A Bouquet of Gardens...

Master Gardeners of the Tanana Valley opened their beautiful gardens to the public for their annual garden tour on Aug. 1, 2006. Featured this summer were the flowers and vegetables of Joan Robson (above), Gary Kallberg (upper right) and Ken McFarland (lower right). For more pictures of the garden tour, see pages 2-3. Photos courtesy of Renee Person.

We had a fun meeting in September. We decided to wait for frost before tearing up the flower beds that are still gorgeous at Pioneer Park, harvested the few vegetables that were left in the garden beds, and left the rain outside while we had a great zucchini potluck in the civic center. No two dishes were alike, which was amazing to me. We had plenty of wonderful food and then met to talk mostly about “Cultivating Gardeners, 2007 State Master Gardeners Conference.”

On Oct. 3, we will be back at Alaska Feed Co. with Terry Reichardt speaking on her bountiful garden and her techniques. You may have heard me talk about her garden after a course she taught for Osher Lifelong Learning. Hope you can join us at 7 p.m.

The state conference is shaping up to be a rip-roaring lollapaloosa! We have nine speakers lined up, some of whom are internationally recognized, including: Bob Bors of the University of Saskatoon (we know him as “the honeyberry man”); Tracy DiSabatino-Aust, garden writer, consultant and author of several gardening books; Eva Shaw, author and therapeutic gardening speaker; Linda Toomey of Euro-American (Proven Winners) Less Brake of Willow; Julie Riley, horticulture agent at the UAF Cooperative Extension Service-Anchorage Office; and some of our local experts.

If you have suggestions for other conference speakers—or you want to be involved in the planning or the execution of the plan—please talk to a board member. We are looking for help from now through March 17.

Prez Sez....

By Virginia Damron, President
Master Gardeners of the Tanana Valley

October 2006
Master Gardeners of the Tanana Valley Annual Garden Tour
By Radene Schroeder with photos by Renee Person

Gary Kallberg Gardens

Gary Kallberg’s lush gardens boast 10-foot-high delphiniums, perennials that many of us have given up on, a riot of annuals, and a vegetable garden good enough to eat! Located on Old Elliott Highway in Fox, a real babbling brook running behind his house offers a lovely place for a gardener to rest.

Ken McFarland Gardens

Ken McFarland describes his garden as virtually all perennials—some are zone 4 and a few zone 5, but mostly zone 3, of course. Located on Eldorado Drive, he is experimenting with rhododendrons, though they were not in bloom at the time of the tour. Also, he is doing trials of special delphinium seeds that he gets from England. They are purposefully evolving the garden into as much of an English cottage garden as they can. There is a lot to learn here about structure and flow. (Ken has learned a lot about basic structure from taking many groups to visit famous English gardens. Flow is something that just came naturally.)
Joan Robson’s home on McKinley Drive features her gorgeous, award-winning dahlias. Joan has won the blue ribbon at the Tanana Valley State Fair so often for her dahlias that a class champion can’t be far behind! Joan has been a member of the Master Gardeners for years and is president of the Fairbanks Garden Club. Her gardens clearly demonstrate her love of gardening and a lifetime of devotion to implementing what she has learned from fellow gardeners. Garden tour participants were treated to refreshments following Joan’s tour of her grounds.

MASTER GARDENER HARVEST POTLUCK & AWARDS NIGHT!

Tuesday, Oct. 17 | 6:30 p.m. | Fairbanks Community Food Bank

Please bring your extra garden produce or a can of food to donate to the food bank...

And a potluck dish to share with others:
- A to G, desserts
- H to N, main dishes
- O to U, salads or vegetables
- V to Z, breads or chips

RSVP to Michele at 474-2423 or ffmah@uaf.edu.
Tulips have been my favorite for several years and seem to be fairly forgiving of my forgetful approach to growing them.

Most “wild” tulips—of which there are 150 species—originate not from Holland, but rather from arid areas of Central Asia. Over the centuries, these ancestral plants have been used to create the limitless hybrid varieties that we can purchase and grow today. I’d like to believe that a dry spell in my root cellar triggers an ancient memory in my tulip bulbs of a spring drought somewhere near modern-day Islamabad about 1,000 years ago.

