

In the garden with Shobha Vanchiswar



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Too many helicopters in my garden!

Lately, I've been battling something far more annoying than weeds in the garden. I'm talking maple seeds. Is it my imagination that they are in far greater abundance this year? I can't tell you how many tons have already been collected and still tons more shower down.

Unlike leaf raking, this is a frustrating job. For all those seeds one has removed from lawns, paths, patios and driveways, there is an equal number in plant beds where it is next to impossible to remove. That means maple seedlings will be appearing in the hundreds and hence much weeding will be required. One has to get them still young or else pulling them out requires some effort.

The squirrels help out some as they love eating the seeds and so render many "helicopters" harmless. Yes, those rodents actually have some use. I just have to figure out a way to keep them from my fruit trees. Maybe I should save the collected maple seeds and serve them out when the fruits are ripening. Perhaps the seeds will distract the thieving critters. Somehow, I'm not so optimistic.

On a more pleasant note, I'm really happy with the current exhibit at the New York Botanical Gardens (NYBG). The Emily Dickinson show, *The Poetry of Flowers*, combines poetry and flowers – two of my passions. I've been twice. The first time I even got to participate in a public reading of her works. That was a real thrill. Might even look good on a resume. For what sort of job I haven't the faintest idea. But do go to this show as it is delightful and appeals to all. It is on till June 13. And while you're there, take a stroll through the perennial gardens to be inspired by the plantings. It's a great place to get ideas for plant combinations.

Questions from readers on staking peonies and chasing moles from the garden

While I was busy getting ready for my garden's Open Day and ignoring everything else, I received questions from two readers.

Kathleen wanted to know about staking peonies. It is important to get peony rings in place when the plants are still young. They will guide the peonies to grow through the supports. If placing rings later on,

much care has to be given lest you damage the emerging buds or tender stems.

I noticed the NYBG uses the regular, gridded peony rings and their plants are all neatly supported. However, I use the old, tall tomato cages. My peonies tend to grow taller and the usual rings run short. Since I have a whole row of the plants, I weave grape vine clippings all around and through the tops of the cages and thereby conceal the “mechanics” of the staking. I’m very big on hiding all mechanics. Keeping things natural looking is important to me. Let the vegetation take center stage.

The other question asked what organic measures could be taken to get rid of moles. My initial response is a facetious “Move!” Because I really feel for you. Moles are tough opponents. First of all, be sure you really have a mole problem and not some other critter messing your lawn. Skunks too like to root around for grubs and worms. If the lawn is dug up, look for burrow openings.

Once you establish that it is, indeed, trouble with moles, there are some organic measures that can be taken. Products are available that can be sprinkled around the lawn and at the mouths of burrows. These are intended to repel the pests and send them packing. Flooding the burrows is another option. Planting skunk cabbage seems to work – the odor puts moles off. Scilla bulbs are also said to be repellents. If your lawn is newly seeded, the last three choices might not be feasible.

The most effective method is trapping the moles. I do not recommend that you do this yourself. There are companies that specialize in humane wildlife trapping. There is a philosophy that empty burrows invite other moles to move in. So, once you get rid of the moles, do continue to use a product to repel future residents. I wish I had an easy, guaranteed solution but moles are a challenge. Instead, I wish you lots of luck. Do keep me posted, as I’d really like to know how it all works out.