

Jim Casada Outdoors

July 2014 Newsletter

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Jim's Doings



This is how my main garden (one of four separate plots) looks at present.

June has been fairly quiet in these parts and has included dealing with some of the health irritants which come with age (I weigh too much, exercise too little, enjoy fine food far beyond reason, and simply ain't, to use a phrase from a fishing buddy, "as catty as I used to be"). I've gotten a decent amount of writing done, including my premier column for the first issue of a magazine with a concept I really like, *Outdoor Heritage*. I'll give more information in an upcoming newsletter. Beyond that there's been a celebration of my grand-daughter's reaching her teen years (we jointly celebrated that and Father's Day with a really nice meal out), the gardening efforts which form the crux of this month's newsletter, and the typical daily stuff I try to churn out of an active (although some might say periodically addled) mind.

I'll be spending most of July researching on Archibald Rutledge, although there's a wedding to attend (a fine young man I've seen grow up in the Smokies), daily chores to do, and what have you. Enough of that though, let's get to one of the "constants" of the month of July which has given me a full measure of pleasure one decade after another.



Nantahala runner beans—this is a century-plus old heirloom variety shared with me by a good friend from the mountains, Ken Roper.

[Back to Top](#)

July Means Gardening Joys

If I was tasked to name say 10 things which brought me great joy as a youngster, most of them would involved pleasures associated with leisure time—hunting small game, fly fishing for trout, trot lining and cane poling for catfish in the nearby river, picking berries, camping, swimming, and other aspects of just being a boy growing up in the heart of North Carolina's Great Smokies. Yet one youthful source of pure delight, and it has stood the test of time wonderfully well, involved all the myriad aspects of raising a garden. Plenty of hard work was involved, but the simple delights of enjoying products of the sweat of one's brow, walking newly hoed rows to look at corn and beans, or seeing a labor of love's end product through harvesting all were deeply meaningful.

Gardening was a part of my life as far back as my memory goes. Daddy and Grandpa Joe both took gardening as a matter of serious concern. Part of this was sheer necessity—the food they produced made a significant difference in the family budget—but there is also no doubt whatsoever that they found the whole process enjoyable. From when the ground was first turned in early spring (there were no tillers; everything was done by horse, plow, and harrow followed by hand labor with a hoe and other implements) until everything was harvested in the fall, there was always work to be done.

Each step, from planting the first seeds of spring vegetables or putting out onion sets and cutting up seed potatoes right through to the gathering of October beans and pumpkins after the first frost, was part of the rhythm of life. Some things, such as feeding chickens and slopping hogs, went on throughout the year, but gardening was a March to October deal. It's been well over 60 years since I first raised my "own" garden (Daddy let me have a little spot which I worked up with a spading fork), and in my mind's eye I can still see those Charleston Grey



Another view of the main garden—others hold a big patch of blueberries, three rows of okra, late tomatoes, etc.



Caladiums add a delightful touch of color to semi-shady spots around the yard.

watermelons growing until they finally reached maturity in mid-August. A few years later, matters got a bit more ambitious, but it wasn't until I had finished undergraduate school and was out on my own that garden became more than a hobby. Since I was in my 20s it has been an ongoing, mostly delightful love affair.

As every gardener knows, there are some down times, and it seems most of mine revolve around dealing with critters. While I have the normal problems such as blight, nematodes, squash stem borers, Japanese beetles, and the like, my major sources of misery come from deer and squirrels, with occasional intrusions from 'coons and rabbits thrown in for good measure. I also have trouble with terrapins (really painted turtles but we always called them terrapins or "tarpins") taking a bite or two out of any ripe tomato they can reach, and forget growing cantaloupes. They wait until the melon is on the edge of perfection and then eat into it.

