

A WORD OR TWO ABOUT GARDENING

Planning an African American Focused Garden.

With February designated Black History Month, this month's article is for those who would like to incorporate elements of a traditional African American yard into their landscaping. Given local climate and soil conditions it is not possible to duplicate exactly the African American yard as it evolved in the American South. However our sub-tropical climate permits us to expand the scope of our landscaping by including both ornamental and edible plants from Africa. Since plantation agriculture never became established in Miami-Dade, there is no tradition of African American gardening comparable to that seen in the American rural south. The first people of African descent to settle in what is now Miami-Dade County prior to emancipation were a few escaped slaves. In the final decade of the 19th Ct., an influx of Bahamians established Coconut Grove as the first permanent black settlement in Miami-Dade County, soon to be joined by American born black settlers from neighboring southern states and the Carolinas. Subsequently further black settlements were established in other parts of the county. While the residents were sometimes involved in local agriculture, many had sort to escape the bitter legacy of slavery they associated with agriculture. The majority formed part of the predominantly black labor force involved in building Florida's developing east coast rail road.

As with other aspects of local African American history, there is little available written material to trace the development of home gardening in Miami-Dade, either as a source of sustenance or pleasure. Over the years several gardening clubs were founded in black communities in various parts of the county, some of which are still active today. One of the earliest was the Poinsettia Garden Club, which was founded in 1926 and devoted to neighborhood beautification. In 1936 a group of black women, under the leadership of Mrs. Annie Coleman organized the Friendship Garden Club, with meetings in the parish hall of St. Agnes Episcopal Church. They held annual flower shows, landscaped schools and later broadened their activities becoming the Friendship Garden and Civic Club. After World War II, Richmond Heights was developed as a private residential area for African American war veterans, and attracted many relatively affluent professionals. The Richmond Heights Garden Club was founded at this time to promote home gardening in general, as well as roadside beautification and conservation of native plants and birds.

The **design elements** that characterized the traditional African American yard were an area of bare soil around the residence (**the swept yard**), **the garden** (devoted to vegetables), **ornamental plants** (especially annuals), possibly a **shade/fruit tree** and **decorative items** fashioned from discarded items such as jars, bottles, and farm implements. The dominant feature of the African American yard as it developed in the South was the conspicuous absence of turf grass. Instead the area around the residence was kept bare and swept smooth (the swept yard) to

provide an outdoor recreational/work area, and to reduce weeds and insect pests. In addition, having the perimeter of the house cleared of vegetation probably reduced the danger from brush fires. The swept yard is still common in West African villages (and indeed other tropical areas, particularly where there is a long dry season). Garden lawns are a landscaping feature that developed in northern temperate latitudes. In the American South, lawns were restricted to plantations and affluent white urban dwellers; however for poor whites too the swept or dirt yard was the rule. It is interesting to note that current environmentally responsible landscaping recommendations call for scaling back areas devoted to turf grass, principally as a means of conserving water but also to reduce the use of fertilizer, pesticides and emissions from gas powered mowers.

One drawback to the swept yard is apparent during the wet months of the year when it can become muddy unless all the loose dirt has been assiduously swept to the side. Not surprisingly, maintenance of such a yard was labor intensive, requiring constant upkeep to remove weeds and smooth out the surface with a brushwood broom. One quote described this task as “ironing” the yard, and it was a weekly chore usually undertaken by the younger members of the family. If you wish to simulate a swept yard locally, better to cover the area with a load of pea gravel.

The term garden to African Americans in the rural south referred to an area of the yard that was specifically set aside for growing vegetables. There were few if any flowering plants in this garden area, though over the years ornamental plants began to be found elsewhere in the yard. There is little in the historical record as to what was grown in slave gardens; for the most part we have to rely on what can be inferred from both unearthed remains and knowledge of vegetables that were then in general cultivation. Post emancipation, more so in the 20th Ct. somewhat more information became available through word of mouth together with official written/pictorial surveys (e.g., WPA in the 1930's). More recently Westmacott's 1992 survey of rural African American yards in Georgia, Alabama and South Carolina gave one of the more comprehensive insights of what was grown in a sampling of the dwindling number of traditional yards that remained in those states. Rivers in his study of slavery in Florida published in 2000 makes passing mention of food crops grown in NE Florida pre-emancipation.

Based on these two sources it is possible to draw up a list of vegetables on which to base our choice of crops to grow in a traditional African American garden. For gardeners in Miami-Dade we can divide this list of crops into three overlapping growing seasons: cool (November to February), warm (October to March) and summer (February to July). In addition to the vegetables reviewed below the following were also found in Westmacott's survey: globe and Jerusalem artichokes, asparagus, English peas and peanuts. These are either difficult or totally unsuited to Miami-Dade. None of the yards in Westmacott's survey grew broccoli, cauliflower, lettuce, parsnips, pumpkin or spinach.

