** or two of its presence in your garden, you might keep it in check if you **cut the plants to the ground** every fall and put the debris in a hot compost. Also, **divide affected plants** then replant only uninfected young bits into soil that hasn't previously grown *Rudbeckia*. Take each division and **dip it briefly into a weak bleach solution** (1 part bleach, 19 parts water) for additional insurance.

For me, that strategy is too much work, with too uncertain an outcome. I think the better move is to **abandon 'Goldsturm.'** **Plant a new area with some of the new, very showy selections of *Rudbeckia hirta*** (Gloriosa daisy, one of the blackeye species involved in the creation of 'Goldsturm'). Not only are they gorgeous and long-blooming, and haven't shown themselves susceptible to this fungus, but they are clump-formers. Such sedate blackeye Susans can be a treat after wild man 'Goldsturm', which spreads by runner and seed with enough vigor to be a nuisance.

Cut first, ask questions later if it's spotted, streaked or blotched

Most plant diseases are caused by fungi, and many appear first as spots on leaves or stems. Although **most are just cosmetic problems** that ruin the plant's looks but not its long-term health, some that can move from leaf to stem and even into the root **can become chronic**, strength-sapping conditions.

So remove discolored foliage as it appears to keep a check on fungus' spread. Put the debris on a hot compost pile or send it as yard waste to a municipal composting facility. The 140°F heat of an active compost pile kills most known disease organisms, weed seeds and insect eggs.

This **strategy shouldn't be taken to extremes**. Some gardeners have heard "cut and remove *all* plant debris at the end of the season." Yet if you oust *healthy* foliage you also lose what resides on those plants, including beneficial fungi, eggs of predator insects and other helper organisms.

So **cut what's infected**, but **go easy on what's not!**

Spot the weaklings, then be tough on their spots

Only a few plants in any garden are disease prone, and only some of those diseases are likely to spread and become serious if ignored. Here are some **plants that that bear watching** on both counts. Remove discolored foliage or stems as you see them on:

Delphinium. **Pale leaves** and what appear to be **water-soaked splotches** may be the first sign of one of several leaf spots and stem infections that eventually kill the plant. Even with special attention, these plants rarely live long where hot, humid summers encourage these diseases.

Dogwood. **Spots** on flower petals, infect leaves and twigs. Infected limbs develop "**cankers**" -- diseased, depressed spots under the bark -- which enlarge and eventually kill the branch.

Peony. **Spots and streaks** on leaves can spread to stems, then down into roots to become chronic infections that eventually even kill flower buds as they form in spring.

A dead flower bud on a peony may give rise to a spot on a leaf, then this streak (right) on a stem that will go down to the root. Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila

Rose. **Black spot** kills leaves, weakens the plant and reduces its flowering ability. As spots multiply they can infect stems, remain through winter and quickly infect the next year's foliage.

Viburnum. **Spots** on leaves can infect young twigs and persist as the twig becomes woody, weakening it and the plant for life.



As you deal with plant problems keep in mind that the world's best gardeners are not wonder-workers when it comes to **disease and insect issues**. They succeed by taking a simple outlook: **If it's sickly** even in a spot that provides all the species is supposed to need, **get rid of it**. There are more species worth growing than any gardener can grow in a lifetime, so don't waste time on those that can't cut it on your site.

Judge a tree by its long term performance

I love my **tri-color beech tree**, but it is not doing very well in its current location. It leafed out early this spring with beautiful color, then the **bugs came and ate a lot of its leaves**. I wouldn't normally worry about that except that the tree looks stressed. I think the location is too hot as it's on the south side of the house. I am **thinking about moving it** to the north side which has quite a bit of shade. What are your thoughts? I really would like this tree to do well. They are beautiful when healthy. - N.P. -

We have a tricolor beech in my yard, N.P., and we, too, have had years when we mourned for its leaves. **Sometimes the heat saps or singes the color**, or insect damage ruins leaves. One year I had to keep telling myself, "It's just one year, do not overreact" when fall webworms spread their branch-encompassing webs at midsummer and proceeded to eat most of the leaves. **Other times every leaf is gorgeous**. This year is one of the good ones. We live for these years.