In the case of the bushytails, I've been working on them with a will, and I would imagine that over the past month I've averaged killing one a day. Somehow, it doesn't seem to make any difference other than to increase their awareness of the fact that my appearance sends an instant signal to light a shuck to some place far away. They play hob with the bird feeders, make me spend a lot of extra time pulling up oak and pecan sprouts from nuts they have planted, make trying to harvest pecans an exercise in futility, and more. This year they have pretty well denuded a pear tree of fruit long before it reached the ripe stage, they are getting figs as soon as they ripen, and seem to have a penchant for taking one or two bites out of green tomatoes.

Deer are a major problem on many fronts—they work on newly sprouted or planted stuff of all kinds, can devastate a patch of corn as it reaches the milk stage, nip away at new growth on my raspberries and muscadines with a will,



A flower garden near the street adds color, provides cut flowers for the house, and brings nice comments from neighbors.



I always plant a small patch of basil. It is wonderful fresh with home-grown tomatoes and fresh mozzarella cheese drizzled with olive oil, not to mention being the key ingredient for basil butter and a bunch of Italian dishes.

and generally seem to stay a bit ahead of me in an ongoing war that has no foreseeable conclusion. I've tried tape, tin pie pans, urine, hair, netting, perfume, hair spray, and perhaps two dozen other "solutions." All work temporarily; none work for long. The same is true, albeit to a much smaller degree, with rabbits. Still, all too often I find evidence of rabbit browsing (they cut stems at a 45 degree angle while deer clip them pretty much straight across), and they are particularly fond of young beans, limas, and crowder peas.

Then there are the birds. I love to watch them feed, and we go through a considerable amount of bird food each year, along with sweet water for hummingbirds. 'Coons have gotten into the hummingbird act (or at least that's what I think it is, because the raids come at night and are undertaken by some type of climbing critter) and have taken to emptying and often knocking down our feeder. My main bone to pick with birds focuses on blueberries and to a lesser degree on raspberries and thornless blackberries. Some years I cover them with netting (a considerable undertaking, because if you leave an opening birds will find it); others I just write off substantial losses. This year I'm taking the lazy approach and thus far the blackberries are faring pretty well although there are ongoing inroads on the blueberries. I don't mind sharing but sometimes the birds, and robins, brown thrashers, and mockingbirds are the worst, have a decidedly different idea of what constitutes their share from what I have in mind.

Usually the blueberry patch I planted some 40 years ago and which now sports plants eight or nine feet high, has far more berries than we need. That is not the case this year, and that's another reason for me to be a bit irritated with the birds. Although the explanation lies beyond my understanding, some bushes are covered while others, heavy bearers in the past, have few if any berries. Still, we have plenty for our needs so I guess I shouldn't



Each morning in July brings the pleasure of harvesting. Today's harvest included a peck of veggies—yellow squash, zucchini, burpless and pickling cucumbers, Swiss chard, Nantahala runner beans, and two kinds of eggplant. We have already had the first ripe tomatoes, but none needed picking today.



One of 48 Cherokee Purple tomato plants I have in the ground. They are roughly three weeks from ripeness, thanks to a wet spring and me getting the plants in late, but in time they will bring a wonderful reward. This

complain, and blueberries will be a part of our daily diet for the next six weeks or so. This month's food section is also devoted entirely to this healthy, delicious, and relatively easy to cultivate plant. In fact, once established, blueberries need little other than mulch, being kept free of weeds, and maybe a bit of fertilizer every other year. They do require acidic soil, and in times of extreme drought I usually give them a bit of a hands up with the soaker hose. Most years no watering is needed.

Beyond that, there's a bit of daily war at dawn with Japanese beetles (I knock them off heavily laden muscadines into a bucket with a couple of inches of water and a dash of liquid soap in it), keeping an eye out for any squirrel who dares give me an opportunity to shoot, and the genuine pleasure of just walking around in the gloaming surveying what a lot of hard work and the good earth have given me.

heirloom variety is my favorite tomato, although I also have Lemon Boy, Park's Whopper, Better Boy, Early Girl, and volunteer tommytoes.



Thornless blackberries give promise of cobblers and jam in the immediate future.

