# THE SEEDLING

The Newsletter of Burnaby and Region Allotment Garden Association
BARAGA , Volume 26, Number 4, December 2007

## Membership Renewals

The membership renewal form will be in the mail before this news letter goes to press. Members are again reminded that dues for 2008 must be paid by January 31st. If you're leaving town or just have "end of year" bills to pay, postdate your cheque to January 31, 2008. Plots for which fees are not paid will be considered vacated.

## AGM Announcements

BARAGA Annual General Meeting will be held on January 12, 2008 at 1:00 P.M. As usual the Lions Club Hall at 5024 Rumble Street, Burnaby is reserved for the occasion. The agenda will include reports on the condition of the garden, consideration of the proposed 2008 budget and election of Directors. Membership renewals (including sign up for volunteer tasks) can be processed before the meeting begins (approx. 12:00 to 12:55 P.M.). As usual there will door prizes and refreshments. This is the ideal opportunity for members to get information about BARAGA and how it is run; it is also a time to input your ideas.

Elections for the four executive positions (President, Vice-president, Treasurer and Secretary) and for Directors (number to be determined by motion) will be held. Members are invited to submit written nominations for these positions. You may nominate any member in good standing (providing you have their permission); you may also nominate yourself. Nominations will also be accepted at the meeting.

**Send in your nomination: members are encouraged to submit their nominations to Camilla Dietrich by mail to 214 - 67 Miner Street, New Westminster BC V3L 5N5 or by email to dietrich@sfu.ca**

## Restrictions on Planting

Members are reminded that they may not plant or cultivate outside of their assigned plots without permission of the Directors. If you wish to donate plants to BARAGA, to replace a fallen tree, cultivate a weedy area, whatever, you must consult Don Hatch or Derrill Thompson before taking any action.

Also please consult with the directors if you want to plant a tree on your rental lot. While small fruit trees or decorative shrubs may be acceptable on individual lots, larger, especially fast growing, trees are not. Besides casting shade on neighbouring plots and blocking pathways, they pose the problem of expensive removal in the future.

## Sharing a Plot

Members who cannot look after a full garden plot (either health, or age, or whatever) can share their plots. If it is with a family member, all that is necessary is including their name on the rental agreement. BARAGA has also allowed Associate Memberships; this is a private arrangement in which the renter who signs the agreement remains responsible for the whole plot; incidentally, the associate may eventually be able to take over the plot if you leave for any reason, providing they qualify as residents of Burnaby and in seniority on the wait list.

At present the directors are contemplating the possibility of adding a few half size lots. These plots would be 500 square feet and the rent also halved. If any present members are interested in such plots they are advised to contact Derrill Thompson (604-436-0324).

## Pick up a New Handbook

Many members have still not picked up their copies of the Revised Handbook (2007). Several changes have been made since the original. Members are expected to be familiar with BARAGA's regulations and abide by them. Handbooks will be on hand at the AGM and this will be a good opportunity to pick up your copy if you have not done so.

## Catalogues from West Coast

Seed catalogues from West Coast Seed will be available at the AGM (free, of course); these catalogues contain valuable information about planting time as well a full listing of vegetables suitable for our area. Many of them have been grown at the trial garden over the year. West Coast Seeds are available at most garden centres.

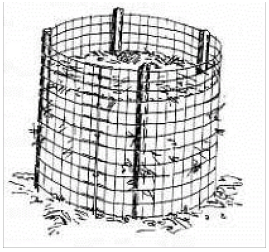
# Composting: Making Black Gold from Debris

Current wisdom in gardening circles is that the most valuable amendment that can be made to the soil is the addition of compost. It improves the soil in texture, moisture retention, and adds all the nutrients plants require to grow. Many plants store nutrients in their leaves, roots, etc.; breaking them down into compost returns these nutrients to the soil. While compost is available commercially it can be readily made by the gardener for little or no cost. As an added bonus, in most cases waste and unwanted material is being recycled into something supremely useful.

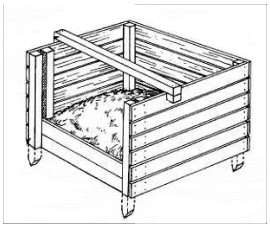
There are numerous composting methods. The basic process is to allow bacteria and fungi to breakdown dead plant material so it is returned to its elements in a form that plants can use. This process can be fast or slow, sophisticated or dead simple.