Unlike many bulbs that are ready to plant, tulips require a winter dormancy period during which time the bulbs must be cooled. I normally purchase bulbs in the fall and stash them on a shelf in my root cellar. By October I remember to put them in pots, packing 10 bulbs per 10-inch pot in two layers of five bulbs each. I start with 2 inches of soil in the bottom, then place five bulbs, root side down, in a circle, cover with 2 more inches of soil, add another layer of bulbs in between the first layer, and then cover with another 2 inches of soil. (One layer of bulbs under two inches of soil works well, too, but a double layer means longer blooming pots of flowers.) At this point I should give them some water, cover them with plastic and punch holes in the plastic—but more often than not—I stack them up in a corner of the root cellar and, drawn to some other task, forget about them. My root cellar is usually somewhere between 40-45 degrees during the winter, but any cool spot like a garage or unheated cellar would be a good place to keep bulbs. The ideal book temperature for cooling bulbs is 35-40 degrees. The bulbs will be harmed by freezing, which is why tulip bulbs planted outside in Fairbanks generally will not succeed unless they are close to a building and heavily mulched.

I have read that tulips require a dormancy period of 14-15 weeks. I usually pull my pots out in January, which means their dormancy in my cellar has only been about 10-12 weeks. This year I pulled them out on Jan. 3, watered them well and placed them on a shelf away from a window. Generally, you know the bulbs are ready if you can see roots at the bottom of the pot and leaf tips beginning to emerge. Within days the pale yellow leaf tips begin to turn a rich green. In the past I have placed my pots in the window, resulting in beautiful but leggy plants with blooms in about six weeks. This year I kept the pots under a shop light and to my surprise, I had sturdy plants with full blooms in four weeks!

If you don’t have a cool cellar, garage or root cellar, you can keep your bulbs in the refrigerator for their required dormant period. I haven’t tried this method myself, since the refrigerator is already too crowded with other horticultural experiments. If space is a problem, use a wide shallow pot and fill it about half full with stones or another coarse material. Set the bulbs, root side down, on the stones, then cover with a finer material or light soil until the bulbs are about two-thirds covered. Water lightly, cover with plastic and punch a few holes in the plastic for circulation. Keep the bulbs away from fruit and make a note on the calendar to pull them out three months after you hid them away. When that time arrives, set the pot in a spot out of direct light for a couple of weeks, water, and in a short time, you’ll be enjoying beautiful living color against a backdrop of winter white.

A final note: Mark on your calendar to buy bulbs this fall! ☀️
**Tillers of the Soil**

These garden dynamos save you from getting down and dirty

*Article by Veronica Lorson Fowler, Handy magazine, March/April 2006, and submitted by Deborah Koons* 

If you don’t dig the spade-work your garden demands, perhaps it’s time to turn the job over to a tiller. These machines can save time—and your back—as you break new ground, cultivate, weed and aerate. They’re also invaluable for gardeners who plant cover crops or work compost into the soil to create a black, crumbly dream bed.

Tillers can be as small as weed whackers or as large as plows (which is what they essentially are). To help you decide which size you want—and which functions you want to pay for—here’s a good look at tillers.

**Power.** Gardens larger than 5,000 square feet call for tillers that boast at least 6-horsepower motors. Prices for these machines range from $800 to $2,800. Smaller gardens can be tamed by 4- to 6-horsepower tillers, which typically cost $500 to $900.

Mini-tillers or cultivators are rated 4 horsepower or less and cost $200 to $400. They aren’t powerful enough to chew up sod, but they work well for small raised beds, weeding rows of vegetable gardens and tilling close to plants.

Mini-tillers are often wheelless and light enough (20 to 30 pounds) to carry. This can be a blessing or a curse: In hard soil, the lightweight machines tend to bounce and jerk. Of course, larger tillers pose their own challenges: Their power may make operation a tug-of-war.

**Tine location.** Front-tine tillers are good for gardens smaller than 5,000 square feet with loose soil. These machines have rear wheels so you can roll them to the site and forward-rotating front tines that pull the tiller onward. But in hard and unturned soil, the tines (especially on lighter models) tend to crawl over the ground rather than dig into it.

