



THYMES
CUMBERLAND
COUNTY MASTER
GARDENERS
APRIL, 2024

Woodland Phlox, Homestead verbena, flame azaleas, baby robins (Courtesy of Vicki May)

Mike Barron: President

Spring must be here...the Bats are back in my barn. Yesterday I counted 32 bats hanging on my wall. These are most likely Big Brown Bats or Little Brown Bats. I haven't been able to get close enough with a tape measure to make sure. The bats must be at least four to five weeks old, as that is when they are able to fly. I am always happy to see the bats, because I know that I will not be bothered by mosquitos or many other flying insects around my ponds this year.



I am not so happy to see the bats, as it means that my guano clean-up duties are going to be required. Bats are very important to our ecosystem and are also very vulnerable to predators and loss of habitat. Most people who visit are uneasy seeing a bat in my barn. For me, they are just a part of our home wildlife.

Spring brings a couple of big events with the Flower, Lawn & Garden Show, Friday the 26th and Saturday, the 27th, along with the PDG Plant Sale on Saturday, May 4th. Both of these events are important to our organization and require an *all hands* effort for volunteers to be successful. In addition, MGs are hosting great *Classes in the Garden* and representing us at events telling our story. Keep turning in those volunteer hours. Your efforts are truly appreciated.

On May 7th, we will hold our MG membership meeting in the Country Store beginning at 5:30 pm. We will begin with a potluck dinner with a Mexican theme in honor of Cinco de Mayo. Our speaker, Vicki May, is a very experienced straw bale gardener who often holds classes for the public at the PDG. After our speaker, we will hold our monthly business meeting.

Vice President: Katie DePoortere

The speaker for our next meeting on Tuesday, May 7th at 6 pm will be our very own Master Gardener, Vicki May. She will be talking about Straw Bale Gardens, sharing tips on how to start one and the best practices to use when maintaining one. They can be utilized in small spaces and are virtually weed free.

Sue Partch: Bluebirds



They're back. I saw one flying last time I was at PDG. I've seen them every year that I've worked at the gardens, mostly around the nest boxes in the daylilies. I have a birdhouse and bluebird pair at home, too.

I knew the boxes at the gardens were tended but had to ask garden director, Shalena Durkot, to find out by whom. She directed me to Don Hazel. In addition to conducting the very popular classes on bluebirds, he is part of the Cumberland County Bluebird Club, the group that monitors and maintains the PDG nest boxes. The following is from him via an email response to my request for info.

When the CCCBC took over monitoring several years ago there were about 12 boxes along the roads and 8 in the garden area. Now there are 32 boxes along the roads, in the daylilies, around the ponds and in the fields with 7 in the garden area. In 2023, 93 bluebirds fledged and the numbers have been increasing each year. Monitors, including some MG members, check every box every week during the breeding season and record the activity on an app from Cornell University as part of a Country-wide study. After the babies have left the boxes, the monitors clean out the old nests, because bluebirds have 2 or 3 broods a year and make a new nest each time. Part of the monitoring and maintaining is controlling house sparrows. They are a non-native invasive species that can kill bluebirds and often take over nest boxes. CCCBC members capture house sparrows and remove their nests from all boxes, except in the busy garden area. (Hmmm, so we painted those pretty boxes for house sparrows?!?)

From my on-line research, I discovered that in non-breeding season bluebirds are social and gather in flocks. They eat, and feed their young, insects throughout spring and summer—then, their diets become mostly berries in the fall and winter. Although I've never seen it, people have told me they get bluebirds at their feeders.

I try not to disturb the bluebirds at their boxes when I'm weeding and tend to hurry when I'm near a box if I see them bringing food to their young. They tolerate me if I'm not too near and keep fairly still. One interesting encounter was the day I found the *door* to one of the boxes open; two frightened little birds were huddled inside. I closed it up, hoped the parents would come back and told Shalena about it. I still sometimes worry that they may have been abandoned.

Final note: Next time you're at PDG check out the new bird houses. They have 2 holes and the ones on posts have metal predator discouragers. (Perhaps one hole is for entrance and the other for necessary escape from predators.)

Rosie Drechnik: More Bluebirds

Ron and I caught the *bluebird bug* after attending Don Hazel's class several years ago. We started out with one bluebird house and now have three, including one with a camera.

As spring approaches, we wait and watch to see which feathered friends claim the houses. There is competition between the tree swallows and the bluebirds each season. Currently, we have two houses with bluebirds and one with a tree swallow nest.

Bluebirds lay 4-6 eggs, and two of our houses have nests with 5 eggs. It has been fun to track the cycle as they lay one egg per day, and mama bluebird does not begin sitting on the nest until she is done laying all eggs. Now the countdown begins as we wait for hatching in approximately 14 days.

Our tree swallow nest had 4 tiny white and pink speckled eggs as of a day ago. The nest is adorned with feathers as is typical. Tree swallows only have one brood each spring, but our bluebirds can have as many as three. Last year we fledged 18 bluebirds in total.

Both Ron and I find great joy as we look out the window and see these adorable, chubby looking blue and rust-colored birds flying around. The tree swallows are also quite beautiful with their iridescent feathers. (Note: Tree swallows are known to guard all nests in their vicinity, so bluebirds benefit from their presence.)

Not only do we enjoy these wonderful creatures in our yard, we monitor the Tansi Golf course once a month where they have 18 houses. To be outdoors as the sun rises and the world is waking up is both peaceful and invigorating at the same time. Makes one grateful to be alive!

Carol Burdett: New Home, New Gardening

Some of you came to my big property for field trips as interns or garden club members, and some folks came from neighboring MG counties. It was always a 3-hour tour, and we talked planting, pruning, mulching, making new beds--a fun time. But, as time marched on and took me with it, keeping up so many acres got to be too much. I now have just a half acre in Sherwood Farms and have had to learn some things unknown in that past life.

Let's begin from a four-legged perspective. It seems farm dogs, suddenly confronted with having people come within 30' of their home territory, would need to stop barking or threatening—behavior which was formerly protective and acceptable. And, they noticed the sad face of their person who was most unhappy when they ran to the fence. Someone did not realize all that green stuff she was planting was in their way, making it difficult to keep watch over the yard. And, when they found small branches and such to chew on for something to do, their person was again upset, saying unknown things that might have sounded like *not my new hydrangea!* This person has learned a new reason for raised beds: dogs do their important peering through the fence in places that are unencumbered by raised beds.

Fortunately, I had plenty of rotted logs in my new woods for a base layer in these beds; then, I used the rotted leaves that for years yard men had dumped in piles at the back of my new property. Topped with compost and bags of commercial soil, all my plants are now safe from prancing dog feet, and they are happily adjusting to their new environment.

I brought in many giant begonias that have wintered indoors for years, going back outside each spring. This year they lived in window boxes with just water around their feet on the new, wide windowsills that

came with the house. Ditto for my favorite impatiens plants that have bloomed heartily indoors all winter, in spite of having no soil, just water to live in. I know I'm pushing my luck by planting outdoors early but I have lots of milk jugs with their bottoms cut off to put over threatened plants just in case.

Last year, every time a lovely big strawberry was just a day away from being taken from its pot for my own delight, said berry was always gone before I got it. One day, I noticed it wasn't wildlife thieves in the night, it was my own dog who was happily sniffing among the almost ripe, pulling off the ones I had my own eye on. This year the strawberry plants are in a planting tower, quite attractive in my front yard among my newly-planted trees and bushes.

Strawberries in the front yard, dogs in the back yard, works for me!

Thanks to all the contributors to this month's newsletter. Great bird and nature updates. Keep them coming.