



ALASKA MASTER
GARDENERS
ANCHORAGE

NEWSLETTER
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PIGMENT IN THE ALASKA GARDEN by Lisa Docken and Lee Tibbitts

Spring and summer in Alaska are magical times of the year. It is the promise of new beginnings, watching magic happen as sprouts appear in the garden, emerging from frozen earth. This past year additional magic has emerged for Lisa and Lee, new neighbors on the Anchorage Rabbit Creek hillside.

Lee, a long-time Alaska gardener and retired scientist, and Lisa, a budding gardener new to Anchorage from Cordova, found a match made in fun and crafting. Lee took Lisa under her wing when she moved in a few doors down. Lisa was eager to learn the tips and tricks of gardening on the Hillside. Their friendship, and Lee's mentorship, resulted in something magical: a gardening and crafting duo exploring the wonders of finding color in botanical dyeing.



Lee and Lisa modeling knitted garments made with yarn dyed with their garden plants.

Seed sharing, seedling check-ins, garden tours, text messages about weather, reporting on moose: we had a wonderful summer of growing and sharing. And something else: science experiments! Did you know that many plants can be used to dye cellulose fibers (such as cotton and linen) as well as protein-based materials (like silk and wool)? We soon learned that plant fibers need to be processed differently from animal ones.

During her time in Cordova, Lisa had learned a lot about dyeing yarn with mushrooms and testing various plants for dye. This great blending of Lee's garden experience and Lisa's crafting interests used Dyer's chamomile (*Cota tinctoria*), Japanese indigo (*Persicaria tinctoria*), Tango cosmos (*Cosmos sulphureus*), and French marigold (*Tagetes patula*) to create yellow, blue, orange and green dyes, respectively. Lisa's crafting skill then turned the colored materials into beautiful garments.

While this venture is only in its second summer and we are by no means experts, we are excited to share some preliminary results. We started seeds indoors in March under lights in our garages, then moved plants outside when conditions allowed. Spring was cold this year, but in general, plants started to go outside around the last week of May.

Continued on next page.

*Cover: Elizabeth Bluemink's Manzano peppers, *Capsicum pubescens*, originate from the Andes and have purple flowers, black seeds, and fuzzy leaves. Since they like cooler weather, she's growing them outside.*

BOTANICAL DYEING, *continued*

More specifically, plants were planted in three different situations: in pots in an unheated greenhouse, in pots on the deck, and directly in the ground. The indigo did well in all conditions, though wind and harsh sun did damage some leaves. Similarly, French marigolds grew well in all three conditions.

For Dyer's chamomile and Tango cosmos, growing conditions mattered considerably. We found that Dyer's chamomile grew best in the ground outside, whereas Tango cosmos was very sensitive to temperature and wind. Tangos performed best in the greenhouse. Overall, Tango cosmos were the most finicky plant and the most challenging to keep happy.

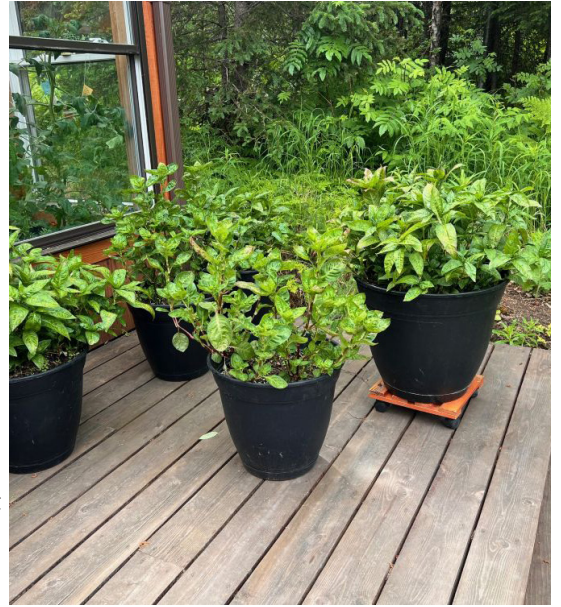
After growing the plants, the next step was to process them to extract the colors. For the indigo, we processed the leaves to extract indigo dye. This involved soaking the leaves for a few days before removing the plant material and adding pickling lime, calcium hydroxide. The lime changes the pH of the liquid and allows the indigo particles to settle out, a process that can take weeks. We then regularly siphoned off excess liquid until we were left with indigo sludge, or if left long enough, indigo powder. While lots of indigo extraction methods can be found online, we followed [Utah State University Extension instructions](#).

