

# Gardener's Notebook

*Horticultural News and Research Important to American Gardeners*

## Blue Star Shines in Trials in the Midwest

BLUE STAR (*Amsonia* spp.) has been called the “Lillian Gish of perennials” because the pale blue spring flowers have the same delicate beauty as the star from the silent movie era. Its popularity soared after native plant enthusiasts began seeking out American species such as *Amsonia hubrichtii* for their strong autumn personalities and designers began using these perennials en masse.

The Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe, Illinois, recently published the results of an evaluation of 11 taxa of *Amsonia*, conducted from 1994 to 1999. Evaluation specifics included bloom period and flower color, size, and coverage, as well as habit and disease and pest resistance. *Amsonia tabernaemontana* var. *salicifolia* and *A. illustris*, the highest rated species with scores of five stars (“excellent”), produced exceptional floral displays, covering 80 to 100 percent of the plants. Close seconds were *A. hubrichtii* and *A. tabernaemontana*, which were rated “good to excellent.”



*Amsonia illustris* ranked tops in floral display.

All the varieties in the trials exhibited clean, healthy foliage and some degree of yellow to gold fall color in October and November. All were disease free and unaffected by insects or animals (the stems contain a milky latex sap that is unappealing to deer). Fall foliage color and flower production improved as plants matured.

The bluestars in the trials proved to be sturdy, low-maintenance perennials with three seasons of interest: spring flowers, attractive, willowy summer foliage, and bright autumn color. All proved hardy in USDA Zone 5 during the trial period.

To request a copy of Issue 18, “An Evaluation Study of Hardy Amsonia,” send \$3, payable to Chicago Botanic Garden, to: Plant Evaluation Notes, c/o Richard Hawke, Chicago Botanic Garden, 1000 Lake Cook Road, Glencoe, IL 60022.

## QUARANTINE IMPOSED FOR SUDDEN OAK DEATH

HORTICULTURISTS ON the West Coast are still greatly concerned about sudden oak death, a fatal fungal disease that was first detected in tanoaks (*Lithocarpus densiflorus*) in Marin County, California, in 1999. The disease has since spread to other California counties and into Curry County, Oregon. It also spread to other native oak species: coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*), black oak (*Q. kelloggii*), and Shreve's oak (*Q. parvula* var. *shrevei*); several California bay laurels (*Umbellularia californica*) have also been found to be infected.

On February 14, 2002, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service announced an interim quarantine of plants susceptible to *Phytophthora ramorum*, the fungus responsible for sudden oak death. This ruling allows nurseries in affected counties to ship species known to host *P. ramorum* interstate only if the shipment is accompanied by a certificate indicating that the plants have been inspected and that they originate from a nursery that is



Coast live oak, above, is an affected species.

free of the fungus. The quarantine applies to part of Curry County and all 12 counties of California.

The quarantine may not be enough. “We do know the disease is present in the soil,” says Katie Facino, information officer for the California Oak Mortality Task Force. “It can be spread by bikes, cars, shoes, dogs, and in many other ways, so public education is a big part of our strategy for controlling it.”

In addition to the species listed above, the quarantine applies to the following plants known to host the disease: bigleaf maple (*Acer macrophyllum*), California buckeye (*Aesculus californica*), California coffeeberry (*Rhamnus californicus*), California honeysuckle (*Lonicera hispidula*), huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*), madrone (*Arbutus menziesii*), manzanita (*Arctostaphylos manzanita*), rhododendrons and azaleas (*Rhododendron* spp.), toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*), and *Viburnum × bodnantense*.

To report a diseased plant, log on to <http://hilda.espm.berkeley.edu>.

## LADY BIRD JOHNSON RECEIVES ARBORETUM GOLD

FORMER FIRST LADY Lady Bird Johnson and her Committee for a More Beautiful Capital are the first recipients of the Gold Medal Award from the U.S. National Arboretum in Washington, D.C. The medal, provided by the Friends of the National Arboretum (FONA), will be presented along with a



Lady Bird Johnson in a 1995 photograph.

certificate of appreciation at a formal dinner to be held at the arboretum on October 3 this year. Citing Johnson's long involvement with environmental improvements and beautification efforts nationally, Arboretum Director Thomas Elias stated that Johnson's efforts "epitomize the arboretum's mission."

