

Keynote Speaker Spring Fling 2014

Kent Phillips was the keynote speaker at the Columbia Gardeners Spring Fling 2014. The title of his talk was "2014: The Year of the Cucurbit". Kent is a Howard County Master gardener who regularly visits our sites offering gardening advice and tips. He is involved in the Grow It Eat It program and has a large garden in which he grows a variety of plants.

Cucurbits include vegetables such as cucumbers, squash, pumpkins, cantaloupe, watermelon, muskmelons, and gourds.

Reasons for growing cucurbits include they are easy to grow from seed; there are several different types of them; they can be stored and eaten over the winter; and they are very versatile in the kitchen. Kent advised monitoring them closely because they are susceptible to many insect pests and diseases. Row cover can be used to deter pests.

Various planting tips were presented including planting them in full sun; planting them in 6-8 inches of fertile soil; planting them after Mother's Day when the soil has warmed and the danger of frost has passed; covering seedlings with floating row cover to speed up growth and to protect plants from pests; and thinning out seedlings to achieve the correct spacing between plants. He also recommended adding organic matter (about one inch for established gardens) and following the Nitrogen, Phosphorous and Potassium recommendations from a soil test. The PH of the soil should be between 6.2 and 6.8.

Floating row cover should be used as soon as the seeds are put in the ground. The row cover should be removed for pollinators when the female blossoms appear. The female blossoms won't appear until two weeks after the male blossoms. Self-pollination of male to female flowers can be performed with a Q-tip for added blooming. Kent showed a picture of male and female flowers.

Organic mulches such as shredded leaves, grass clippings, newspapers with straw on top and synthetic mulches such as landscape fabric and black plastic were mentioned.

There are no organic pesticides that kill the squash bug. Organic pesticides kill off pollinators so should be used only as a last resort.

Natural predators include the orb weave spider, the assassin bug and lady bug larvae.

Snakes are good to have in the garden. The babies prey on larvae, the bigger snakes prey on voles.

Organic insecticides include pyrethrins, neem oil, neem extract, Surround, horticultural oil and insecticidal soap.

Various pests such as cucumber beetles, bacterial wilt, downy mildew, and squash vine borers were mentioned.

The link to the Grow It Eat It website (<https://extension.umd.edu/growit>) was recommended as a good source of information.

For those who missed the talk or would like additional details, Kent's PowerPoint presentation is available here: <http://extension.umd.edu/mg/giei-powerpoint-presentations>. Click on MG15 Cucurbits.