The simplest form is simply turning over the soil. Spent plant material lying on the surface is buried and breaks down over time.

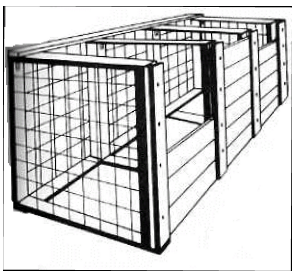
Another easy method is to dig a shallow pit, fill it with chopped up plants. Spent plants of all kinds, weeds, vegetable roots and tops can all be thrown in. Weeds should only be used before their seed has matured. Diseased plants, tomatoes with blight for instance, will harbour disease and should not be used. The finer the material is cut up the quicker it will be reduced to a reusable state; the chopping increases the surface area and breaks up tough membranes. Many gardening books contain illustrations of simple structures the gardener can make to contain a compost pile. A few dollars spent on lumber and galvanized wire is usually adequate to construct a bin about a metre square. That will be big enough to accumulate garden waste until it breaks down. Spent material is added as it becomes available.



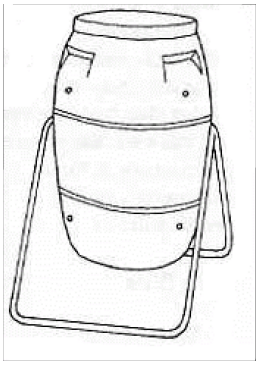
Single bins are essentially slow, cold composting. Spent plants, etc. are added to the top of the pile as they become available. This material will break down into friable dark stuff - the fabulous black gold - in 6-18 months time. A more elaborate method is recommended in some gardening books; it uses two or three bins if there is enough space available. The contents of bins A and B are turned into each other at intervals and bin C is used to accumulate the finished compost. This allows for



aeration and speeds the process.



Much faster composts (six weeks) are possible using a hot composting method. A specially designed container is usually required, typically a suspended barrel that can be cranked regularly to turn and aerate the compost. Turning the compost heap every few days to allow air to penetrate speeds the process. Hot compost requires a selected mix of composting material, regulated watering, and regular attention. In truly hot composting the heat generated is sometimes sufficient to destroy weed seeds and disease carriers.

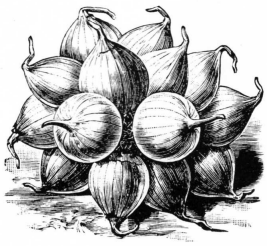


The essential parts of the compost mix are nitrogen and carbon. Nitrogen-rich compostables include such things as grass clippings, seaweed, vegetable wastes, manures of many kinds (things green and slimy). Carbon rich additions include dry leaves, wood chips, straw, cornstalks (things brown and dry). An old fashioned method was to layer dry leaves with manure (chicken, rabbit, cow); this provided the right balance of nutrients for bacteria and fungi to accomplish their breakdown.

These organisms need a supply of oxygen, so require aeration. Shredding or chopping reduces size but increases the surface area, so the micro-organisms task is performed faster. Compost works best if uniformly moist, neither allowing it to dry out nor to become soggy. This may necessitate a cover of some kind.

Compost can be used well before it reaches the stage of pure humus. If too raw the compost will use nitrogen from the soil and surrounding plant growth will be stunted. But if partly broken down, the composting process continues in the soil. Eventually the breakdown is total and the material has then become humus.

Easy Basic Compost Recipe
1 part fresh green material - weeds, spent plants, grass clippings, etc
1 part dry brown material - dry leaves, other old material
1 part black material - compost, soil, manure (any stuff that contains the micro-organisms needed to get the compost started



## Winter Dreaming

Days are cool - and getting colder - , rain beats on the windows making the ground soggy, fierce winds swirl around the dying vegetation. Even winter crops protected under a cloche tend to sit and wait for longer days of stronger light before they start to grow. And the hardiest of gardeners longs for an easy chair in a warm corner of the house. It seems that there really is very little that can be done. But even in winter a true enthusiast can do a lot of useful things and get a head start on the next season.

You might take stock of the crops you grew last season. What crops did best, which ones provided the best yields? Were you satisfied with the varieties you planted; or would others better suit your taste? Did you plant too many cabbages and never manage to use them all? Did the sweet peppers fail to ripen to red? It might help to make a list of everything you grew and evaluate how satisfied you were with the results.