[Back to Top](#)

A Bevy of Blueberry Delights

FRESH BLUEBERRY PIE

1 baked 9-inch pie shell (pastry or graham cracker)
 4 cups fresh blueberries, divided
 1 cup sugar
 3 tablespoons cornstarch
 ¼ cup water
 ¼ teaspoon salt
 ¼ teaspoon cinnamon (optional)
 1 tablespoon butter

Line pie shell with two cups of the fresh blueberries. Cook remaining two cups of the berries with sugar, cornstarch, water and salt over medium heat until thickened. Remove from heat. Add cinnamon and butter and cool slightly. Pour over berries in shell Refrigerate. Serve with whipped cream.

BLUEBERRY TIPS AND TIDBITS

- Make a blueberry pizza for dessert. Use sugar cookie dough, top with sweetened cream cheese blended with whipped topping and a layer of blueberry sauce (cook two cups of blueberries and two-thirds cup of sugar and thicken with cornstarch and water). Reserve additional fresh blueberries for the topping.

- Make a blueberry chutney (perhaps mixed with mangos) as a complement to game dinners.
- Blueberries go wonderfully well with fresh melons such as honeydew, cantaloupe and watermelon.
- Add blueberries to your favorite muffin, waffle, pancake, or pound cake batter.
- Stir blueberries into plain yoghurt.
- Make a summertime ambrosia with blueberries, fresh peaches, raspberries, and pineapple. Top with coconut.
- Partially fill an ice cream cone with blueberries then top off with a scoop of vanilla ice cream. Tell children (or the young at heart no matter their age) they are eating an ice cream surprise and let them discover the surprise as they get into the cone.

BLUEBERRY SALAD

2 cups blueberries
 1 (six-ounce) package black cherry gelatin
 1 cup water
 1 (8 1/2 -ounce) can crushed pineapple, undrained
 1 small carton whipped cream
 1 (3-ounce) package cream cheese, softened
 1/2 cup finely chopped pecans

Place one cup berries in a saucepan, cover with water and simmer until berries are tender. Drain and reserve the juice. Add enough water to the blueberry juice to make two cups. Heat juice to boiling and add gelatin; stir until gelatin is dissolved. Add one cup cold water, pineapple, cooked blueberries, and a cup of uncooked blueberries. Pour into a 9 x 13-inch dish and refrigerate until firm.

Beat softened cream cheese, add nuts and fold in whipped topping. Mix well. Spread over congealed salad and chill for at least two hours before serving.

BLUEBERRY COBBLER

1/2 stick butter
 4 cups blueberries, rinsed and drained (frozen berries may be used—drain well)
 1 teaspoon freshly squeezed lemon juice

Topping

1 cup self-rising flour
 1 cup sugar
 1 teaspoon vanilla flavoring
 1/2 cup milk

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Melt butter in an 8 x 8-inch baking dish. Combine blueberries and lemon juice in bowl; add sugar and mix well. Spoon blueberries into baking dish over melted butter. Do not stir. Combine flour and sugar in a small bowl. Add vanilla to milk and mix into flour and sugar. Pour topping over blueberries and bake for 30-45 minutes or until bubbly and golden brown. Serve with whipped cream or vanilla ice cream.

BLUEBERRY BUCKLE

4 cups blueberries
 1/2 cup maple syrup
 1 teaspoon cinnamon

¼ cup cornstarch
1 ¼ cups flour
¾ cup brown sugar
½ cup butter, softened
½ teaspoon almond extract

Gently stir blueberries, maple syrup, cinnamon and cornstarch. Pour into a 9-inch square baking dish that has been sprayed. In a separate bowl, blend flour and brown sugar. Cut butter and almond extract into flour and sugar until mixture is crumbly. Sprinkle over berries and bake at 375 degrees for 30-45 minutes or until lightly browned and bubbly. Serve warm with ice cream, whipped cream or milk.

[Back to Top](#)

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