We cut our dye flowers at their peak and dried them either passively on trays or in a food dehydrator. Dried flowers can be stored in air-tight containers out of direct sunlight until you are ready to craft. Simply add the flowers to warm water and gently heat (do not boil!). We then added [pre-mordanted fibers](#) to our flower dye baths. Mordanting is the process of treating fibers prior to dyeing to boost color fastness and to shift colors to be darker or lighter. A mordant is a soluble substance that combines with the organic dye and forms an insoluble colored compound. There are countless types of mordants, but with the flowers, we used alum, potassium aluminum sulfate, to get brighter colors. It can sometimes feel tedious to mordant because mordants don't change the color of the fiber but as Lee says, you get to feel like a witch stirring her cauldron. Mordanting pays off when you place the wet pre-treated fibers into your flower dye bath. And voilà, the fibers actively take color. In our case, we got bright yellow, orange and green wool.

There are so many ways to dye cellulose and protein fiber with natural dyes and we feel like we've just barely scratched the surface!

Left, yarn dyed with Tango cosmos.

Right, yarn soaking in chamomile.



Indigo plants growing on Lee's deck.



First step of water extraction of indigo leaves yields light blue liquid. The same liquid after addition of pickling lime turns a darker indigo blue. The pigment will settle out of this liquid after days or weeks.



VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

VOLUNTEER CATALOG

Alaska Master Gardeners Anchorage and the Alaska School Garden Network have compiled this list of public gardening projects in Anchorage. Why not join one?

Updated 2026 Anchorage

Connect with other gardeners, have fun, learn something new! [Check out our catalog of gardening volunteer opportunities](#) in Anchorage.



Susan Brusehaber, left, and AMGA members and friends enjoying her stunning lighthouse gardens. Emily Becker photo.

JUNE 2026 TREASURER'S REPORT

Balances on 5/31/2026

Checking S-88	\$18,972.68
Savings S-2	\$ 5.25
Savings S-29	\$ 17,234.44
CD General 2 year mature; 1/3/27	\$ 11,720.13
CD General 1 year; mature 1/30/26	\$ 10,893.54
Total Assets	\$ 58,826.04

Interest/Dividends	\$172.36
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This month's revenue

Membership	\$218.67
Donations	\$314.66
Fundraising/Plant sale	\$

Total revenue	\$ 533.33
fees included in revenue	27.56

This month's expenses

NEON 1	\$125.00
Grants	\$1000.00
Operations	\$ 763.40
Website Hosting	\$
Pioneer Home Garden	520.25
Postage/Box Rental	\$
Fundraising/plant sale	\$
Newsletter	\$39.99
Postage/Box rental	\$
Advanced MG class	\$2,250.00
Total Expenses this month	\$ 4,698.64

Balances On 6/30/2026

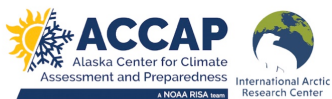
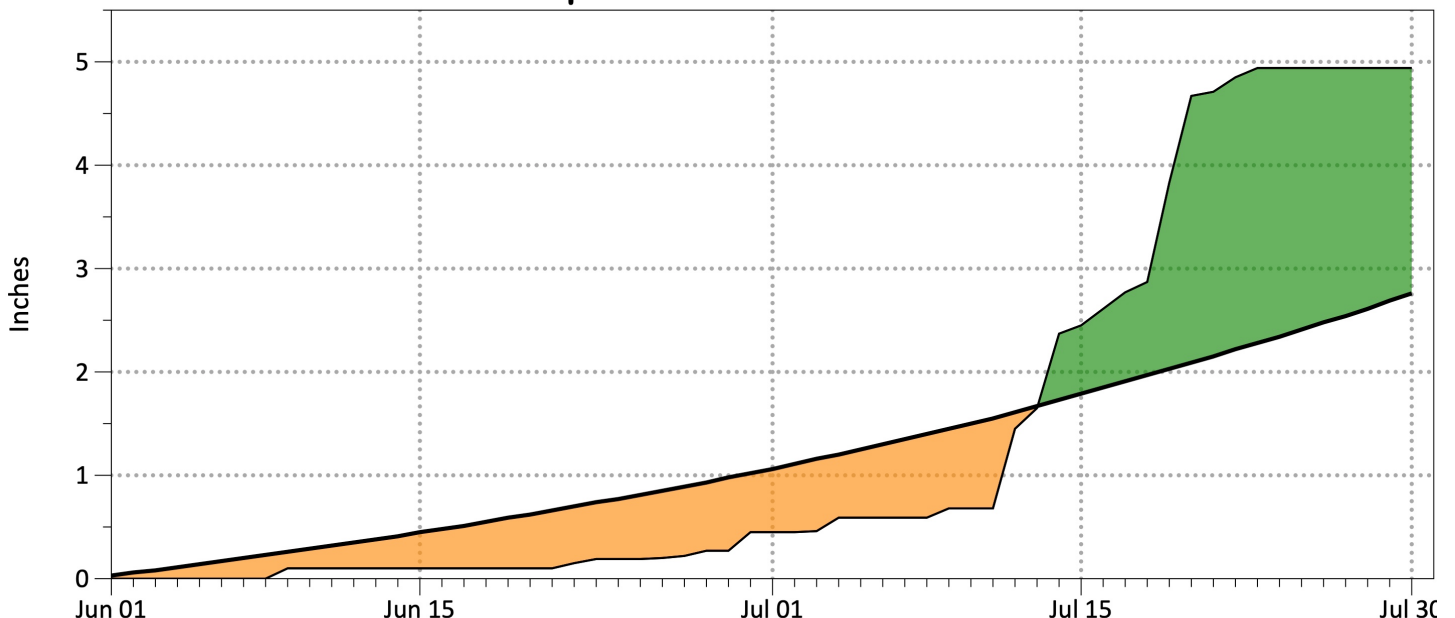
Checking S-88	\$ 14,779.81
Savings S-2	\$ 5.25
Savings S-29	\$ 17,238.69
CD General 2 Year 2.71%, (1/3/27)	\$ 11,793.18
CD General 1 Year 4.07% (1/30/27)	\$10,988.60

