**Survey**

Oooops ... It's been a while since we called for renewal of subscriptions to our horticulture newsletter. We are required to ask that our readers periodically renew, and that time is here once again. The renewal form is at the bottom of the enclosed one-page survey. Completing the survey is not required but would be very helpful to us in addressing end of year reports. Please return by December 15 if possible. Renewal forms will be detached from the surveys on arrival at our office. Thanks!

**Christmas Tree Care**

Two very quick comments: First, our Extension forestry specialists tell us that plain old water is the very best preservative for your cut Christmas trees. Additives, both home brewed and store bought, have not been shown to prolong freshness and might actually promote dryness of the tree. Secondly, don't trust your wires and lights, especially if they have a few years of wear and tear. Old lighting wires can ignite fires, possibly on Christmas trees inside the home or on decorated shrubs in the landscape. Unplug old or new lighting before you leave the house.

**Private or Commercial?**

Core training for all pesticide applicators will be offered in Pender County Wednesday, November 22, beginning at 9 AM, concluding no later than 3 PM. If you have your manuals, there is no charge. If you do not have your manuals, you will need to pay for them when you arrive. Cost is $5 for Applying Pesticides Safely and $5 for NC Pesticide Laws and Regulations. Both of these manuals are needed for all commercial and private license testing. Ornamental and Turf Specialty Training will be offered Thursday, November 30 from 8:30 AM to 11:30. If you have your manuals, there is no charge. If you do not have your manuals, you will need to pay for them when you arrive. The cost is $15 for the Ornamental and Turfgrass Pest Control Manual. Testing will begin for all categories at 1 PM on Thursday, November 30. You must bring photo identification to the testing. Please call Pender County Cooperative Extension at 910 259-1235 ASAP to reserve a space in the class of your choice, or for location and additional information.

**Peony Question Once Again**

A recent caller states that some of her peonies are not flowering as they should from year to year. As noted in a previous newsletter a year or two ago, this is most
likely related to variety. We simply don't get enough chilling hours during our winters for the newer selections. Old fashioned cultivars which should do reasonably well include ‘Baroness Schroeder’, ‘Festival Maxima’, 'Sarah Bernhardt' and others. Even the well adapted selections may not bloom for a few years after transplanting, especially if the tubers were small. Planting the tubers more than 2 inches deep, planting in a shady or poorly drained location, competition from tree and shrub roots, and late spring frosts are additional possibilities. Give me a call at 633-1477 for more information on peonies.

Pink Hibiscus Mealybug

From LSU comes an update on the pink hibiscus mealybug, an introduced pest which could be a threat along any coastal areas where hibiscus are established. Symptoms of an infestation include heavy, cotton-like, white waxy buildup on the terminals, stems and branches of infested plants. For pictures and other information, visit:

www.lsuagcenter.com or www.ldaf.state.la.us

Parasitic wasps are currently being used in Louisiana, where the hibiscus mealybug poses a serious threat to hibiscus, bougainvillea, palms, oleander, sugarcane, corn, soybeans, vegetables and citrus. If you encounter what appears to be hibiscus mealybug in Eastern NC, please bring a sample by the Extension office or contact us at 633-1477.

Master Gardener Training for 2007

Master Gardener training will be provided in 2007 but not 2008. The first session will be January 10, 9 AM to noon. From January through March we will provide about 40 hours of training and in return our new volunteers will donate 40 hours of volunteer time in that first year. In subsequent years volunteers donate 20 hours annually to stay current in the program. Volunteer opportunities include presentations to groups, answering the phones, working in our landscape plant collection and in our demonstration vegetable garden, leading tours on the grounds, assisting us at the county fair, and working with youth both in the schools and in the community. Give me a call at 633-1477 if you'd like to know more about this opportunity to develop your horticulture knowledge while donating your time and talents to the community.

