



# North Lake Tahoe DEMONSTRATION GARDEN



*The North Lake Tahoe Demonstration Garden is an educational community garden which promotes lake-friendly landscaping to help preserve our unique and fragile alpine environment*

## SPRING IN THE SIERRA

by Jan Steinmann

Roots have been growing under the snow, serviceberry buds have emerged from seemingly dead branches, narcissus thrust tentative green shoots through melting slush, and garden people are beginning to.....think Spring! With our harsh climate and short growing season, Sierra gardeners don't take the exhilaration and mystery of spring season for granted.



## EARLY SPRING TIPS

**Walk around your yard**, or check out the North Lake Tahoe Demonstration Garden in March and April. There may still be some snow and it appears that not much is happening... but look closely and rejoice in the emerging chartreuse shoots of bulbs, living branches full of promise, and the perennial flowers' new leaves among last year's refuse, all signs of healthy renewal. If a plant didn't make it through winter because of bad placement, lack of care, or through no fault of your own, don't mourn; accept

*(continued on page 2)*

## From the President's Plot

by Mimi Komito

Drip, drip, drip... Could it be spring already? Well, not quite I'm afraid. The dripping snowmelt from my roof is just a teaser. I haven't seen the Robin yet, so we probably have a few more weeks of winter. Spring doesn't really arrive in earnest in Tahoe until May(ish). This is not necessarily bad news, however, it just means we have a little more time to plan and organize what needs to be done in the garden this year.



Melting snow in the garden

The NLT Demonstration Garden has a big season planned. On the top of our list is a Butterfly event. In collaboration with UC Davis and Tahoe Center for Environmental Sciences at SNC (TCES) we will have a visit by Dr. Arthur Shapiro, a well renowned butterfly expert and professor of Ecology and Evolution at UC Davis. Dr. Shapiro will give a lecture at TCES and lead a walk through the new Butterfly and Hummingbird demonstration at the Garden. We are all looking forward to this event and to show off our new demonstration. Save the date for this great event, Thursday August 5th starting in the garden at 5:00PM and continuing with a lecture in the TCES building at approximately 6:00PM. Please watch our web site ([www.demogarden.org](http://www.demogarden.org)) for further details.

In July there will be a weeklong event with one day in the garden on July 8. It is the Tahoe Basin Wildfire Awareness Week (July 3-11). This year's theme is "Be Ember Aware." The main focus in the garden will be on our defensible space demonstration. This area will be getting a makeover in honor of this event. Our garden shed, which serves as the structure of the demonstration, will be modified to show "before and after." We will show how a structure can be a fire hazard and how that same structure can be modified to be more fire resistant. We will work on the area around the shed to better show the "do not" and "do" principles of defensible space. You will see information about this event both on our web site and the local media as the event draws nearer.

*(continued on page 2)*





*(Spring Tips cont.)*

that “dieback happens” and either give up on the species or try again in a better location.

**Don't be too exuberant in your spring-cleaning tasks.** This advice is the most often violated by Tahoe gardeners including myself. Inspired by the excitement engendered in Tip #1 and encouraged by the usual spurt of lovely warm, sunny weather in April, we begin raking, pruning, weeding, and tidying up too early and too enthusiastically. We all know that removing ugly but protective dead stuff (like iris leaves) will hinder, not help, our plants. In addition, some overly neat (neurotic) folks insist on raking every shielding pine needle, thus exposing any emerging plants to spring snows and freezes and drought, and also raking up many new seedlings as well. You know who you are.

**Plan to plant something new.** Fall is the best time for planting trees and shrubs at Tahoe but (late) spring works if you will be able to water and care for the new plant. Most local nurseries don't advise planting until May or later, but it's always fun to research catalogues and plan ahead.

**Join a group of Tahoe/Truckee gardeners.** This is the best way to meet other gardening folks (the most generous and “deep rooted” of all, in my experience) and also share information and learn about gardening in our challenging conditions while protecting our most beautiful and fragile ecosystem. Of course, we recommend our North Lake Tahoe Demonstration Garden. We are always looking for new members who want to learn from our free classes and help form the totally volunteer garden at Sierra Nevada College.

