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## Horticultural Heaven

by Anne Przybilla

Your Munsinger/Clemens Botanical Society (MCBS) membership card is your passport to gorgeous gardens around the country. One of my favorites is the 30-acre Atlanta Botanical Garden (ABG), a relative newcomer to the gardening world incorporated in 1976. The following year it was given a double-wide trailer to serve as an office. In 1979 it held a plant sale, the first of many promotional activities to raise money for the gardens -to-be, but it wasn't until 1980 that a 50-year lease was signed with the city. This lease secured the location adjacent to Piedmont Park in midtown Atlanta as the home of the ABG for years to come.

My daughter moved to Atlanta in the mid-1980s, and I feel as though I've watched the ABG and my granddaughter grow up together. The first permanent structure, the Garden House, was completed just before my first visit to the ABG in 1986. Their Children's Garden, which features whimsical sculptures, fountains, and special interpretive exhibits, was established in 1999, and my granddaughter arrived shortly thereafter. I remember well the first time I pushed her stroller down the gravel path of the fledgling gardens. Both the ABG and my granddaughter have continued to grow like weeds.

My granddaughter has outgrown the Children's Garden, but we continue to visit the ABG whenever I'm in Atlanta. Our current favorite attraction there is the Dorothy Chapman Fuqua Conservatory, which displays plants in both tropical and desert environments. Priority in this building is given to species that are rare, threatened, or endangered.

Our individual pursuits in the conservatory are quite different, however. While my interests there are centered on the flora, her focus is on the fauna. She loves the High Elevation House with its massive waterfall because it is also home to an assortment of uncommon critters. The dart frog exhibit, a collaborative conservation partnership with Zoo Atlanta, fascinates her. She loves watching the brilliantly colored poisonous frogs as they dart about in their glass-enclosed native habitat. Saffron colored finches from South America flit about the upper canopy of trees while several varieties of quail patrol the underbrush in their search for plants and insects to eat. A pair of alligator snapping turtles reside in the pool at the base of the waterfall, and if you look carefully (she always does) you may get a glimpse of a tropical wood tortoise as it sips water that has collected in a cupped leaf. Though they are not easy to spot, the mating call of a gecko provides evidence that it is there. We both recognize that the successful coexistence of plants and animals in this created environment is an example of a healthy and balanced ecosystem.

I enjoy the High Elevation House for a different reason. It, along with the Orchid Display House, is part of the ABG Orchid Center, home to the largest collection of species orchids on permanent exhibit in the U.S. This amazing display of enchantingly exotic plants allows visitors to get an up-close-and-personal view of rare orchids from around the world. Many of these intoxicatingly fragrant varieties are pollinated by bees, but there's also a night-pollinated variety from Madagascar that is pollinated only by a specific proboscis moth. There are sun-loving

orchids and shade-loving orchids. There are rock-dwelling orchids from Australia and stream-dwelling orchids from South America. Did you know that the vanilla bean that gives us the vanilla flavoring used in cooking, ice cream, and hundreds of other products comes from the seed capsule of several species of orchids of the genus *Vanilla*? Neither did I until I visited the ABG Orchid Center.

I'm not much for heights but my granddaughter is, so we usually take a stroll on the Canopy Walk, the only tree-canopy-level walkway of its kind in the country. It begins on a bluff in the gardens and meanders for 600 feet through the tree tops of assorted tulip poplars, hickories, redbuds, buckeyes, maples, and oaks in Storza Woods, one of Atlanta's last remaining urban forests. This aerial pathway provides a bird's-eye view of the woodland garden with its native azalea collection below.

We also pay at least a short visit to the Desert House, which contains a vast assortment of intriguingly unique succulents native to southern Africa and the dry region of Madagascar known as the Spiny Forest. About 85% of these

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to this horticultural heaven.