Rear-tine tillers are good for gardens larger than 5,000 square feet or for hard or stony soil. The motor powers rear tines and front wheels, which pull the tiller forward. Rear-tine tillers are heavier (200 pounds or more) and larger than front-tine tillers, which may make them difficult to maneuver in tight gardens.

Midtine tillers are usually mini-tillers with tines directly beneath the engine. These machines are so light that the weight of their engines helps the tines to penetrate the soil.

**Tine rotation.** Tillers with standard-rotating tines (SRT) have tines and wheels that both turn forward. Tillers with counter-rotating tines (CRT) have tines that rotate toward the rear, counter to the forward-pulling wheels. CRT tillers make for easier tilling of hard soils, including previously unturned ground, where kickback can be a problem. Some models have a reverse-tine feature, which will give you the best of both worlds.

**Tilling width and depth.** Tilling widths range from 9 inches with mini-tillers to 2 feet with full-size tillers. Narrow is fine if you’re not doing much more than weeding between rows of an existing garden. Wider, of course, means fewer passes when tilling large patches to create a new plot.

Tilling depth is usually stated in the machine’s manual. Note that tine size does not equal tilling depth; a machine with 12-inch tines, for example, may till only 8 inches deep. More expensive tillers have adjustable tilling depths.

As a rule, deeper is better. A tilling depth of 6 to 8 inches is fine for mixing soil amendments into an existing bed or for preparing an established garden for planting. But for new beds, you need to work the soil at least 12 inches down; 24 inches is ideal for optimal plant growth. Few tillers go deeper than 10 inches, which means that after tilling a new bed, you should—if you want a superior garden—use a spade to loosen and amend the soil beneath.

**Gears, handles and controls.** More economical tillers have one forward gear; reverse is typically not an option. Top-of-the-line tillers have as many as four forward and two reverse gears to help you maneuver and speed up the work.

Smaller tillers often have fold-down handles, which are handy for storage. Some tillers have handles that adjust vertically to suit your height. Other handles swing side-to-side so you can control the tiller from the side and avoid walking in freshly tilled soil.

For comfortable operation, make sure the handle controls (throttle lever, shutoff switch) are at your fingertips. If you’ll be working in tooth-rattling rocky soil, you may want to invest in a model with shock-absorbing grips.

**Accessories.** Tiller accessories, usually sold separately, include dethatchers, edgers, lawn aerators, planters, string trimmers, furrowers, crevice cleaners and even log splitters. Before you buy any of these, check how easily they attach and how well they function. For example, mini-tillers may not have enough power to make an accessory perform well.

*Doing the job well is the point of using a tiller. Although hand-turning the soil can produce a perfect plot, a tiller can save you from a spring afternoon with a spade—and a spring evening with a bottle of ibuprofen.* ✿

~ Visit www.handymanclub.com for more information on tillers.

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See “Tiller Tips” on page 6 for buying and safety information!
Pondering a tiller purchase? Consider these factors:

- Some tillers have two-cycle engines that require mixing the fuel with oil. Not having the mix fuel is a plus.
- If upper-body strength is an issue, pass on a pull-cord starter in favor of an electric starter.
- Some models have self-cleaning tines that shed mud and debris. Tine and engine guards are good safety features.
- An anti-kickback rod prevents tillers from jumping when they hit hard soil or obstacles such as roots and construction debris.
- Big pneumatic tires are best because they are durable and shock-absorbent and their wide footprint offers better traction and less sinking into the soil.
- Consider add-on weights for lightweight tillers. Some mini-tillers allow you to add up to 13 pounds by filling a container with sand. The extra weight provides better soil penetration and more control.

To protect yourself and your tiller:

- Mow tall vegetation, and rake leaves and debris that could get tangled in the tines. Some weeds chop up nicely with tilling, but avoid tough species such as purslane, bindweed, nut grass, crabgrass and Johnsongrass.
- Check the oil in gas-powered tillers regularly, and change it after two years or 15 hours of operation.
- Proceed with caution on slopes: Large tillers can tip, so use a small tiller or none at all.
- Don’t overwork yourself or the tiller. Make several passes rather than working a large area once.
- Wear ear protection. Electric mini-tillers are quiet, but gas-powered models are noisy.
- Work with slightly moist soil. Working dry or wet soil can ruin its texture.