We don't worry during the bad years because the tree, **overall, has grown well** in its time here. **That's the acid test**. A beech is normally an understory tree *when it's young* -- suited to the protection of high branches that moderate daily and seasonal temperature changes. Eventually, it becomes top dog in the woods and then has no other trees above it. So it may be stressed in its youth in some south facing, hot sites but can be fine over time.

However, **sun orientation is only one aspect of a site** and when all its facets are considered your site may or may not be a problem. If a beech has **soil** that's loose, well drained and moist, if it has plenty of **room** to grow roots, and there's no **exposure** to road salt, it can be quite happy in full sun.

Let your tree give you a summary: Does it have **more bad years than good**? Is its **growth rate** less than 12 inches per year? If you say yes to those questions and the tree's still small enough to move, move it. If you say yes but the tree's too big to handle, plant another in a second, better location so that one day you can put the first one out of its misery but still have a tricolor beech.



In years that are relatively cool and have no prolonged droughts, the leaves of my tricolor beech keep their rich color all summer, even though the tree's growing in full sun rather than in the shelter of other trees.

Some people say beeches are slow to grow. This may be true as an average across many regions and sites but has not been my experience with my own tree and others in my care in the Upper Midwest. In their youth -- the first few decades -- the beeches I've watched have grown between 12 and 18 inches a year. So I treat that as a norm and know my own tree is doing well since it has grown from eight feet to 28 feet tall in 14 years, a rate of 17 inches per year. Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila

That's not a tree in bloom or fall color (right), that's the all-summer leaf color of the tricolor beech in my back yard.
Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila

No quick way to be rid of quack grass

Do you have any suggestions on how to **get quack grass out of perennial beds**? Our yard is bordered by fields and the grass just seems to keep **invading and eventually takes over**. I am considering redoing one whole bed due to the grass. Any easier solution? - N.G. -

Re-doing the bed is a good first step. I **lift all the perennials** and then use a garden fork -- a shovel-sized, four-prong digging tool -- to chase and remove every one of those thick, white, piercing, plant-killing quack grass roots. I don't say I'm done until both the bed and the perennials' root balls are **quack-grass free**. Sometimes that requires reducing desirable perennials to bare root.

Then I **install a deep root barrier** to keep the quack grass from running back in. By "deep" I mean as deep as the quack grass roots run in that soil, which is often seven- to nine inches deep, several inches below lawn roots. I've made deep edging from wood planks set vertically into the soil and from carpet runner -- the clear, heavy vinyl, nubbly-backed material available in rolls to lay over carpet as protection in high traffic areas.

I've also found it possible to contain quack grass by **creating heavy shade** between it and the bed -- for instance, by growing an evergreen hedge more than three feet wide between bed and field. Quack grass runs out of energy when it runs into shade, and can't make the whole crossing if that's as much as three feet. You will have to keep the quack grass from infiltrating until the hedge fills in, however.



Quack grass: Only a weed where it's not wanted

Quack grass (*Agropyron repens*), also called cooch grass, is a mighty weed that may have come **to North America by invitation as well as by accident**. Some of the seeds probably crossed the ocean as contaminants of packaged grain or fodder but some European settlers, as some people today, favored quack grass where they needed fast-growing, high-quality pasture plants to fill cleared land. Today quack grass is widespread in southern Canada and in all but a few southeastern U.S. States.

Have a care for trees when you edge a bed

Even a shallow **root barrier can impede the growth of a tree's roots** and create a pot-bound situation for the tree, especially if the soil in an area is compacted so that roots can grow well only within a few inches of the soil surface. Trees with restricted roots age faster, are more likely to succumb to diseases, pests or drought, and are less stable in storms than trees with wider-spread roots.

Before you insert a vertical line of plastic, wood, metal or stone into the soil to contain garden plants or bar creeping plants from entering a garden, consider young trees in the area. If an edging will confine a tree's roots to less than the tree's mature branch spread, the harm you do to that tree may cancel any benefit you realize from edging out weeds.