Johnson put together the committee in 1965, when her husband, Lyndon B. Johnson, was president. After she returned to Texas, Johnson worked with the

Texas Highway Department, preserving wildflowers along the state's interstates and freeways. Then, in 1982, she founded the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin, Texas, dedicated to promoting and preserving native plants. Johnson has received numerous other awards, including the Liberty Hyde Bailey Award from the American Horticultural Society in 1993.

## GRAND CHAMPION DOWNED

ON JUNE 6, 2002, the Wye oak—some 31 tons of it—toppled in the wild winds of a thunderstorm in the village of Wye in Talbot County on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. The majestic white oak (*Quercus alba*)—96 feet tall, 32 feet in circumference, and estimated to be 460 years old—fell as nobly as it lived, without damaging property or power lines.

In 1919, it was the very first tree nominated in *American Forests* magazine's national Hall of Fame for trees. Thereafter, its title as the grandest-white-oak-of-them-all and one of the finest trees in the country was undisputed. It was named Maryland's State Tree in 1941 and eventually soared over a third of an acre in the park named in its honor: Wye Oak State Park.

In April, 2002, two clones of the Wye oak—part of a cloning project initiated in 2000—were planted at Mount Vernon. Now, buds of the downed oak will also be used for cloning. "All of the



The Wye oak, estimated to be over 400 years old, toppled in June 2002.

branches have been shipped to a nursery where they are being kept in cold storage," says John Ohler, park manager of Wye Oak State Park. For more information on the Wye oak, visit [www.dnr.state.md.us/forests/trees/giant.html](http://www.dnr.state.md.us/forests/trees/giant.html).

## VINEGAR IS TOUGH ON WEEDS

IT MAY NOT yet rival Jerry Baker as a proponent of homemade pesticides, but the USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS) is moving into the kitchen. Researchers Jay Radhakrishnan, John T. Teasdale, and Ben Coffman of the ARS's Beltsville, Maryland, facility, scientifically tested vinegar



Vinegar has been shown to kill a number of common weeds.

for herbicidal qualities and found it an efficacious control for many weeds. A 5 percent solution—the strength of a standard bottle of household vinegar—had a 100 percent kill rate on the top growth of such tough customers as Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*). [Editor's note: Personal use has shown it also kills burdock (*Arctium lappa*).

By hand-spraying leaves to coat them uniformly, the researchers found that 5- and 10-percent solutions killed weeds such as lamb's-quarters (*Chenopodium album*), giant foxtail (*Setaria faberi*), velvetleaf (*Abutilon theophrasti*), and smooth pigweed (*Amaranthus hybridus*) in the first two weeks of life. Older plants required higher concentrations of vinegar to kill them.

The vinegar used by the researchers was made from fruits or grains, thus conforming to organic farming standards. The experiments confirm what many gardeners already knew: Vinegar is a potent, inexpensive, and environmentally-safe weed killer—and it's not bad on tossed salads, either.

## ORGANIC SEAL

BEGINNING OCTOBER 21, 2002, organic food that originates in the United States or abroad may display a USDA seal to signify that it comes from a certified farm. To gain "organic" certification, farmers must have their farms inspected by government-approved certifiers and meet USDA organic standards requiring that food contain no synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, or growth hormones, and are not genetically modified. In addition, the use of additives and processing aids is highly restricted. Companies that process organic food must be certified as well.

While the USDA makes no claims that organically produced food is safer or more nutritious than conventionally produced food, in a 2002 survey of 1,029 adults released by the National Center for Public Policy Research, a majority of consumers interpreted the proposed USDA seal as an indication that certified organic foods "are better in some way; safer; more healthy; and better for the environment." ♡ —Carole Ottesen, Associate Editor