Cool season: Cabbage - grows best at temperatures from 60 – 70°F; hard heading or white cabbages usually fail to develop a tight head under local conditions. Maintain even soil moisture (otherwise heads can split), provide frequent light applications of fertilizer and watch for leaf chewing insects. **Collards** – regarded as

a non-heading cabbage are easier to grow but also require cool temperatures.

Turnip (root and greens), for greens select varieties grown for their tops such as 'All Tops'; harvest roots when no more than 3" across - can become woody and liable to split in wet soil. **Irish potatoes**, plant no later than January; require sufficient depth of soil and can be difficult to grow – a range of pests and disease. Choose only seed potatoes suited to Florida such as Sebago, La Chipper or La Rouge. **Onions**. For *bulbing* onions select only short day (early) types and grow transplants from seed. Avoid sets – most are long day types. For *non-bulbing* onions (green onions also known as scallions) use long day white onions, either seeds or sets.

Warm Season Many warm season vegetables can be planted in September, but this is the height of hurricane season and Miami-Dade's second wettest month so it is usually more prudent to wait until October. Depending on variety **lima and snap beans** require either no support (bush beans) or some form of support (pole beans). Seed usually sown directly – soil must be kept moist, not wet, until seedling emerges. There after water as soil surface dries out. Diseases can cause seedling collapse as well as affecting foliage and pods. **Sweet corn** requires enriched, moist soil (rolled leaves indicate a need for water) with regular applications of fertilizer (e.g., 12:12:12, N/P/K.). Corn is wind pollinated so group plants together in blocks to aid pollination. Numerous pests can make corn difficult to grow in local home gardens. **Tomatoes**: Either determinate (bush - fruit matures at the same time) or indeterminate (vining - fruit matures throughout the season). Grow from seed or transplants; heirloom varieties may be more susceptible to disease. Provide at least 6 hours sun daily and evenly moist soil; cherry tomatoes can be grown during summer. **Bell peppers**: culture similar to tomatoes – somewhat more heat and drought tolerant. **Eggplant** Grow from transplants in enriched soil. Greater heat and drought tolerance than tomatoes or peppers – can be grown into summer but risk of disease increases. Requires up to 3 months until harvest; fruit becomes bitter if allowed to become fully mature. Watch for melon thrips and root/basal stem rots. **Squash (summer)** Purchase transplants (easiest) or grow them from seed – relatively short time to harvest (less than 1½ months). Require hand pollination if bees are absent; watch for mildews on foliage and pickleworm damage to fruit. **Cucumber** Specific varieties for either salads (slicers) or pickling. Grow directly from seeds (or start in transplant pots) and provide a support (trellis). Hand pollinate if no bees (except parthenocarpic seedless varieties). Watch for mildews on foliage and pickle worms on fruit. **Cantaloupe** (a misnomer, actually a musk melon). Grow directly from seed or use transplants. Culture is similar to cucumbers but time to harvest longer - requires up to 3 months of warm weather with low relative humidity, plus regular water to ensure evenly moist soil. Apply mulch to prevent fruit from contacting wet soil. Disease and insect pests can make this a challenging crop under Miami-Dade conditions.

Summer Rather than growing a vegetable crop through the summer many local gardeners prefer to rest the soil, often covering it with clear plastic. This traps the sun's heat (greenhouse effect) helping to destroy weed seeds and assorted pests in the top few inches of soil (soil solarization). A few gardeners plant a cover crop

during summer to help enrich the soil by fixing nitrogen and/or as a green manure by incorporating it into the soil.

If you wish to extend the growing season, growing more crops found in a traditional African American vegetable garden, there are a few suited to local summer conditions. **Okra** is grown as an annual crop, planted from late February to September using seeds (previously soaked overnight) sown directly in the ground, spaced 6-12" apart. Apply fertilizer every 3-4 weeks and remove pods within 3 days (they rapidly become fibrous). Once plants become leggy they can be cut close to the ground and allowed to re-grow. Pests include whitefly, thrips, stink bugs (damage pods) and spider mites; diseases include damping off fungi and powdery mildew. Okra is extremely susceptible to root damage from pathogenic soil nematodes; avoid planting if soil is already infested. **Sweet potatoes** are swollen storage roots (Irish potatoes are swollen rhizomes, i.e., stems). Plant Feb – July, using either transplants (termed slips, adventitious shoots that sprout from the stem end of a sweet potato), or whole/sectioned sweet potatoes. Slips reduce the risk of introducing pests and disease, especially sweet potato weevil. Time to harvest is 3-4 months. **Black-eye peas** can be directly sown where they are to be grown, spaced at 3" intervals thinning to 18" after germination. Location must be in full sun, never flood and have free draining soil. Drought tolerant and well adapted to dry infertile soil (highly fertile soil can reduce the number of pods), a light side dressing of a low nitrogen fertilizer (e.g., 5/10/10, N-P-K) can be applied after plants are thinned out. Harvest after 2-3 mo.; once peas start to swell in the pod.