Beneath our feet: Weeds wage chemical warfare

Quack grass is an **allelopath** -- a plant that **stunts and kills other plants with chemicals** that come from its roots. So a peony, daylily or other perennial that has quack grass in its root zone is not only saddled with competition for water and nutrients but is slowed in its growth.

Determinedly waiting for tomatoes

I'm about to give up **waiting for tomatoes to form** on the plants in my garden. I figure time's running out on this season. My tomato plants still aren't showing a single flower or fruit, so I plan to pull them out and plant something else. Which is too bad because the **'Ace' tomato** plants a friend gave me look healthy. Except no fruit. - Matt -

Wait, Matt! Don't give up. Do run out to the store and **buy some freezer bags or canning jars**, however.

That's a **determinate variety** of tomato you're growing, which means the plants produce just **one big crop all at once**. You may be accustomed to growing indeterminate tomato varieties. Those mature, form a flowering branch and some fruit, then another and another in sequence.

Determinate tomatoes are to indeterminate tomatoes as an old fashioned climbing rose is to a hybrid tea rose. The climber blooms its heart out for two weeks, smothered in flower, then is done until the next year. The hybrid tea blooms, rests a bit, blooms again and so on all season. It's never covered in bloom but always has a few flowers.

A month from now you will have more big (3/4 pound) red, meaty tomatoes than you may know what to do with. They're **good for freezing or canning -- or sharing** 'round to friends.

Happiness comes from growing what thrives, not merely survives

- Janet -

We think we learn by growing a plant but we can't know if it's just surviving or truly living. We really don't know anything about a plant until we kill it.

Can't fool you: Winner of last week's quiz

I asked you if you could identify the two rare items in this photo.



The knee-high leaves belong to **black jack jack-in-the-pulpit** (*Arisaema sikokianum*, right, in its spring finery) alongside **my bare leg**, which was on that day making about its tenth public appearance in 15 years.

Many of you were well into the ball park regarding the plant, and a surprising number of you recognized my skin as rare. In entering your guesses to the prize drawing I gave credit to: "leg *not* in gardeners' pants," "you in shorts," "*clean* knees" and even one "tennis shoes instead of boots."

Then Steven shook the ballot box and drew out Paul Lenhard's name for a copy of my six books on CD (more on page 12) plus a copy of George Schenk's classic "Complete Shade Gardener." Congrats, Paul, and thanks to everyone who played!

The black jack (*Arisaema sikokianum*) is hard to find for sale and expensive, so it seemed special enough to be planted in the shade of the *Stewartia* tree we grow in memory of my father-in-law, Jack Stuart Nikkila. I told Mom that 'round about Easter each year, "Jack will be there in his best suit, ready for church." Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila



Nominate your favorite August, gorgeous, healthy plant!

I am glad to be able to help you answer garden questions. However, it can get me down when **gloom and doom dominate** the email and calls, so the dark side rules in that week's newsletter.

I've noticed this happens more often in midsummer than at other times. Perhaps it's the influence of Sirius, the Dog Star, lord of **the steamy Dog Days** of summer (July 3 - August 11).

Next week marks our one-year anniversary conversing in this e-newsletter format, and the beginning of my 18th year writing weekly Q&A articles. Help me fill that issue with happy color and sure-bet plants. Email or call me to tell me **what plant in your garden is beautiful** and trouble-free *right now*. I'll list them. That issue might stave off a few cases of the August Blahs if we use it to load next year's gardens with things that will brighten the Dog Days .

This week in Janet's garden

Grow with me! This week I will:

Remove plants that have passed beyond trial stage but **failed the test.**

We all have plants like this, things we decided to try and have left in despite reservations at their initial performance. It's surprising how many years can sneak by while such lackluster plants remain in place.