Take stock of the seeds on hand. A few seeds have to purchased every year to get a reasonable rate of germination. Others, properly stored, can be viable for five years and even longer. If the seed package is not dated, it is handy to mark the year of purchase yourself. When you have sorted your seeds, make a list and determine what will be required for next season. The next step might be to browse a seed catalogue and make out your purchase order. For crops like tomatoes it is always nice to experiment with a new variety, just to experiment; size, flavour, fruit colour, disease resistence, days to ripeness are all qualities to consider.

Another thing that can be easily evaluated from the comfort of a soft chair is where everything is going to be planted. A few years ago the Seedling carried an article describing how a succession of shallow, medium and deep rooted vegetables could be rotated; this method ensures that available nutrients are systematically tapped. Another element in forming a planting scheme is a decision on layout; do you plant in long rows for easy access or in raised beds to squeeze as much productivity into your garden.

A final touch, before you leave comfort and get to work, might be to consider what you have vis-a-vis what you would like to have. For instance strawberries and cream in mid-June might be a delicious childhood memory that could be a future reality. Now you have to figure out where to make that strawberry bed, how best to protect your berries from the slugs and birds, how to nourish those berries, and perhaps how to speed their ripening. But can't you see that ripe crop; dreaming can be fun and it can ease the path to a planned future of happy outcomes.

## Where Seeds Come From

We assume Mackenzie, Mr. Fothergill, Stokes, Burpee's, etc. produced the seeds they are selling. Not so. They're only repackagers. Seed growing is part of the world-wide bio-agri-business; like many businesses these days it is international and it is big.

For instance "Alf Christianson" is the name of a grandfather in Washington state who started a family seed business back in the twenties. Now it is the name of a branch of a multinational company based in Japan - Sakata Seeds who own operations in several third world countries. Most of the seeds you buy at garden stores originate in similar operations. Which seeds are produced each year is decided at a "Pinning Date" - an annual meeting of the local growers that Christianson manages.

Their operation is in isolated pockets of the Skagit Valley. Ripe seed is harvested, cleaned, graded and tested (for purity, viability, germination rate, etc.) ending up in giant crates that might contain a ton. Then it all goes into the distribution system and finally arrives at the seed houses in relatively small packages. The distributors' employees at the seed-house are almost literally bean counters, splitting shipments into individual packages for redistribution to store shelves.

Let me digress - to explain F1 hybrids. If you have a plant with high productivity and disease resistence and another with excellent flavour that stores well, you might be able to cross-breed them for one generation and get all the desired qualities. That is a "F1 hybrid"; like you and me it combines the good qualities of both our parents. The next generation is the snag; by the laws of genetics it may come true, it may have a few of the desired qualities, it may be a throwback, or it could be just a failure that doesn't even grow. Many of the seeds available commercially are F1 hybrids. You can save seed from them (if you like) but most won't "come true" to the parent plant. It takes many generations to arrive at a genetically stable plant. The difference between open pollinated (heritage, heirloom) seeds and F1 hybrids is one comes true and the other doesn't.

F1 hybrids suit commercial producers; it almost guarantees return business year after year. These are the international bio-agro-businesses who supply most of the seeds sold in local nursery operations and those supplied to their customers by seed-houses through the mail. It allows the genetic parents, the cross pollination process, etc. to remain in the producers' hands. This could lead to other advantages such as control of supply and control of price. This isn't to claim that seed suppliers are profiteers - a $3.00 package of tomato seeds is still quite a bargain when you consider how expensive it is to obtain a hundred

pounds of tomatoes in any other form. But we loose control of which tomatoes varieties we plant.

The gardener may find some drawbacks in the seed supply system. Being a gardener is a bit like being on the lowest rung of the ladder; the guys at the top may hardly notice who's down there, let alone value his/her opinions. Rather than ask what we want, their sales honchos may trumpet what they prefer to sell. Have you ever compared seed catalogues? Notice that the varieties available tends to be quite similar and all described in the same superlatives.

Many people are concerned that a basic component of our food production has fallen into corporate hands (and we all know what considerations go into corporate decision making). If a seed grower decides to rationalize business and produce seed for only the most popular varieties, no one else is likely to want to grow the seed for the less marketable varieties. There is a trend to uniformity and a loss of diversity. The economic clout and sheer size of today's growing operations makes GM (genetically modified) seed a distinct future possibility.

