



# Annual Welcome Back Newsletter

Spring 2013, Edition 4

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After a winter that has caused some to despair. Here is a poem to start the season

*"Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul,  
And sings the tune without the words,  
And never stops at all,*

*And sweetest in the gale is heard;  
And sore must be the storm  
That could abash the little bird  
That kept so many warm.*

*I've heard it in the chilliest land  
And on the strangest sea;  
Yet, never, in extremity,  
It asked a crumb of me."*

Emily Dickinson

## Biochar

We have continued to stay busy on the biochar front. One of the most exciting things that has happened is a collaboration amongst Queen's University RMC and us. Dr. Barbara Zeeb of RMC has been looking at the use of biochar in the remediation of brownfields by reducing

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## Grace

*"Everything that slows us down and forces patience, everything that sets us back into the slow circles of nature, is a help. Gardening is an instrument of grace."* May Sarton

I must admit to being a Wikipedia Junkie. It is one of the tools and distractions that I make a great deal of use of. In thinking about the above quotation which I believe encompasses much of the multiple and complex reasons that people garden I turned to Wikipedia to try and get a better understanding of the term grace and indeed what is this force that might be acting through your act of gardening.

What I found was a page with multiple definitions. The most important and fundamental definitions were at the top of that page;

Divine grace is a theological term present in many religions. It has been defined as the divine influence which operates in humans to regenerate and sanctify, to inspire virtuous impulses,

and to impart strength to endure trial and resist temptation, and as an individual virtue or excellence of divine origin

Wow it is hard to top that one!.....divine influence, regeneration, sanctification and virtuous impulses! Surly this should turn everyone into a gardener. As high sounding as this may be it is not difficult to see these effects in the customers that we see every spring or in the impulses that possess people as they practice the art of gardening. We frequently see people coming to us with plans of renewal of an abandoned piece of property. You need look no further than the many community gardens that have sprung up in the past few years. To sanctify is perhaps the easiest to see the effects of. Most of the people who

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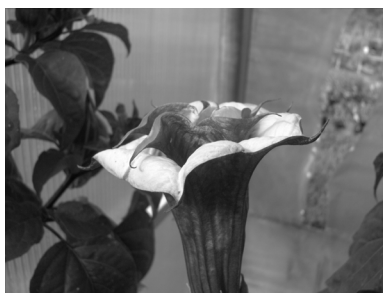
## ....and you were asking?

One of the facts of life in this business (maybe all businesses) is that of repeating questions and the most common questions we get are about watering. Sometimes people don't even know their question is about watering!

In training our own staff to water the most important instruction we give is that you have to make a judgment first before you water. I am sure (I hope!)

that at the outset this appears to be a daunting task. Every plant in the garden centre must be checked and a judgment made about its level of dryness along with factoring in how long it will be before you might be able to check them again. Once that decision is made the next part is easy .... apply sufficient water to saturate the soil.

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(Biochar)



the bio-availability of contaminants. She has been working with one of her PhD students, Mackenzie Denyes in this work. Partly as a result of that work a project was approved and has just been finished with Queen's University. Dr. Allison Rutter the Director of the Analytical Services Unit (ASU) at Queens University and Dr. Darko Matovic, a professor in Mechanical & Materials Engineering at Queen's were the research experts involved from Queen's. This project was generously funded through the FedDev Ontario Applied Research and Commercialization program as one of eleven projects supported at Queen's University.

Please note our own brand of biochar "Terra-C" will be available for purchase at our greenhouses this spring. It is available as 100% biochar bags and also in a mix with worm castings.

If you would like to learn more about the properties and benefits of biochar check out <http://www.biochar-international.org/biochar>

*"Your first job is to prepare the soil. The best tool for this is your neighbor's garden tiller. If your neighbor does not own a garden tiller, suggest that he buy one."*

## Challenge!

I would like to challenge our customers to think a bit differently about pest control. We have been using biological pest control since 2001. One of the principles of IPM or integrated pest management is that of thresholds. What this means is that you have a prescribed level of tolerance for any given pest so the goal ceases to be eradication.

### Eradication

When you think about the concept of eradication it seems quite ridiculous. For any garden, greenhouse, field you will have a neighbor. We only have so much control over our neighbors ... like it or not. We also have only so much control over our own domain.

### Tolerance...next strategy

In addition to tolerance it may also be wise to choose your battles. Certain crops have a high affinity for certain pests. An example might be calibrachoa. Calibrachoa is somewhat prone to being liked by aphids but the yellow ones are almost a trap for aphids. They will have many times more aphids on them than any other colour. Maybe the best approach is to simply adjust your colour preference or plant preference to make your life easier.