If I tell you about my hit list will you find the fortitude to follow my lead? I've made up my mind to remove from various gardens and consign to the compost:

- **sickly**, weak-sister white purple coneflowers;
- a kousa dogwood I should never have put out into so much sun and which in that place **requires way too much attention** just to hold its own;
- phlox that can't make it through a summer without **mildew**;
- a hydrangea that **blooms** about once **every six years**;
- raspberries that have **seen better days**; and
- a rose of sharon that's **gnarled and weak** because it keeps dying back during winters.

Make some **space for the herbs** I used to have at hand and have missed this year.

How did it happen that I mulched over the whole area where **dill** came voluntarily from seed for so many years? Potato salad with dried dill is just not the same.

When was it that our culinary **thyme** and good **oregano** got squeezed out of their borders, leaving me with only wooly thyme and ornamental oregano?

And for heaven's sake, someone should've stopped me when I left my **bay** out to die last October just because I was fed up with its scale problems. Now that I've had to buy bay leaves-- for so many years they grew on trees! -- I know that biweekly cleaning of the tree's leaves to stay ahead of the scale was a worthwhile investment.

Identify this year's "What the heck is that?!" plant problems. This is the season to hit the books and the Internet search engines to solve these mysteries.

Mostly, the issues I'm studying now are things that showed me early stages that didn't register on my radar. Seeing them now in advanced stages of development, I probably can't revive the plant for this year but I can look back and recall the subtle signs. Next year I'll be alerted in time to salvage the plant's show.

Walk, and learn at garden tours. I'll learn and share in Belleville, Michigan. On Sunday, July 26 from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. I'll tour six gardens. Then on Wednesday, July 29 from 7 to 9 p.m. (please note the 7 p.m. start time; my previous report of 6 p.m. was in error) I'll share that tour and my thoughts on summer garden care and color. See "Where to Catch Janet... July 29."

Who's Janet?

"A woman who gets a lot of mileage out of a garden" is how Janet Macunovich was once described by the owner of a garden she maintains through her business, Perennial Favorites. "You design and plant it, Janet. I enjoy it and then you come here and look where I do but see so much more!" She explained. "I love hearing your stories about the plants and it's fascinating to hear *why* something is growing a certain way or having trouble." Janet brings the same depth and enthusiasm to books and articles she writes, classes she teaches and practical how-to materials she develops. Email questions to her at JMaxGarden@aol.com.

Gardeners do first, read later. Why not?
Plants are very gracious in accepting an apology.
- Janet -

Where to catch Janet and friends* in-person:

*See August 15 on and "Invite Janet or Steven" on page 12

Wednesday, July 29, 7-9 p.m., "Summer in the Garden: An Expert's Perspective" Come hear and see Janet's take on what makes a garden grow and makes for fun in summer. This talk is based on examples from the Belleville Garden Club Garden Walk (Sunday, July 26, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.; purchase tickets at the Belleville library, \$8 in advance, \$10 on the day of the walk). You don't have to attend the walk to appreciate Janet's follow-up presentation but if you do you're likely to recognize a whole new dimension in on-site learning. The talk is at the **Fred C. Fisher Library** in downtown **Belleville**, Michigan. Free. Call 734-699-3291 to reserve a seat.

Garden by Janet - Bring your gloves and tools! for *Pruning Trees and Shrubs: Keep them small and shapely*

August is prime time for pruning woody plants to keep them small. All around the Detroit, Michigan area Janet has appointments with trees and you're can attend. Janet covers: How well and how long popular landscape plants hold up to pruning, and simple techniques for keeping plants within the bounds you set. Free. You must contact Janet for location details.

You can attend at one or a combination of these locations:

- **New date:** **Thursday, August 13, 9 a.m. in Grosse Pointe Shores.** Prune **yews, oakleaf hydrangea and more.**
- **Thursday, August 13, 7 p.m. in Rochester Hills.** Prune **crabapples** and evaluating the performance and future needs of a serviceberry tree last pruned in this way in 2008.
- **Saturday, August 15, 8:30 a.m. in Grosse Pointe.** An upright Japanese maple and a coral bark maple are the focus.
- **CLOSED (full up!) Saturday, August 15, 2:00 p.m. in Farmington Hills.** A magnolia, serviceberry and fir tree.
- **Monday, August 17, 6:00 p.m. in Livonia.** A weeping Japanese maple, yews and a dwarf white pine.
- **Questions? Or to reserve a spot** in these limited-space workshops, call or email Janet: 248-681-7850 or JMaxGarden@aol.com. Include your name and phone number on the phone message or in your email, and make the subject of your email "pruning with Janet."