*(Presidents Plot cont.)*

Other goings on in the garden will be some new interpretive signage as well as a new path made with drivable lawn. It is actually cast concrete bricks mounted on a hard plastic grid which will be laid similar to flagstone and then planted with grass, groundcovers and creeping herbs. It is referred to as drivable lawn since it can be used in a drive way application. It counts as pervious coverage and causes a lot less runoff than conventional driveway materials.



Board meeting in February

We will, of course, also have our ever-popular Green Thumb Thursday classes this summer, starting in mid to late June. We hope to see you there.

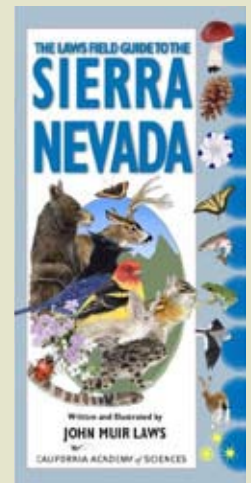
See you down the garden path...

Mimi

**THANK YOU TO OUR FRIENDS!**

**For help with our Butterfly Garden Signs:**

**John Muir Laws** graciously provided the use of his illustrations for a natural history sign in our new Butterfly Garden. These beautiful illustrations, and hundreds more, are in his book “The Laws Field Guide to the Sierra Nevada.” In addition to being a skilled watercolorist, Mr. Laws is a naturalist and educator. His Sierra Nevada field guide is indispensable for anyone interested in our native flora and fauna. Check out his website at [www.johnmuirlaws.com](http://www.johnmuirlaws.com) for his schedule of lectures and classes, and tips on drawing birds.



**Dr. Arthur Shapiro** has been very helpful in providing the information on butterfly natural history and the appropriate adult butterfly nectar and caterpillar host plants. Check out his website at [www.butterfly.ucdavis.edu](http://www.butterfly.ucdavis.edu) which describes over 34 years of data collection. It's a great source for information on California and Sierra Nevada butterfly species, distribution, and current research. We are looking forward to seeing him in August.



# TOOLS OF THE TRADE: BEST AND WORST GARDENING TOOLS FOR TAHOE

by Jan Steinmann

Gardening on our stony Sierra hillsides and pruning very tough Manzanita branches is not for sissies. Our soil runs the gamut from just rocky to downright “boulder-y,” often with easily washed-away decomposed granite filling in the gaps. Garden tools that perform best and last a long time in the mountains are not always those that are favorites in Ohio or Southern California. Tools that best meet the challenges of Tahoe/Truckee meadows terrain are among these recommended by Demonstration Garden workers and their gardener friends:

**Best Digging Tools:** We expect to encounter rocks and occasionally huge boulders when planting or otherwise digging, and often this leads to a landscape design determined by practicality rather than by aesthetic concerns. Eric Larusson of the Villager Nursery in Truckee loves the 1.5 pick mattock (see photo on left published in Eric’s article in Tahoe Quarterly), which has a pick on one end and a wide hoe-like blade on the other. The pick can be forcefully driven into the earth to start a hole and used to pry up even large rocks;



Eric’s favorite picks  
© Eric Larusson

the hoe side can then be used for moving smaller rocks and leveling the depression. Even tiny Candy Dowdle is adept at wielding this mighty tool against her hillside. I am too wimpy to use the long handled, chain-gang type mattock, but I move smaller rocks with a shorter version.

**Worst digging tools:** Lesley Higgins nominates the cylindrical bulb planter, which is useless in sandy or rocky soil. Eric advised her to use a pick mattock instead, which she said worked much better.

**Best Pruning and Clearing Tools:** A good quality bypass pruner is recommended by Lesley, as well as by many Tahoe gardeners. In addition, I couldn’t get by without strong reticulating loppers for heavy-duty defensible space cutting of our very tough natives. Finally, for the most



Lesley’s oldies but goodies

rugged brush clearing, Warren Kocmond’s favorite tool is his chain saw, used for “manly” tasks at his cabin in the woods.

**Worst tool:** Cheap, lightweight loppers that can break when cutting strong wood—not only is this a waste of money but it can be dangerous if the loppers “backfires” into your face upon breaking.

**Best Transport Tools:** In the Demonstration Garden, we use a lightweight, well-balanced cart that is pulled rather than pushed. It carries more and is easier to maneuver than a wheelbarrow, although a 3-wheeled transport does work best on a slope with shrubs and boulders. A collapsible, expandable plastic carrier is great for carrying lightweight garden waste by hand.