A day at the ABG is a day well spent, and your MCBS membership card is your passport held all year round.

conifer garden, the seasonal gardens, and the classes and special events that are garden (another one of my favorites), the conservation garden, the dwarf and rare And I haven't even mentioned the rose garden, the rock garden, the Japanese also provides sound insulation as well as an additional garden display area for visitors. plants. This roof provides natural cooling in the heat of Atlanta's sultry summers. It new visitor center features a "green" roof that is almost half-covered with growing an older parking lot into an edible garden complete with an outdoor kitchen. Plus, the cistern completely and it waters almost 40% of the gardens. And they have converted 100,000-gallon underground cistern in 2007. It takes only 1 1/4 inch of rain to fill the with some of their "green" projects. To aid in water conservation, they installed a While I appreciate the ABG's focus on conservation efforts I'm even more impressed and encroaching development.

House is ABG's effort to save these rare plants from the ravages of climate change species that occur in Madagascar are found nowhere else in the world. The Desert

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# What’s Up in the Greenhouse, Spring 2014

by Joan Andersen, Stearns County Master Gardener

A visit to the greenhouse makes me feel more ready for spring than ever. As I write this in early March there is still no sign of the spring thaw. Because of the heavy snow cover, garden bed preparation may be a little later than normal in 2014.

Almost all the new annuals and perennials used in the Gardens are purchased from specialty growers who can provide the ideal light, temperature, and watering conditions to germinate the seeds. Once the seeds have sprouted and have a few leaves, they are shipped to the greenhouse. Depending on the plant, there may be as many as 288 seedlings in a tray, each in a tiny little cell. Larger annuals and many perennials are started in larger cells with fewer cells per tray, and these are much easier to hold and keep watered. Ideally, shipments are received on Mondays or Tuesdays. Nobody wants a shipment of plugs on Friday!

Garden Supervisor Nia Primus prioritizes which plants need immediate trans-planting and which can wait a little. When the core group of staff gardeners starts to return on March 24, their first task will be transplanting tiny annual plants from their plug trays to larger pots to begin growing in the greenhouse. Employees also watch plants carefully. If it is sunny in the spring the greenhouse can get very warm and cause things to dry out faster.

To make things interesting, Nia receives periodic emails from growers announcing a crop failure for something she has ordered. Substitutions are offered, but they are usually not a color that fits the design. Nia researches and finds a replacement plant that will fit the design and growing conditions. Everything is recorded on a spreadsheet to keep up with the changes and record what was actually planted in the Gardens.

### Some other tidbits:

Nia has discovered that she is interested in orange flowers. I told her that the

same unexpected thing had happened to me! Maybe because hybridizers have developed much more interesting plants with softer or more appealing shades of orange and shown us how to use orange with other colors. This year there will be an “orange garden” in a sunny area of Munsinger Gardens.

Nia often uses the flower bed in front of the greenhouse to experiment with new combinations. This year she is planting the bed with Caribbean colors of mango, purple, and red. If she likes it, this combination may make an appearance in Clemens Gardens in the future.

Deb Keiser, Rose Specialist, has worked on the design for the Formal Gardens annual plantings. There are many perennials in this garden, but annuals are added for color and design. This year, Deb has chosen coral, lime green, and burgundy as her color theme. A lot of the color will be provided by plants primarily grown for their foliage because they look great for the entire season. Watch for colorful sun coleus, variegated ginger, elephant ear, and ornamental grasses to provide a backdrop for flowers such as dahlias, cosmos, geraniums, verbena, and petunias. Some perennial heuchera (coral bells) are being added because their ruffled foliage in shades of burgundy and red will add interest to the design.

Someone told Deb that roses like coffee grounds, so she’s been using them on the tree roses overwintering in the greenhouse. This is something my mother used to do. The roses must really like it, because they are growing long canes and are covered in large blossoms. Now Deb is plotting how to find a reliable supply of coffee grounds.

Finally, we walked around the greenhouse and checked out all the succulents, banana plants, and other tender perennials being overwintered. Many will be divided, repotted, and watered to coax them into a growth spurt to get them ready for the season. Spring can’t get here soon enough!



Looking for the Thaw continued from page 5

Lately I’ve been listening to Norwegian ice music. Those Norwegians love winter. They cut ice blocks from the fjord and carve them into musical instruments like chimes and horns and big bass fiddles. Then they go out on a frozen spot and play a concert like you’ve never heard before. I get this music. It speaks to my inner self. My friggin freezin inner self.