Total Assets on 6/30/26	\$ 54,805.53
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Prepared by Jan van den Top

A VERY DRY JUNE, A VERY WET JULY

Anchorage Airport June and July 2026 Accumulated Rainfall Compared to 1991-2020 Normal



Data source: NOAA/NCEI and NWS

July's rainfall total of 4.49 inches at Anchorage Airport ties with 2001 for the most rain in July on record. Rainfall for the month at Merrill Field was slightly higher at 4.66 inches. *Map and caption courtesy Rick Thoman, Alaska Center for Climate Assessment and Preparedness, International Arctic Research Center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.*

OUTSIDE THE ALASKA BOTANICAL GARDEN
4515 CAMPBELL AIRSTRIP ROAD, ANCHORAGE, AK



LATE SEASON PLANT SALE

HARDY PERENNIALS • UNIQUE HOUSEPLANTS • OUTDOOR ART • GARDENING ADVICE

AUGUST 15, 2026
10 AM-3 PM



The AMGA late-season plant sale is August 15 from 10 am to 3 pm outside the Alaska Botanical Garden! Look around your yard and pot up those plants you can share with others. Requirements for participating in AMGA plant sales are [on our website](#). Please call or email organizer Nancy Grant at nancy.grant@live.com with any questions.

[Click here to sign up for the plant sale.](#)

SUMMER GARDEN TOURS CONTINUE!

Tours on this list are free and are for AMGA members and their guests. All tours start at 6 PM. Details will be emailed to members. Make sure your membership is up to date by emailing president@alaskamastergardeners.org.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Garden</i>	<i>Features</i>
August 3	Jane McClure's Garden	Large city garden. Perennial flowers, berries, apple trees and wandering paths.
August 10	Maureen Pinter's Garden	A "little bit of everything" plus a bonus pottery sale by Maureen's husband!
August 11	Palmer Garden Tour!	This tour has a fee. Space is limited. Tickets and info here.
August 17	Gary Masog's Orchard	A new greenhouse, a mature asparagus bed, and LOTS of fruit.
August 24	Van den Top Garden	Lots of fruit trees, flowers, and fun wandering paths.
August 31	Diane's Sand Lake Garden	100 dahlia varieties, arches, and carved wood accents throughout
Sept. 7	Labor Day, no tour	stay tuned for other Sept. tours!



AMGA members hit the road in July for the first-ever Homer garden tour. It won't be the last!

HOME GARDEN GROUND COVERS by Janice Berry

Groundcovers, according to Wikipedia, are any plant that grows low over an area of ground that protects the topsoil from erosion and drought. ThisOldHouse.com recommends we pick varieties that fill in fast enough to choke out weeds yet aren't invasive. Lenore Hedla, in her book, *Gardens for Alaskans*, says "ground covers are not a lazy gardener's substitute for grass." She continues: "There are places where grass will not grow well - at the base of trees, on banks too steep to mow, on trampled parking strips, and under roof eaves. There are plants that make better ground covers in such places. They conserve water, act as a living mulch and they mask dying bulb foliage."

