

Garden Line - March 2009

by Brent Moon - HPARD Urban Garden Manager

March brings us the Vernal Equinox and the return of gardening in earnest. Gardeners will be flocking to their local nurseries and garden stores, so be prepared. For all you vegetable lovers, this is the month you want to get your warm season vegetables planted. Typical fare include summer beans and peas, carrots, peppers, squash, eggplant, okra, melons, corn, cucumber, onions, and tomatoes, if you choose an early-maturing variety and get them in early in the month. More exotic choices include chicory, endive, horseradish, mache (corn salad), and mizuna. Be sure to get your plants off to a good start with the addition of compost as you plant, or a good organic fertilizer.



This is also a great month to get your fruit crops going. Numerous citrus plants do well in our area, needing only occasional winter protection. Limes are the most frost sensitive, while Satsumas and kumquats are the most frost tolerant. There are many cultivars of citrus that do well here, so check with your local nursery or check out the Urban Harvest web site for a list of varieties that perform well in our area.

Don't limit yourself to citrus, however. Houston gardeners can have success with bananas, blackberries, blueberries, figs, grapes, papaya, peaches, pears, persimmons, pomegranates, and strawberries, to name a few. Again, the Urban Harvest web site contains a list of varieties that perform well in our area.



With the onset of warmer weather, you will likely see the return of predatory insects. Keep an eye out for aphids, spider mites, stinkbugs, leaf-footed bugs, and of course, the tomato hornworm. Many of these can be controlled with insecticidal soap (a mixture of liquid soap, a little rubbing alcohol and water) or with Neem or orange oil, the latter two of which can be found at your local nursery or hardware store. If you are observant, you can usually locate and simply "handpick" the hornworms. They may also be controlled with the biological agent known as Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*), sold as Dipel and Thuricide. Hornworms are the larval stage of the beautiful Sphinx moth and some folks are reluctant to kill them. This is up to the individual and how much damage to their tomatoes one is willing to put up with. If you come across a hornworm with what looks like little grains of rice attached to it, leave it alone. These are actually the egg sacs of a predatory wasp that has attacked

the worm. In a few days, the eggs will hatch out and the wasp larvae will attack and devour the hornworm. This predatory wasp is what is known as a beneficial insect and we want to encourage as many of them as possible in our gardens, as they help control pests.

One way to encourage beneficial insects in your garden is to grow a wide variety of plants, especially herbs and flowers. Herbs such as parsley, dill, fennel, carrot, and cilantro are very attractive to beneficial insects, especially when allowed to flower. They produce a type of flower known as an umbel, which is what attract the insects. Some herbs, such as parsley and dill, are also good sources of food for butterfly larvae. Be sure to plant several members of the sunflower family such as coreopsis, coneflowers, asters, cosmos, rudbeckia, gaillardia, and of course, actual sunflowers. Planting some *Asclepias* (butterfly weed) will provide a good source of food for Monarch butterflies, as well as having beautiful flowers.