### Tortoise Beetle .... learn to love.

The last example is where I get to engage in a bit of 12 year old bathroom humour.....always my favourite part. Ipomea or Sweet Potato vine almost always get infested with Tortoise Beetle. Tortoise beetle are a stunningly beautiful beetle about the size of a ladybug.

They are a shiny golden colour with a transparent cover. If you see the larval stage, and it is the stage that does most of the damage, they are about the same size as the adult and have a tail that wraps around over their back. If a threat approaches they will flip up their tail in defense. The last part is that to make their tail and themselves a bit less attractive they cover it with poop!

The damage that the tortoise beetle does is usually quite minimal and if you see the adults they are yet another "feature" of your garden that quite possibly could be more beautiful than the plant it is preying on!

### Summing above

If you can manage to get into this mode, tolerance, choosing your battles and then learning to love more of what you see in the garden you will be well on your way to a realistic pest control strategy.

### Identification

My approach with requests for help is always to try and identify what the problem may be and in fact if it is a problem.

Tying this back to the principle of choosing your battles and realistic strategy it is really important to > identify damage > identify agent > use a very specific strategy pinpointed at the target so to least upset any of the beneficials.

*"Help us to be ever faithful gardeners of the spirit, who know that without darkness nothing comes to birth, and without light nothing flowers."*

May Sarton

## Dragon Wing Begonias



We have few plants that have both the characteristics that make us want to grow them because of ease of culture and also perform at the highest level for the end-user. Dragon Wing Begonias top the list. Some of the characteristics that make Dragon Wing Begonias great; great glossy foliage disease free both foliage and roots pest free....we have never seen anything attack them grow well in either sun or shade moderate fertility requirements....don't over-fertilize to get max display of blossoms will recover from any abuse you throw at them particularly under-watering will make a big show quickly

We don't have any other plant that has as long a shelf life. They grow and establish quickly, don't require any pinching and if you dry them out most likely will come back.



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garden will tell you how the garden has become a respite from the rest of their world be it work or otherwise. Of course this does not mean that the garden and gardening are not a normal part of their life or environment, just the opposite through its contrast with the other parts of their life it provides them something

that makes those parts both more complete and tolerable. Of course the entire act of gardening is a virtuous impulse (so say we all!). How could it be any other way to convene with the "slow circles of nature" in the pursuit of charm, beauty, nature, human creativity, and fertility as the greeks would define grace.

### continued from page 1 (....and you were asking?)

How do you know when the soil is dry enough to water? That comes with experience but our rule of thumb is to water them just before the point of wilting. As you observe the reaction of any plant as the soil dries you will be able to predict that point. Like so many things in gardening there is no substitute for experience. Judgment > apply water if needed > repeat.

The reason that you need to let the soil dry out is that the roots need oxygen derived from the air. Water holds less oxygen than air and if the roots are saturated for too long a period of time they will start to die from a lack of oxygen.

If you let the plants dry out to the point of wilting for too long a period of time you will start to desiccate the fine root hairs that are so valuable in increasing the surface area of the roots. Back to my own staff. In training we always take plants out of pots and look at the roots with a magnifying glass. When you do that you will see many fine hairs and it is very easy to see how they could be susceptible to being damaged from drying out.

Once you damage those fine root hairs from either over-watering or under-watering the result is the same. The plant no longer has sufficient root system to support its top growth. As

with many statements of "fact" there is a qualifier. Plant top growth tends to match the root system otherwise the plant would not be able to take up enough water and nutrients. It seems like common sense but in fact conditions can arise that will make a plant ill-prepared for the conditions it is facing. If a plant has come out of a greenhouse it has likely been a very humid environment. Once moved outdoors it will be subjected to very different conditions. The plant's root system may not be prepared for the differing conditions and the plant may wilt even with wet soil. Remember my rule before was a "rule of thumb" ....this is the exception. What you can do to help the plant adapt is give it some shade and/or a bit of misting to increase the humidity around the plant so it is not giving off as much water from its foliage (transpiring). Once it has a larger root system capable of doing the job your special treatment can end.

What is the most common question we get? "How often should I water it?". If you understand what I have written above then you know that the answer to that question is a complex one and that you cannot water on a schedule. You should check your plants on a schedule. I think Yoda said in Star Wars "Water not Luke, check"....or words to that effect!



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*"A weed is a plant that has mastered every survival skill except for learning how to grow in rows." Doug Larson*

## 20 dollars of plants for 10 dollars!

Bring in this newsletter to redeem your 20 dollars of plant purchases.

Limit of 1 per customer. Good until May 31  
2013

**Small Print** see [www.burtsgh.com/smallprint](http://www.burtsgh.com/smallprint)

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