

Spring Cleaning

By Kim Smith

Despite the chill in the air, my garden is calling. Red Riding Hood tulips poke magenta points through semi-frozen ground, and fresh notes of newly arrived songbirds come trilling. Our neighborhood's male cardinal has awakened from his winter quietude, vigorously whistling varied phrases from the tallest treetops. Lest you are uncertain who is in command, he loudly proclaims his territory, from sunup till sundown. True harbingers of spring, the plump furry buds of the magnolias are bursting with promised splendor.

Although it is too early to work the soil, there are plenty of tasks to tend, and I am reveling in much-longed-for few spare hours pottering around the garden. The blackberries are receiving a thorough pruning, thinning old canes and spindly newer shoots, to leave only the most vigorous, for best fruit production. The roses benefit from housekeeping—pruning blackened tips and twiggy growth. I see our native *Rosa virginiana*, planted to provide fruit for songbirds, is sending forth suckers. This could be problematic in our postage stamp of a yard. Time will tell. The honeysuckles are a tangled mass and they, too, undergo a thorough pruning. Stalks of perennials and annuals that were left standing for seed dispersal and for songbirds to perch upon are cut clean to the ground. I am eager to learn if seeds of wildflowers collected in autumn and tossed randomly about the garden will germinate—seaside goldenrod (*Solidago sempervirens*) for the Monarchs, rock bells (*Aquilegia canadensis*) for the hummingbirds, and flat-topped white aster (*Aster umbellatus*) for the Harris Checkerspot. I see minor insect damage on the foliage of the mountain laurel and take this as a good sign; possibly caused by caterpillars, a true indication Lepidoptera are colonizing garden.

A whiff of the raw soggy smell of black earth awakens my senses. I close my eyes and imagine the dogwood in bloom with a sea of violas, bluebells, and bluets swirling in waves beneath her limbs. Pruning flowering and fruiting trees is a project I enjoy. We are left with branches to coax into bloom indoors. Warm-pink dogwood and peach blossoms, rosy-pink plum blossoms and the sparkling white apricot blossoms, with their liltingly fragrance, are nothing to complain about.

Three years in the ground and we have yet to prune the American wisteria (*Wisteria frutescens* 'Amethyst Falls'). Not because it is not thriving. American wisteria is a well-behaved vine. The tendrils spiral and become woody curlicues and will, when there are more of them, make a great wreath form. American wisteria was planted to support Lepidoptera, as the foliage is a larval host plant for various caterpillars. On the other hand, Chinese wisteria (*Wisteria sinensis*), which was planted for its divine fragrance, benefits greatly (as will your supporting structure) from a regular maintenance program of twice-yearly pruning.

Growing Chinese wisteria close to a dwelling is a life-long commitment. Plant against a super sturdy support such as an iron arbor, stonewall, or weight-bearing post or column. Without steady maintenance—judicious thinning and continual pruning—Chinese wisteria has the potential to seriously damage and ultimately destroy. In our old neighborhood in Boston, on Commonwealth Avenue, Chinese wisteria had wrapped itself through a second-story iron balcony and pulled the structure off and away from the brick. The wisteria was supporting the balcony, tilting it at a 45-degree angle, cartoon-like, but really not funny at all because the damage was so serious. With that in mind, begin pruning in February or March, before the buds begin to swell. The following method of pruning creates the classic espaliered shape, with a main

trunk and lateral scaffolding from where the blossoms drape. The tiers of horizontal scaffolds should be spaced approximately 1 1/2 feet apart. Train the shoots of a young plant to grow straight up, to the point of the first desired lateral branching. Remove the growing tip with a heading cut. At this point, new shoots will appear. Train, by tying, one shoot to continue to grow up towards the next desired point of the lateral scaffold. Tie second and third shoots to grow perpendicular to the main trunk, which will become the first tier of scaffolding. Shorten the fourth shoot to six inches, which will become a flowering short lateral. Remove all other shoots.

In mid-summer cut all runners and lower growing shoots at the point where they grow from the trunk. Shorten shoots emerging along the main scaffolding branches to about six or seven inches, which will promote flower-producing shoots. Eventually, some of the shortened shoots will develop flowering spurs and others will only produce foliage. The shortened lateral shoots look like a hand after five to six years of pruning. More precise pruning is then left for winter, when the underlying shape of the vine is clearly visible.

With our daughter home from college for a few days during spring break, she and I took, what was planned to be, a leisurely walk through the Great Magnolia Swamp at Ravenswood Park. We became lost, exploring much more of the park than anticipated. Plentiful rain and snow this winter created innumerable vernal ponds. Barring a late season snow storm (our son was born on the first day of spring, during a blizzard), in a few short weeks these ponds will be teeming with amphibians—wood frogs, spotted salamanders and spring peepers, to name but a few. It won't be long now. Our all-too-ephemeral New England spring is emerging by flutter and glimmer, peep and peek, and a glimpse that, with weather on our side, promises more than a glance.

Kim Smith is an interior and garden designer. Preorders for her forthcoming book *Oh Garden of Fresh Possibilities! ~ Notes from a Gloucester Garden*, June 2008, are available through her website at www.kimsmithdesigns.com and Toad Hall Bookstore at www.toadhallbooks.org and David R. Godine, publisher. Kim will be happy to respond to readers' questions and comments at kimsmithdesigns@hotmail.com.

Second-Year Wisteria "Hand"





Chortling Male Cardinal