Spring Flowering Bulbs: Time to Plant

Late November into early December is the time to get busy planting your spring flowering bulbs. The planting site should be well drained and receive partial shade or at least a break from full sun during mid day through afternoon. In general, planting depth should be equal to 3-4 times the width of the bulb at its base. Many of the bulbs most familiar to American gardeners do not perennialize well in our hot and humid climate, and may only last a few years. These include tulips, crocus, hyacinths, anemones, grape hyacinth and snowdrops. You can certainly plant them, but they should perhaps be viewed more as annuals than long term perennials. Tulips are a bit of a special case; more than 4,000 varieties are known to exist and some, such as the *Tulipa clusiana* selections, may perennialize better than others in our region. According to the Fall 2006 horticulture newsletter from the Pender County Extension office, reliable long-lived spring flowering bulbs for our area include summer snowflake (*Leucojum aestivum*), Spanish bluebells (*Hyacinthoides hispanica*), star flower (*Ipheion uniflorum*), and a number of daffodil varieties. Summer snowflake happens to be one of my favorites. Flower spikes shoot up to 12-18 inches, producing white bell shaped flowers with slight green markings, sometime in mid spring. Unlike most spring flowering bulbs, summer snowflake actually has some tolerance of wet areas. Spanish bluebells are a nice companion plant for azaleas, because they bloom at the same time as many of our azalea cultivars and also thrive under the same conditions. Blue, white and pink varieties are available. Star flower usually blooms early, along with the daffodils.
Starflower produces blueish-white flowers on 6- to 8-inch stems. They can really spread in the landscape, so site selection may need to be carefully considered. Finally, while daffodils have a tremendous reputation in southeastern landscapes, not all are actually good perennializers. According to Charlotte Glen of the Pender County office, 'Trevithian', 'Sweetness', and 'Pipit' are jonquil types which should perennialize well. Good large flowering selections include 'Carlton', 'Fortune', 'St. Keverne', 'Ice Follies', and 'Mt. Hood'. Early flowering shorter selections to consider include 'February Gold', 'Jack Snipe', 'Thalia', and 'Hawera'. Give me a call for more complete information on spring flowering bulbs.

### 'Summer Cascade' River Birch

On a recent Master Gardener field trip to the J.C. Raulston Arboretum in Raleigh, I noticed a weeping river birch cultivar which is expected to become a big item in the landscape trade. According to horticulture specialists at NC State University, 'Summer Cascade' river birch will be "ideal for use as a specimen tree or focal point, particularly with water features, or for use in group plantings or creative design elements including topiary." If untrained, this cultivar will form a mounded shrub or small tree with successive layers of arching branches. To get a true, upright tree with weeping form, you'll need to stake and train it early on. It is believed this will be an extremely successful introduction, although we're still a year or so away from easy availability. River birch as a species (*Betula nigra*) is native to our area and fairly common in Craven County; it is also the only birch species you're likely to have any long term success with in the hot and humid SE United States. High soil pH (over 6.5) and compacted, dry soils will not support vigorous, healthy river birch growth. These are absolutely the wrong trees for parking lot planters. I'd also like to add that for our part of the country, there aren't a lot of good, reliable deciduous weeping tree selections out there. I would expect 'Summer Cascade' to be significantly more reliable over the long run than, for example, weeping flowering cherries.

### Landscape

Is wood ash good for the garden and landscape? Depends. An information note from Purdue University reminds us that the primary effect of wood ash is to raise the pH. Wood ash does have 10% potash (source of potassium), but is also about 25% calcium carbonate, and therefore functions as a liming source. Purdue recommends no more than 20 pounds per 100 square feet annually to a given site; however, if the soil pH is already around 6.5 or higher you probably shouldn't add wood ash at all. Also, it's best to generally avoid wood ash on acid-loving plants such as azaleas, camellias, blueberries and others - unless a soil test taken this year tells you the soil pH is actually too low. Now a quick word on "acid-loving". This is actually a bit of a misnomer. On the pH scale, anything under 7.0 is acid. Virtually all of our landscape and garden plants perform better in a range no higher than 6.0 to 6.5, so in that sense everything we work with is acid-loving. It might be better to think of azaleas, blueberries and so forth as "more" acid-loving than other plants.