I wonder if we’re going to have a February thaw, says Kay. I wonder when I’ll see a tulip again, I say.

I wonder what’s going on with my tulips. Right now they’re dormant. Or are they? I’ll bet there’s a lot going on with them. Don’t they constantly monitor the environment? We humans sure do. This winter especially. We’re obsessed by the weather. Why wouldn’t tulips also be?

It got this cold in 1935, says Kay. Oh, I say.

I close my eyes and imagine. In their icy dark bed I can see my tulip bulbs

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In early July, we purchased 16 large potted hybrid tea and floribunda roses from Linder’s and 24 own-root hybrid tea and floribunda roses from Roses Unlimited. They performed well and added many older varieties to our gardens. The three plants of floribunda ‘Dad’s Day’ with dark velvet red blooms and the bright red blooms of hybrid tea roses ‘Olympiad’ and ‘In the Mood’ put on a good display along the Upper Trial Garden walkway through the Clemens Rest Area Garden. The two pink-bloomed ‘Sexy Remy’ floribunda roses and the two ‘Estelle’ hybrid tea roses with their florist-quality russet blooms reversing to yellow drew many comments from visitors to the Virginia Clemens Rose Garden.

We were lucky to have only one week of 90s in mid-July and another week of 90s at the end of August. Most of the July, August, and September temperatures were in the middle 70s to low 80s,

growing roots. Little white tentacle roots spreading out, reaching in the dirt for water and nutrients. They lie buried beneath three feet of snow and a half foot of frozen soil. It’s very still and quiet there. My tulip bulbs are alive. Each one contains a future plant. Tiny baby tulips are in there getting ready to emerge when all this arctic cold moves out. They’re just waiting for the thaw.

March. As March arrives, gray black snow banks, still high, are glossed with ice. Streets are frozen ruts of chemicals and sand slush. Temperatures are still frigid. I’ve lost my favorite scarf. I’ve left my hat and mittens somewhere. The zipper on my coat has ceased to work. I’m getting a little crazy and off kilter. I can’t take it anymore.

Get some help, I tell myself. Think about the Vernal Equinox that comes in March, when the plane of Earth passes the center of the sun, when the tilt of Earth’s axis is

which made for wonderful working conditions at the gardens. Our rainfall was below normal but the new soaker hoses worked well. We fertilized the roses with Alaska Morbloom zero nitrogen fertilizer after August 31 and the roses continued to bloom.

In September and early October, we gave the Virginia Clemens and Upper Trial Garden roses doses of potassium sulfate 0-0-50 to help ready them for winter. We also treated areas of the Virginia Clemens Rose Garden that were experiencing growth problems with fast-acting sulfur (calcium sulfate) with the intent to lower the pH in those areas and improve growth for 2014. I will be checking our soil pH again next spring and adding amendments as necessary.

Winter came early with cooler than normal temperatures in mid-October, so we started our winter protection

inclined neither away from nor towards the sun. Just the thought of it gives me balance. I check out Old Farmer’s Almanac online. It relates the old folklore saying that you can balance an egg on its end on the equinox. OK, here’s the shift I need, from ice to eggs. I read on. Signs of Spring: Worms begin to emerge from the earth. Good, good, go on. Ladybugs land on screen doors; green buds appear; birds chirp; flowers begin to bloom. Another folklore saying completes my balancing act: In spring, no one thinks of the snow that fell last year.

I am transformed. In March I am Persephone, returning to the world of the living. Winter dark withdraws into daylight. Singing birds wake me up in the morning. I eat an egg. I take a walk outside, and beneath my feet tulips emerge from the wintry earth.

process of cutting back the tender roses to 8 inch height. This allows us to cover the rose beds tightly with insulated construction blankets. We mulched the roses with two large scoops of finished compost over the crown and extending out to the sides of the rose plant. With temperatures threatening to drop into the teens at night, we applied construction blankets to the rose beds in the Virginia Clemens and Upper Trial Rose Gardens on November 7 and tucked our roses in for their long winter’s nap a few days earlier than in past years. We have had plenty of snowfall in 2014 for additional cover on the rose beds.