**Best Protection “tool”:** Gauntlet gloves are usually used for working with thorny roses, but I find them excellent protection for bare forearms in summer. The long cuffs guard forearms when I am working on prickly (conifers), thorny (whitethorn), or sharp (Manzanita) plants. They also protect from rashes and skin reactions when working with plants that may cause allergic reactions.

**Worst gloves:** Any “cute” flowery cotton gloves that offer little protection and wear out quickly. Also, any gloves that are too expensive to misplace in the garden.

**Overall dumbest tool:** Eric volunteered “...those shoes with the nails to be used as aerators—the tiny holes immediately close up.” (Too bad, I always thought they looked like fun!).

(Check out Eric’s nursery at [www.villagernursery.com](http://www.villagernursery.com)).





# SOMETHING NEW AND DIFFERENT FOR THE TAHOE GARDEN

by Mimi Komito

If you're like me you probably feel like your garden is in a rut sometimes. We keep buying and planting the same plants year after year. Not that there's anything wrong with the tried and true approach. But sometimes even a variation on a theme is refreshing. By that I mean new cultivars of some old favorites and some oldies that have been under appreciated.



Creambush © 2010 Walter Siegmund

One of those oldies is Creambush (*Holodiscus discolor*). Creambush is a deciduous medium size shrub (usually 4-5 feet) and bears large cream colored and fragrant flower clusters (up to 5 inches long) from May to July. It likes part shade which makes it a great understory plant for the average Tahoe garden. It is also deer resistant and the flowers are great fill in flower bouquets, which it lends an old fashioned quality to.

One of my favorite butterfly attracting plants is Joe-pye weed (*Eupatorium purpureum* "Gateway," zones 3-5). It grows tall, up to 5ft, and can form a clump up to 3ft wide. It blooms in late summer with large red flower clusters. It needs full sun to bloom well.



Joe-Pye Weed © 2004 Kurt Stueber



Viburnum © 2008 Ted Bodner, Southern Weed Science Society / James H. Miller, USFS

A proven shrub in Tahoe is Viburnum., *V. dentatum* "Blue Muffin" has blue berries in late summer as a change to the more common red berries (Cranberry bush, *V. trilobum*). It has flat topped clusters of white flowers in the spring and the fall foliage is bright orange maturing into purple. It prefers full sun to light shade. Zones 3-8.

Who doesn't like sun flowers and what could be better than a multi-stemmed perennial variety. *Helianthus x multiflorus*,

"Sunshine Daydream" is a 5-6 ft tall variety with dahlia-like blooms that blooms all summer. It is great for a cutting garden, it attracts butterflies and look great at the back of the border. It needs full sun, zones 4-8.

Most of us have enjoyed the Hummingbird magnet, red flowering Bee Balm but this year a purple variety is introduced. *Monarda didyma* "Purple Rooster" (zones 4-10) has deep purple flowers and is mildew resistant (a most welcome trait). Enjoys full sun and grows to 3 ft tall on strong stems.



Bee Balm ©2006 Joe Schneid

There's one more new Bee Balm this year, *M. didyma* "Grand Mum." As the name implies it has large compact very double flowers from July to September resembling mums. It has the added feature of being a compact plant, only 18-24 inches. The flowers are lavender-pink and the plant is very disease resistant and hardier than most Bee Balms, zones 3-7.

A new Penstemon for 2010 is "Prairie Twilight." It has pink and white flowers and blooms from early to midsummer (with deadheading you get the longest bloom). It is a medium tall plant, ca 22 inches and does well in full sun to part shade. It is hardy in zones 4-9.

An ornamental (non-invasive) grass is always nice in between the flowers. Big bluestem grass (*Andropogon gerardii*, "Mega Blue") has the added benefit of adding color both in summer (gray blue) and fall (copper) and height to the back of the border (sometimes over 5 ft). This grass is a native of the prairie and thrives in zones 3-8.

I plan to try a couple of these new varieties this summer and hope you will be inspired to do the same. If your local nursery doesn't carry the variety you'd like, try online. Most plants are available from on-line catalogues these days.