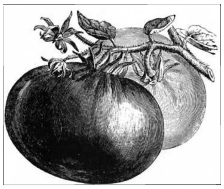
A partial alternative is to keep as much control as possible ourselves. If you start with open pollinated varieties you can save your own seed with little trouble and no cost. There are several small(often one man operations), local seed marketers; there are non profit organizations who endeavour to preserve and supply seed from the old varieties. There are a couple of Italian producers, selling traditional varieties of beans, herbs, radicchio, etc., who still grow their own; their generous packages of viable seed is usually found in Italian markets.

There are organizations who grow seed for the heritage/heirloom varieties or who make unusual species available as seed. Many members will have encountered the organization called "Seeds of Diversity" which endeavours to grow and preserve heritage varieties.

## Seedy Saturday

One place where open-polinated seeds are plentiful is at VanDusen Floral Hall on February 23rd, 2008. That day is known as "Seedy Saturday". Started in 1989 by VanDusen Garden, it has become an annual event. And a much copied one; there are Seedy Saturdays across Canada, several in BC.

Seedy Saturday brings together some of the local growers and suppliers of open polinated seeds with gardeners eager to plant endangered cultivars and save their seeds for posterity. It is all in an atmosphere of a country fair. Admission is by donation.



## Loganberries

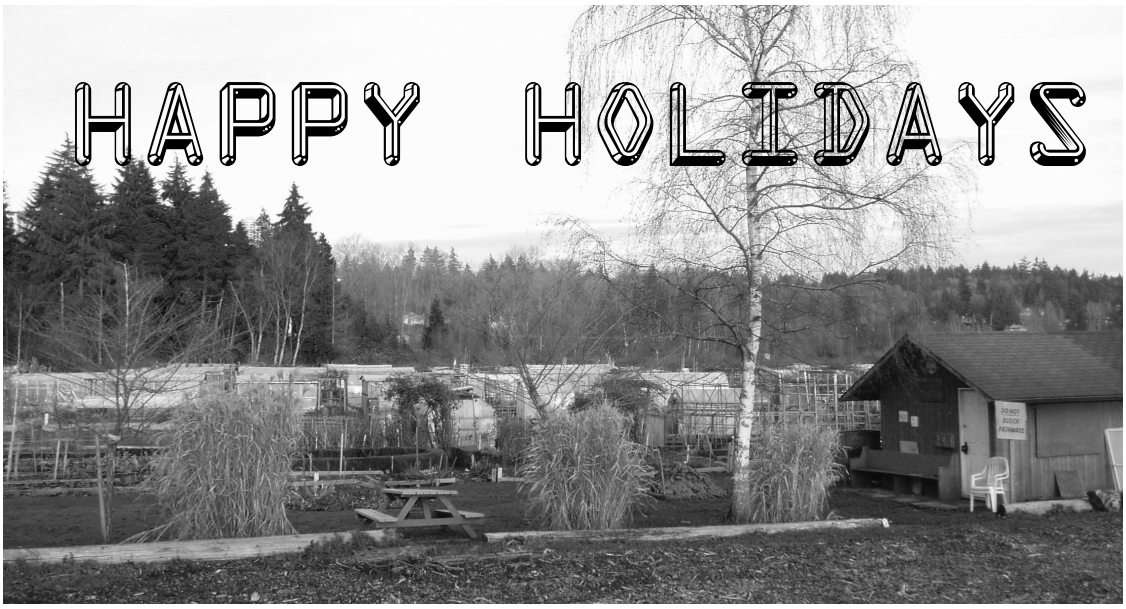
Do you grow loganberries? Have you ever eaten them? Do you know what they are and where they come from?

Well, loganberries are sort of long, rather tart, raspberries. They came about by accident - almost. A California judge, J. H. Logan, was growing a Red Antwerp raspberry next to a trailing blackberry (Rubus ursinus, a west coast species) in his garden in Santa Cruz. In 1881 he collected seeds from the blackberry and grew about one hundred seedlings. One was a hybrid between the two plants, from which originated loganberries. It was introduced to Europe in 1887 and given the judge's name.

Since both raspberries and blackberries flourish at BARAGA, so should loganberries, if you choose to grow them.



The Seedling is the BARAGA newsletter. This issue was edited by David Tamblin (phone 604-521-4318 Email: d_tamblin@telus.net . Views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of BARAGA.




*The Baraga board wish all members the joy of the season and continued prosperous gardening in 2008.*