What will this season bring? I hope for an earlier start to our season with less winter damage, adequate rainfall, and warm sunny days for good growth.

## Notice of a Change

Since its beginning in the year 2000, the Munsinger Clemens Botanical Society has worked alongside the City of Saint Cloud as a support group for Munsinger and Clemens Gardens, arranging events such as Music in the Gardens and Art Fair in the Gardens, publishing this quarterly newsletter, and often providing the Gardens with items not generally covered by regular funding (such as the winter blankets in the Rose Garden). In 2006, MCBS partnered with another Gardens support group, Friends of the Gardens, whose major focus is sustainability of the Gardens through donor gifts. Since then, the MCBS membership list has been handled by the Central Minnesota Community Foundation as part of the Friends list. Your MCBS membership was included in the amount you sent to the Friends address.

Now in 2014, effective January 1, Munsinger Clemens Botanical Society and Friends of the Gardens have agreed to discontinue our partnership, hoping to better accomplish our respective missions by separating the MCBS membership appeal and the Friends’ gift solicitation, and by having each group control its own mailings and accounting. Both organizations will continue to support the Gardens in partnership with the City.

You will have already received a letter from MCBS requesting your 2014 membership renewal, and you may have already sent us your renewal in the envelope we enclosed with that letter. If you responded to the Friends letter in November, before the separation was in effect, your MCBS membership was renewed then. You can also renew membership any time at our website. Support for Friends of the Gardens can be maintained with response to their letters. MCBS members receive the quarterly newsletter.

We are confident that both organizations can continue to work together in carrying out our respective missions in support of Munsinger and Clemens Gardens. We look forward to your continued support of the Gardens through Munsinger Clemens Botanical Society.

—Donna Gorrell, newsletter editor

## Reflections on the 2013 Growing Season

by Deb Keiser, Clemens Gardens Rose Specialist

The weather in April 2013 will be remembered as “extreme” and “record-setting” in many parts of the United States. Saint Cloud Minnesota was no exception. We broke several long-standing records and experienced extreme weather fluctuations.

In early April 2013, I began to watch the forecast high and low temperatures to decide when to remove the insulated construction blankets covering the tender roses. In past years, they were removed during the middle of April, but with widely fluctuating weather this past spring Mother Nature kept us anxiously waiting and watching for warm weather. On April 11, Saint Cloud received 8.7 inches of snow with freezing temperatures every night that week. On April 18 we received another 9.4 inches of snow and set a new record for most snowfall in April with a total of 24.4 inches for the month. On April 20 we had a record low temperature of 16 degrees. Then on April 27 we had a high temperature of 74 degrees with a low that day of 30 degrees followed by a few more 70-degree days that made uncovering the roses very tempting, except for the 10-day forecast. Just when I thought it was finally safe, an early May snowstorm dropped a record-setting 18 inches of snow on parts of southeastern Minnesota. We were fortunate not to get snow in Saint Cloud, but we did have high temperatures in the low 40s, a low of 28 degrees, and 1/4 inch of rain from May 1 through 4.

With volunteers coming for a rose pruning day on May 6, a high temperature of 72 degrees that day and 70 degree temps forecast for the week, I decided that we could finally uncover the roses. As luck would have it we experienced freezing low temperatures the following weekend, followed by a high of 95 degrees two days later. Only in Minnesota!

When uncovered, the tender roses in the Virginia Clemens Rose Garden looked alive but not leafed out as in past years, and we lost several older hybrid tea and floribunda roses. We had a late first flush, on July 4th weekend as compared to Memorial Day weekend in 2010, June 20 in 2011, and a mid-May first flush in 2012. Our season started late, our weather warmed up fast, and we were racing to try to get over 1,800 roses pruned before they were totally leafed out. With only one assistant and a handful of volunteers, we were still pruning roses in mid-summer.