Black-eye peas are one of a group of pulses known as cowpeas (cultigroups of *Vigna unguiculata*). Although wild cowpeas are believed to have diversified in southern Africa, their widespread use as a food crop first developed in W. Africa. They are among a number of other crops that include eggplant, melons, okra and sesame that were first brought to the Americas during the time of the slave trade.

Vegetable crops in a traditional African American vegetable garden were planted in long straight rows – there were no intensive systems (square foot or French) or raised beds. Most modern yards don't have sufficient room for planting in rows and residents in those areas of Miami-Dade on limestone will find it much easier to build raised beds. In the past there were **very few rural African Americans fortunate enough to have access to water to irrigate their vegetable crops**. It was usually a case of having faith that there would be sufficient rainfall. For modern day local gardeners where most vegetables are grown in South Florida's dry season, it is a given that rainfall will not be sufficient. A reliable source of water for local vegetable gardens is therefore imperative. To a lesser extent this is also true for the most important ornamental element of the traditional African American yard, annuals

As the strictly utilitarian role of the rural African American yard (as an essential source of food) lessened, especially through the 20th Ct., space became available for ornamental plants. Of these, **flowering annuals** were by far the most important. The area immediately in front of the house was where flowers were most in evidence and was regarded as a welcoming gesture to visitors. Plants were not arranged in any order as to color or size, but reflected the gardener's own individual preferences. The fact that formal flower beds were not very common has been ascribed to the

fact that economic conditions in the rural south forced many African Americans to move frequently. Instead containers were used, improvised from old sinks, tires, troughs and wheelbarrows. In planting out your flowering annuals you may wish to simulate this practice, remembering to make sure that whatever you use has drainage holes. The flowering annuals listed below are those most frequently found in Westmacott's survey. They can be successfully grown in Miami-Dade during the winter months, however comparatively few can withstand this area's hot wet summer. Do not over water - hand water around the base of each plant when the top 1" of soil dries out (use a wand type extension fitted with a breaker nozzle).

Petunias (*Petunia x hybrida*). Use pelleted seed (much easier to handle) or transplants; set out Nov-Feb in an area receiving 6-8 hours sun, spacing 6-8" off center (o.c.). Remove spent flowers and pinch out new growth to encourage branching. Situate away from sprinklers to reduce the risk of petal blight.

Marigolds (*Tagetes* spp.) are easy to grow, with many varieties in different sizes and colors: African types, tall with large globe shaped flower heads in shades of yellow to orange as well as white; the popular French types are smaller with a wider range of colors; triploid hybrids, sterile crosses between the two above types, have a longer period of flowering but are more expensive. Sow seeds directly where they are to be grown (Feb-Dec), thinning out after germination to 8 -24" between plants - depends on the type being grown. Choose a site with full sun, good drainage and moderately fertile soil. Fertilize lightly to encourage blossoms rather than excess foliage. Once marigolds commence flowering, they will last for 2-3 months in the landscape (less in an especially wet summer) at which time they should be replaced. There are few pests, however excess moisture, as occurs during a S. Florida summer, is conducive to crown and root rots.

Sultana (*Impatiens walleriana* syn. *sultani*) is also known as bizzy Lizzy or impatiens. Many cultivars; most currently derived from 'Super Elfin' series. Set out transplants 12-18" o.c. late October-February in a rich, moist, free draining soil in full sun (dappled shade preferable). Too much fertilizer nitrogen encourages leafy growth at the expense of flowers. Water carefully - excess leads to stem and root rots, too cold or warm can directly damage flower petals.

Coleus (*Solenostemon scutellarioides*) - attractively patterned often multi-colored foliage, in shades of pink, red, maroon, yellow and green; flower spike is removed to encourage extended production of foliage - growth ceases if the plant goes to seed. Usually grown as an annual; in Miami-Dade may survive for more than one season. Grow from seed, cuttings or purchase transplants; set out March-Sep. in moist (never wet) soil with some light shade. Excess shade produces weak, leggy plants. There are some newer cultivars such as 'Pineapple', 'Alabama Sunset', 'Saturn' and the Solar series that are much more tolerant of direct sun.

