

News from the Garden Committee: You can still apply for a garden plot for 2010, but you will be placed on a wait list and may or may not receive a plot later in the season. Applications and instructions for submitting them are available on the garden website, www.eagleheightsgardens.org.

Our January meeting included discussion of efforts by the FH King student group to have the Lakeshore Preserve grant them permanent access to the land they're now gardening on. That will not be resolved for some time. We also discussed possible options for new stakes for marking garden plots; the existing fiberglass stakes are not popular, but a better option is proving elusive. Garden worker and committee member Will Waller kindly put together a budget for tool and cart purchases for 2010 that was accepted with some changes (we will be trying to repair most carts rather than replacing them – they're very expensive). We had an update from graduate student Eric Domyan, who shared responsibility for collecting and delivering donations of produce to the St. Vincent De Paul Grow-a-Row program in 2009. He and other gardeners collected a large amount of produce, and the staff at St. Vincent de Paul say that these donations are very important, since fresh fruits and vegetables are hard to come by for struggling families. Eric and the committee hope that the program can be expanded in 2010 – please contact the Chair at mittenth@gmail.com if you would like to get involved.

The rest of the meeting was devoted to reviewing plans for the upcoming seed fair. We expect to provide free seeds, plot assignments, and information on gardening to Eagle Heights and University Houses gardeners from 10 am to noon on Saturday, March 20 in the Eagle Heights Community Center. Please mark your calendar.

Our next meeting and potluck dinner will be at 6:30 pm on Wed., Mar. 24 in the Eagle Heights Community Center. All gardeners are welcome -- please come and help run the gardens!

The column: Although new fruit trees are not allowed in the Eagle Heights or University Houses plots, the climate and soil here are sufficient for berry bushes and now is the time to start thinking about them. Late winter or early spring is an ideal time to plant many berry varieties like raspberries, blackberries, currants, and gooseberries. Organic homegrown berries are wonderful because they can be eaten straight from the plant – no washing, peeling, cutting, or cooking required. All of the varieties mentioned above and described below also store well in the freezer or in the form of jams, sauces, and pie fillings.

For many berry varieties, you can choose a strain that is early-producing, late-producing, mid-season-bearing, or ever-bearing (which gives you a constant supply of berries throughout the growing season). Ask your local greenhouse about what varieties they have available and look for a bush with a healthy root structure. In general, plant berry bushes when the ground is just thawed and there is no standing water covering the soil.

Choose a site that is slightly uphill to avoid frost pockets and promote good soil drainage. You'll also want to avoid any spots that are exposed to high winds and make sure the bushes are in a place that will get full sun for at least half of the day. Berries will tolerate a wide range of soil conditions and many thrive in slightly acidic conditions. To make your soil less acidic, you can add ground limestone or oyster shells. The dirt here is also on the heavier side, which is great for water retention during the hot months, but can hinder efficient root development. To create lighter soil, aerate the area well with a hoe, shovel, or tiller and mix in some sand.

The berry-growing process requires some patience, because the majority of new berry plantings will not produce much fruit (if any) the first year. However, during its second season in your plot,

a berry bush will produce a sufficient harvest. In fact, there should be enough to share with the local turkeys. If you'd prefer to protect your entire crop, consider covering your berry bushes with fine mesh or netting. Berries are very low-maintenance plants. One application of organic compost or fertilizer every 1-3 years is enough to keep them healthy and productive.

Raspberries: Two or three of these bushes can be grouped around a 5-foot stake to conserve space. A post-and-wire support is recommended. Plant bushes 15-18 inches apart under the wires. Cut branches and apply mulch to thin back new growth. When 30 inches tall, thin to 10 or 12 branches per three feet of row. When all fruit has been harvested, cut the branches to ground level. Autumn-fruiting varieties (Amity, Autumn Bliss, Heritage, Redwing, and Summit) will produce a small harvest the first year and do not require thinning out. These berries do not like an alkaline soil, so avoid adding any ground limestone or oyster shells.

Blackberries: Earlier-producing hybrids include loganberries, tayberries, and boysenberries. Growth and care instructions are similar to those for raspberries. Fruit is generally ready mid-summer to late autumn.

Black currants: These berries are particularly high in Vitamin C and thrive in full-sun conditions. A single bush is enough for most home gardens. Give a single bush a 5-foot border of space in all directions. At the end of the growing season in the first year, cut branches back to 1-2 buds each. In the second year, prune branches to ground level.

Red and white currants: The slightly tart jams produced from these berries are excellent as a result of their high pectin content. Red and white currant bushes are hardy and unfussy about soil. Heavy applications of manure are not recommended. Short periods of direct sun are usually enough to produce a decent harvest. The white variety is slightly sweeter. Plant bushes 4-5 feet apart and prune plants back to their single thick center trunk at the end of the growing season after 2-3 years.

Gooseberries: Green with pale stripes and sweet-tasting, these berries are perhaps underappreciated. Growth and care instructions are similar to those for red and white currants. Stakes and wires are recommended to help keep the plant upright. At the end of the growing season, prune branches down to 3-4 buds.