The long cold spring gave the new roses ordered from Weeks Roses and the new Award Of Excellence trial miniature rose entries extra growing time in our 10,000 sq. ft. greenhouse. We received plenty of rain early in the 2013 season, which got the roses started growing well once they were transplanted outdoors. Many of the plants were already in bloom. I was especially impressed with the three test roses that Weeks sent us. The large golden-orange long-stemmed blooms of hybrid tea rose ‘Good As Gold’ and the large fragrant bright yellow old-fashioned blossoms of grandiflora rose ‘Happy Go Lucky’ seemed to put on a constant display. Both were very disease resistant. Although grandiflora rose ‘Coretta Scott King’ with its beautiful long coral and white buds and disease-resistant foliage did not bloom as much as the other two test roses, its big clusters of blooms were very long lasting.

The new shrub and Old Garden roses that we moved from the University of Minnesota’s Research garden in October 2012 came through the winter very well with only compost for winter cover. I was surprised at the winter hardiness of the zone 4b & 5 roses—four ‘Double Knock Out,’ seven ‘Carefree Marvel,’ and two ‘Salmon Impressionist.’ All of the shrub roses from UMORE grew and bloomed well during 2013. The ten plants of ‘Winnipeg Parks’ on the rock



walls bordering the front and south side of the Virginia Clemens Rose Garden were constant bloom producers. I heard many visitors commenting on their beautiful large pink flowers. The Old Garden Roses experienced nice growth and should bloom for the first time in June 2014.

The shrub roses in our Lower Trial Rose Garden proved their winter hardiness by surviving the winter with only a 4-inch layer of rice-hull mulch and snow cover for winter insulation. These include ‘Pink Home Run,’ ‘Carefree Sunshine,’ ‘Peppermint Pop,’ Northern Accent roses ‘Ole,’ ‘Lena,’ ‘Sven,’ and ‘Sigrid,’ Easy Elegance roses ‘Little Mischief’ and ‘Sunrise Sunset,’ ‘Carefree Wonder,’ ‘Como Park,’ ‘Thrive!,’ and ‘The Charleton.’ The shrub roses were very disease free this season.

Due to the late start, fertilizer was applied much later than normal, and the weather at application was hotter and drier than usual. We did not see a big growth spurt in the roses until we had rain and cooler temperatures late in the season. The roses were much shorter than normal and did not produce as many blooms as in past years.

We replaced most of the soaker hoses in the Virginia Clemens and Upper Trial Rose Gardens with new 3/4-inch double-thick wall soaker hoses with a lifetime guarantee. The hoses were put in place prior to the hot, dry weather in July and August. They worked very well during the season with much better water output than the older hoses and no more fixing broken hoses.

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## The Bugs of Spring

by Joan Andersen, Stearns County Master Gardener

Last spring I was disappointed to see some early cosmetic damage to my roses and perennials so I decided to see if I could prevent some of the problems this year. Even though the damage won’t really harm the plant, I don’t want to look at the evidence all season! Some of the possible culprits are included in this article. Even if you have just a few plants, you may want to check your plants early in the season.

*Poecilocapus lineatus*, a.k.a. the **four-lined plant bug**, is a native pest named for the four black stripes running down its back. Adults are yellowish green with black stripes and orange heads, and are up to 1/3 inch long. The eggs were actually laid last fall on the stems of plants to overwinter and hatch in spring. The nymphs are ready to feed just as your plants leaf out. At first the nymphs are tiny and red, but in about six weeks they become adults with piercing-sucking mouth parts, which means their damage takes the form of unsightly spots all over the leaves of your plants. Adults feed until they mate and lay more eggs for next year. There is only one generation per year.

The four-lined plant bug is not a picky eater and attacks a wide variety of flowers, shrubs, trees, vegetables, fruits, and herbs. Favorite plants are in the mint family. Damage is usually more cosmetic than lethal to the plant but can be very visible. If you have had damage in the past, check your plants early so you can see and remove the eggs. Cut your perennial plants down early in the spring to remove the eggs. For control you can spray very early with insecticidal soap or horticultural oils, or use an insecticide labeled for use on the four-lined plant bug.