Saturday, August 15, 7 a.m., "Shoot! That's Steven!" Bring your camera and join horticultural photographer Steven Nikkila on a photo shoot in one of his favorite gardens. Too early in the day for you? Then that may be his first lesson to you: Shoot when the light is soft! This is a free but limited-space workshop. Call or email Steven to reserve a spot: 248-681-7850 or hortphoto@gmail.com. Include your name and phone number on the phone message or in your email, and make the subject of your email "shooting with Steven."

Invite Janet or Steven 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 own horizons by developing new material or "hybridizing" from what we already have.

So, whether it's...

- a **how-to lesson for a garden club** meeting,
 - a **hands-on workshop** at a site of your choosing or
 - a **multi-part class** for a 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 (above, left) have been digging, shooting and teaching how-to for 22 years. They began bringing producing conferences in the early '90s and then ran a gardening school for 12 years to present instructors who knew their stuff in the garden as well as knowing how to get their messages across in front of a group. That line-up includes people like Deb Hall (above, right) who dug many a planting hole with Janet as well as impressing her with unmatched ingenuity, creativity and humor. Janet and Steve are glad to help you themselves or refer you to these others to meet your group's need. Contact them at JMaxGarden@aol.com or 248-681-7850 when you want to set up a talk, workshop or class.

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About attending Gardens by Janet sessions:

We gardeners are let-me-see, hands-on people and that's how we learn best. In these sessions, I offer you that kind of chance to grow. You can visit me where I'm working and you can either watch or work with me side by side. I hope you'll bring your gloves and join in so you realize the most value for the time.

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

In the **Detroit Zoo Adopt-A-Garden** program: I'm a 21-year veteran of this great program. Many people have worked with me there, some for a day and others for years. We have fun, we learn, we accomplish much. The official program requires that regular garden volunteers complete an interview and orientation process but you can come as my student on an temporary pass for a day or two. **To join me at the Zoo**, email mstgarden@yahoo.com. Make the subject line of your email "I'll help at the zoo with Janet." That email will connect you to my friend Deb Tosch who keeps my group's schedule straight. You'll receive upcoming work dates, directions for meeting up with my group at the zoo as a temporary helper, plus all you need to sign up officially in case you decide to stay on.

A gardening dream come true:

A complete library of how-to, how-come and what-if. From a writer with a green thumb and a golden gift for practical explanation, here is:

Asking About Asters Janet Macunovich's Growing Concerns Special Edition

Gems from a 20-year, 12,000-gardener discussion:

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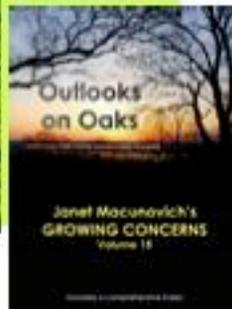
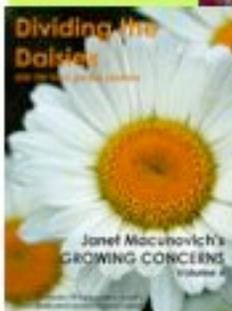
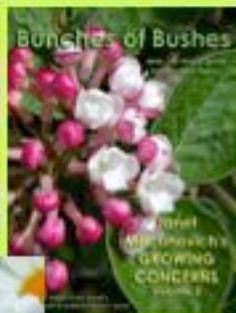
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Janet Macunovich is a professional gardener, author and educator known for her practical, effective approach and engaging presentations. You may know her from her long-running columns in the *Michigan Gardener* magazine or The Detroit News Homestyle section.

Are you on Janet's mailing list? You should be! Just send her an email to receive her free weekly newsletter. JMaxGarden@aol.com