I had the opportunity to visit with the new Taberna Garden Club a few weeks ago. One of the questions I dodged was "what are some good deer resistant plants?" A fair question, but one that always makes me cringe because I don't have a lot of confidence in my answers. But I've had some time to think about it, so let's try a few suggestions that show up repeatedly as "not likely to be bothered": Japanese plum yew (*Cephalotaxus harringtonia*), salvias (probably my favorite group of flowering perennials), ferns, mints (aggressive beyond belief; keep in containers), viburnums, ornamental grass (notice all the pink muhly grass this fall?), and from the above discussion on bulbs - daffodils, Spanish bluebells, star flower and summer snowflake.

Certainly not too late to plant pansies,
violas, snapdragons and dianthus depending on what's still available. Don't shun the violas because the flowers are smaller; they are reliably more cold tolerant than pansies and this means more flowers during colder weather.

### Turf

For centipedegrass lawns, late November is probably not too late to get some benefit from a preemergent application of atrazine for annual bluegrass and numerous broadleaf weed species. On very sandy soils, avoid atrazine and consider Dimension instead. Dimension can also be used in landscape beds. Check the label for precautions and compatible plants. I wouldn't recommend annual applications of preemergent herbicides over entire lawns, but in problem situations or on an occasional basis this is an option. Another approach is to use postemergent broadleaf herbicides such as Weed.B.Gon for Southern Lawns, Spectracide Weed & Grass Killer, Advanced Weed Killer for Southern Lawns, Ferti-lome Weed Out, Weed Stop for Lawns, Maxide Dandelion & Lawn Weed Killer and others which contain 2,4-D, MCPP and dicamba. Spot treat as needed, on warmer winter days when temperatures are at least in the high 50s. By late February or early March at the latest you'll begin to see signs of greenup and it's best to leave the lawn alone at that point, all the way to the first or second mowing. Some weed presence is to be expected, and if we're attempting to maintain a pure green carpet, then we're certainly going to overdo it with the herbicides. It's best to view these products as occasional clean up tools rather than routine, essential inputs. Want to overseed your centipedegrass lawn with annual rye for winter color? Not a real healthy practice for either centipede or St. Augustinegrass. Bermuda and zoysia handle it significantly better. If you do overseed centipedegrass, keep the rate to no more than 5 pounds per 1,000 and don't fertilize.

### Fruits & Vegetables

Don't forget the value of floating row covers for frost protection of your cool season vegetable garden. Interested in rhubarb? Not a great crop for our part of the country, but you might have some luck with 'Victoria', also known as 'Large Victoria'. Plant seeds in December or January in pots; when plants reach 8-12 inches tall in early spring, set out in a semi-shaded site with rich soil. Fertilize lightly, then harvest when vigorous growth has produced stalks of adequate size. Remember that only the petiole or stalk should be eaten. The leaf blades contain a high content of oxalic acid and can be very poisonous. If you happen to come across collards, kale, cabbage, lettuce, and onion sets, you can still set them out although we're later than ideal. Avoid pruning fruit trees until late February or early March so that cold hardiness is not compromised. Grape vines can also be pruned at that time.

### Upcoming Events

**December 13-14:** Southeast Vegetable & Fruit Expo, Myrtle Beach Convention Center, Myrtle Beach. For information, contact Cathy Price, 919 334-0099 or cdprice@bellsouth.net

**January 17-20:** Green & Growin', Greensboro

**January 22-25:** Turfgrass Industry Conference & Expo, Raleigh

**February 3:** Little Sweep, sponsored by Craven County Clean Sweep

**February 17:** Landscape pruning workshop, Craven County Agricultural Building, 10 AM.