**Roseslug sawflies**, *Endelomyia aethiops*, are another early season pest of roses. They are related to wasps and bees, and

their larvae resemble caterpillars—but they are not caterpillars. There are actually many species of sawflies that each have their own host. Most of them attack the needles of evergreen trees or the leaves of deciduous trees.

The Roseslug sawfly overwinters in the pupa stage in the soil. Adults emerge early and lay eggs on the underside of the leaves of your roses. The damage is caused when the eggs hatch and the greenish-yellow caterpillar-like larvae feed on the leaves. The feeding skeletonizes the surface of the leaves in between the veins, leaving white patches or holes. The damage is mostly cosmetic, but it can have a serious effect if the plant is already stressed. Sawfly larvae tend to feed in groups so you should inspect your roses in the spring to see if they are present. You can pick them off the plant or wash them off with a hose. If treatment is desired, use insecticidal soap, horticultural oil, or a chemical labeled for sawflies (not for caterpillars), and use it early while the larvae are very small.

Another pest of gardens early in the season is the **rose chafer**, *Macrodactylus subspinosus*. It is common in Minnesota, especially in sandy soil. Females lay eggs in the soil that hatch into small white larvae resembling grubs. These feed on the roots of plants and move down deep into the soil for the winter. In spring they pupate and emerge as adults. The damage is caused in spring when the adults feed on flower blossoms. They love roses, peonies, apple and grape blossoms, and the foliage of many other plants. The root feeding of the larvae is not harmful.

Adult rose chafers are tan and about 1/2 inch long. You can deal with the adults feeding on your plants by picking them off (although more may fly in) and putting them into a bucket of soapy water. Or use row covers to

protect valuable plants until the end of June. You can treat with an insecticide labeled for use on chafers. Fortunately, the invasion of the rose chafers is over by the end of June in a normal year.

**Red turnip beetles**, *Entomoscelis americana*, are mostly a pest of plants in the mustard family and are more prevalent in sandy soils. This insect overwinters as eggs that begin to hatch in early spring. The larvae are black and they feed on cruciferous plants such as radish, turnip, cabbage, mustard, and flowers such as sweet alyssum and rock cress. Larvae feed for a few weeks and then pupate and re-emerge as adult beetles that feed again on your vegetables. In the fall the adults continue to feed and then lay eggs in the soil that will hatch the following year. The adult beetles are red with three black stripes down the back and are about 1/2 inch long.

Damage is a bigger problem early in the spring if the beetles attack young vegetable plants. The eggs are red and quite visible. Be sure to rake or till the vegetable garden well in early spring to bury the eggs. Continue to cultivate to kill any remaining eggs or pupae. You can get good control of small larvae by using a spray with spinosad. It kills the larvae as they feed without harming beneficial insects.

As you can see, it’s a good idea to inspect your plants in the spring to see if any of these insects are present. Watch carefully for signs of leaf damage and take action early before there is heavy damage. Keep your plants healthy and your garden free of weeds, which can be alternative hosts for hungry insects. Try to control pests early while they are still in the immature stage and before they become a major problem. If you are successful, you will not have to look at ragged leaves on your plants for the entire season.

# Some Plants Have Big Ears

by Carl Hoffman

I like elephant ears—the plant, that is. I owe my introduction to the garden use of this beautiful, large-leaved, massive plant via white mold, *Sclerotinia sclerotiorum*. After a year or more of listening to my tales of woe, Michelle Grabowski, University of Minnesota Extension Plant Pathologist, informed me that she was working on a project to determine which annual flowers had natural resistance to white mold, and she asked me if I would offer my garden as a test site.

The list of 20 or more species plants that Michelle provided included three elephant ears of an unlisted variety. I had used some elephant ears in pots in shady areas with limited success and I was apprehensive about growing them in the full sun of my annual border. I was amazed at the results. These plants were not only resistant to white mold, but flourished in the border. They grew five to six feet tall and the longest leaf measured was 39 inches. They were so striking that many people stopped along the road to look at them. Need I say that I fell in love with elephant ears as a garden plant? When I dug the tubers

in the fall, I had to force each of the clumps in a five-gallon pail to overwinter them.