Sunflower (*Helianthus* spp.) grow up to 6-8' (dwarf varieties to 4') and are single stem or branching. Choose a site in full sun and sow purchased seeds (saved seeds produce inferior results) directly into the ground (Nov-Feb); stake tall varieties and fertilize lightly. Plants die out once the summer rainy season commences. Since sunflowers concentrate lead in their roots there is interest in planting them in inner-city areas where lead-contaminated soil is often a problem.

Portulaca or **Moss Rose** (*Portulaca grandiflora*) is available in wide range of colors – those with double flowers are especially attractive. Sow seed (seed tapes more convenient) or set out transplants (March-Aug) in a site that receives full sun - well suited to thin low fertility soils that exhibit poor water retention, such as the limestone of South Miami-Dade. Short flowering period can be extended by planting seeds at 6 week intervals; plants re-seed but flowers produced are of poor quality.

Salvia (Sage) many species in cultivation; *Salvia splendens* most commonly used as bedding plant, perennial but usually grown as an annual. Flowers are red, plus cultivars that are purple, pink, white or salmon as well as those that are bicolored or striped. Set out transplants Feb-Nov in full sun/part dappled shade. Salvias adapt well to poor soils – use fertilizer sparingly. Remove spent flower spikes to extend flowering; prone to disease in extended periods of wet weather. Culinary sage, *Salvia officinalis* is best planted as a winter annual.

Geranium (*Pelargonium x hortum*, correctly known as pelargoniums) widely used as annual bedding plants either single or double flowering in various shades of red, pink, orange and white. Many different cultivars have been developed including the Dynamo Series, Orbit Series, Ringo 2000 Series and the tetraploid 'Tetra Scarlet' and 'Freckles', these latter producing stronger plants with larger flowers. Purchase transplants or raise from seed (fluctuating temperatures reduce germination; seed usually scarified and pelleted to hasten germination making it relatively expensive). Set out (Nov-Feb) in a sunny site preferably with some afternoon shade; too much inhibits flowering and causes plants to become leggy. Especially suited to container culture. Provide a gritty, free draining, evenly moist soil. In hot sun plants wilt, rapidly lose foliage and become unattractive. Apply a slow release fertilizer (i.e. 10/10/10) at the time of planting, and then at 8-week intervals. Pelargoniums are especially suited to container culture – although perennial they usually do not thrive under the hot, humid conditions of a typical S. Florida summer.

Zinnias Most commercially important cultivars are derived from *Zinnia elegans* and *Zinnia haagaena*, and are available in practically all colors except blue, with flower types from heirloom daisy like, pom-pom (dahlia-like) or cactus flowered. Plants range in height from 5-6" to 3', (semi-double Thumbelina Mix, through intermediate sized and tall series - latter should be staked). Zinnias adapt well to container culture, make excellent cut flowers, and have the added advantage in south Florida of being one of the few annuals that usually lasts well into summer. Space transplants 1-3' o.c. - full sun and free draining soil essential. Zinnias are easy to grow from seed; sow directly in the ground at intervals of 4-5" thinning out once true leaves form. Pinch young plants to encourage branching, and remove spent blooms before they go to seed. Powdery mildew can be a serious problem during periods of moderately hot dry weather, and leaf spotting and blight during extended rainy spells. Several cultivars are available with resistance to powdery mildew, e.g., the Profusion series, 'Orange Star', Pinwheel series, 'Oklahoma' and Benary's Giant Series. 'Crystal White' is a cultivar of *Z. augustifolia*, native to the southern U.S, which has small daisy-like flowers, and is also resistant to powdery mildew.

Other annuals favored in a traditional African American yards included: *Dianthus* spp. (**pinks** but especially **sweet Williams**), **snapdragons**; **Madagascar periwinkle** (*Catharanthus roseus*), given full sun and gritty free draining soil can be grown locally as perennials; **begonias** (wax begonias are widely available locally and are a water wise substitute for impatiens); **dusty miller** (used for silvery lacy foliage which deteriorates as humidity increases during late spring) and **four o'clocks** (*Mirabilis jalapa*), at their best in a climate drier than that of S. Florida, they do grow here and have even naturalized in some areas - can become weedy.

The present article summarizes some of the information on developing an African American/African focused yard that is available on the Miami-Dade Extension Office web site (http://miami-dade.ifas.ufl.edu/Pubs_LnG2.shtml), which should be accessed for further details. I am indebted to Dr Dorothy J. Fields, Black Archives History and Research Foundation of South Florida, for access to archival material.

John McLaughlin

January 21, 2009