The spring of 2011 found me with some health issues that made it very difficult for me to plant my gardens. But I am very fortunate to have friends, many of them master gardeners who heard of my problems and cleaned and planted my gardens for me. I had purchased eight potted *Colocasia* plants, a Proven Winners introduction called ‘Tea Cups,’ and 18 sweet potato vines, *Ipomea batata*, half of them the dark burgundy-leaved ‘Blackie’ and the other half the chartreuse-leaved ‘Margarita,’ which Terry Engels and Sharon Schlick planted in my border. Added to that were the three large tuber clumps that I had overwintered and about 30 Tropical Rose cannas and a mixture of other annuals that I had started from seed. By midsummer I had an annual border that was a real show stopper. The ‘Tea Cups’ elephant ears had grown to heights of four to five feet with large cupped leaves that were green with dark purple veins, and whenever they filled with water they would tip and empty themselves. The sweet potato vines grew aggressively and soon covered the other annuals and started to explore the lawn area.

Add to this foliage palette the beautiful rose colored ‘Tropical Rose’ cannas and I had a garden that rivaled any in the tropical climates. My grandsons told me that all that was missing in my jungle was an elephant or two.

If you look in catalogs that feature elephant ears, you will find that they have become a new “darling” of plant breeders, much like those myriads of new Echinacea and Heuchera plants that have resulted from the same status. For example, Plant Delights Nursery lists 34 varieties of *Colocasia*, and another source estimates that there are over 70 varieties worldwide. If you flip through publications and catalogs, you will see the genus of elephant ear listed as *Alocasia* or *Colocasia*. There are various descriptive differences between these two genera, but in this article I will refer to all elephant ears by the genus *Colocasia*.

Plant breeders have hybridized and developed many appealing varieties of *Colocasia* that will add a tropical touch to patios, gardens, and water features. They vary in size from the three- to four-footers, which make great thrillers in large pots as well as garden accents, to ‘Borneo Giant,’ which has been reported

to grow to a height of 15 feet, with 7 to 10 feet being more realistic. Leaf color varies from the very dark ‘Madeira,’ ‘Black Runner,’ and ‘Black Coral,’ to the palette of green shades including ‘Maui -Gold,’ ‘Jack’s Giant,’ and ‘Ruffles.’ Add variegated-leaved varieties like ‘Mojito’ and ‘Yellow Splash’; leaves with ruffled or contorted edges like ‘Pineapple Princess,’ ‘Black Coral,’ and ‘Diamond Head’; those with colored petioles such as ‘Rhubarb,’ ‘Pink China,’ and Hawaiian Punch,’ and those with dark prominent veins like ‘Blue Hawaii’ and ‘Coffee Cups.’ I readily admit that I have seen only a few of these varieties in a garden setting and that most of the descriptions come from catalogs and publications. I have included the varietal names for the sake of illustrating the many attractive characteristics in these large-leaved plants.

I have found that elephant ears are easy to grow. They can be purchased as “bulbs” (actually tubers) or potted plants. They prefer full sun to bright shade, a reasonably well-drained soil, plenty of moisture, and a layer of mulch. They make attractive water plants (Taro, often sold for use in water features, is *Colocasia*) but should be planted in pots

and then placed in the water feature. Elephant ears are heavy feeders; fertilizer should be applied to the soil at planting time followed by regular feeding throughout the growing season to encourage potential growth. I have found that well-nourished, sturdy plants are able to withstand wind storms, and mine even came through the hail storm of 2011 reasonably well.

The hardiness zone listed for most elephant ears is zone 8, and even with the new hardiness zone map they would never survive winter below zone 7. Therefore, they must be overwintered indoors as either greenhouse plants or stored tubers. Dig and store tubers after the plants have been killed by frost. Digging can be a bit of a task, because the tubers tend to form large clumps in a single season. Use care not to damage the covering, because wounds will invite decay organisms during storage. Use a light spray to wash off most of the soil and then allow the tubers to dry for a week or so out of sunlight. Pack the dry tubers in sphagnum moss or wood



shavings and store them in a dark place at a temperature of 40-50 degrees F. I had to store my bulbs and tubers in a place where the temperature tended to stay at 50-55

degrees F. and found that covering the containers loosely with a sheet of plastic helps prevent desiccation during the winter. It is important that air can enter the storage containers or you will have a smelly, rotting mess in the spring. Although they can be planted directly in the garden, starting the Colocasia tubers indoors six to eight weeks before outdoor planting time will give you a longer period of time to enjoy the plants.

For a garden, patio, or water feature that will have your neighbors talking, plant some elephant ears this summer. I predict that we will find many interesting varieties at garden stores and nurseries this spring. Contrary to what many of us have heard, they do not have to be planted in the shade and actually prefer full sun. Keep them watered and fertilized and you will have big-leaved, tropical-looking plants of which you can be justly proud.

# Looking for the Thaw: A Journal

by Idella Moberg

January. Everything’s suddenly quiet. Eerily still. I stand for a moment, listening, then slowly I draw aside the curtain on the front door and look. They’ve gone. Have they? I open the door and step out. They’ve gone. Bulldozers and diggers and city utility trucks of every sort and size. Gone. The army of men in helmets and electric lime green vests are gone too. They’ve been here all week. And now they’ve gone. Mountains of rusty brown dirt and gray chunks of pavement have disappeared. Orange and white striped warning markers blink

on and off next to where holes in the street gaped only hours ago.

Subzero temperatures are to blame. Our neighbors’ pipes froze. Streams of water gushing out of two houses on our block no longer flow down the hill and around the corner, no longer do they freeze into lumpy puddles at the bottom of our hill. It’s all been cleared away, smoothed down. And even though the garages of both houses are still open, suggesting that cleanup work is still going on inside, it mostly seems to have been taken care of. Now all we need is a January thaw to give us all a break from this weather.

It’s gotten political. Polar vortex? What kind of twaddle is this? No, no, says Al Roker. It’s in my old textbook from weather school. And onto the television screen flashes the very excerpt, which he reads to us. That should settle it. But for some it all smacks of some kind of a global warming something or other. How about that global warming. We’re all freezing to death and they’re talking about global warming. A scientist explains ever so patiently for the umpteenth time that we do have this thing we call winter. Since December the vortex has bulged southward from the north pole. Arctic cold has blown south for the

winter. Traffic in Atlanta—Atlanta!—is stymied, and mayors and politicians are throwing blame balls.

Remember that one January thaw? says my mother-in-law Kay. She’s 96. The tulips came up. I have a spot just outside the kitchen that always stays a little warmer. And the tulips, they just appeared one day. I do remember. It was sometime in the 1970s or ‘80s. Her tulips shot up as though it was spring. Spindly yellowish spikes.

February. January has melted into February without a thaw. It’s still cold. I mean frigid. We’re having an arctic blast

of historic dimensions. Down south 800,000 people are sitting in the dark. Trees and power lines are covered in thick ice. This has been one of the most severe winters ever.

There are things I can do to avoid the severe cold. Regrettable things. I can crawl under a big quilt, with candy and chips and a bucket of ice cream. I can watch TV. Movie binge on Netflix. Watch six seasons of something. Anything. I have SADD, I can say, as though that explains it all, which actually it does, I suppose. I’ll stay out of Florida for now. Should have gone to Mexico.

I can do this. I can make it through the winter, but I’ll need to change my thinking. Get out there and act as though I enjoy it. I can walk at the mall or go to the gym. It’s really kind of fun shoveling the driveway day after day. I can wear layers. Wear a hat. The current trend is hat hair. I can swerve and spin like a ballerina driving to the grocery store. Plastic buckets aren’t just good for ice cream. I can fill them with water and set them outside overnight and make ice lanterns. Make one a day. I could surround the house with them and light up the yard while I wait for the thaw.

*Looking for the Thaw continued on page 7*