I've had my small garden for over 30 years. It has no grass, just paths paved with stepping stones and rocks, a raised bed for vegetables, a rock garden, and flower beds. We are taught, as Master Gardeners, that nature abhors bare ground. The challenge is making sure our choices will be compatible with our most treasured plants. I will confess that my experience with ground covers has been many failed experiments that continually pop up and remind me I was not 100% successful with their intended purpose.

Long ago I purchased some lily of the valley (*Convallaria majalis*) from a posting on Craigslist, which spread quite aggressively and still lives on in little pockets. Bishop's weed (*Aegopodium podagraria*) was another that looked pretty easy and attractive for filling space, but, alas, it too has aggressive underground roots. Creeping Charlie (*Glechoma hederacea*) seemed attractive in the beginning - but as it, too, started spreading aggressively, I pulled out as much as I could. It has never been completely eradicated. Lamium (*Lamium maculatum*) has nice pink flowers and the variegated foliage is appealing, but it's also a fast spreader. These varieties are still acceptable options for perennial beds, as long as they remain isolated from other beds, preferably by grass; that way they don't become a problem elsewhere. Lesson learned: fill spaces between perennial and annual flowering groups with a thick layer of mulch - either leaves or bark.



White Clover (*Trifolium repens*)



Bugleweed (*Ajuga reptans*) in Janice's garden.

Then there's the matter of walking paths. Many gardens use bark for pathways. This requires regular upkeep by adding more every few years. I use rocks and stepping stones between my garden beds. The only issue here is things like to grow between the rocks. Neat and pretty paths do not stay that way forever. What's growing in the rocks? Chickweed, plantain, dandelions, pineapple weed, etc. Some gardeners like to use chemicals to keep their rocks neat and tidy, others use blow torches. I also tried an assortment of natural and toxic weed killers, but hand digging remained the most satisfying and economical solution since it is a small garden. Once dug up, making teas, salad, or other recipes are an option if one has the time.

GROUND COVER (*continued*)

Eventually I realized that SOMETHING always wanted to grow through the rocks, and that maybe the easiest thing to do was to replace what was growing that I didn't want, with something I did want. What's needed are hardy low-growing plants that prefer dry sandy or rocky soil, and don't mind being stepped on. So far creeping thyme (*Thymus serpyllum*) seems to fit the bill. Strawberries (*Sitka* hybrid) that spread their runners wherever they like seem quite happy growing among the rocks. Pansies have been able to reseed anywhere they want for many years and require no care whatsoever. White clovers (*Trifolium repens*) are great. They will try to move into your flower beds, but are easy to pull out as long as you get them before they move too far. Bugleweed (*Ajuga reptans*) with its spiky purple flowers, has formed a dense mat in one of my shadiest areas. It is wise, however, to keep a close eye on any plant with the word "weed" in it.



Dead Nettle (Lamium maculatum)

Ms. Hedla recommends the following plants: creeping phlox (*Phlox subulata*), dwarf dogwood (*Cornus canadensis*), nagoonberry (*Rubus arcticus*), pussy toes (*Antennaria rosea*), and kinnikinnick (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*). The Alaska Native Plant Society suggests using the following plants as groundcovers in their brochure "Alaska Native Plants in Your Garden": lowbush cranberry (*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*), twinflower (*Linnaea borealis*), and trailing raspberry (*Rubus pubescens*).



Happy harebells (Campanula rotundifolia) in Elizabeth Bluemink's garden.



Master gardeners enjoying Linda Uttech's potager garden.

Join our Meetings

Member Mtgs: 3rd Monday of the month, 6:30 PM, September-May (except December), unless otherwise specified. Free and open to the public.

Board Mtgs: 2nd Monday of the month, 6-7 PM, all are welcome to observe. Email president@alaskamastergardeners.org for details.

AMGA Board of Directors

Dawn Groth	President
Troy Weiss	Vice President
Jan van den Top	Treasurer
Diane Peck	Secretary
Brenda Adams, Roz Goodman, Ellen Kirchner, Rich Ervin, Jerelyn Miyashiro, Nancy Tone	At Large

Committees, Program Coordinators & Volunteers

Casey Matney	CES Master Gardener Statewide Coordinator
Roz Goodman	Broadcast Email
Nick Riordan	Calendar of Events
Brenda Adams	Advanced MG Course
Kathy Liska, Cindy Walker	Facebook
Nancy Tone	Meetings/Programs
Janie Odgers	Garden Tours
Mary Rydesky	Google Group Manager
Ellen Kirchner, Nancy Tone, Rich Ervin	Grants Program
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Diane Peck	Membership Database
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Board of Directors	Volunteer Coordinators
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Renew/Join AMGA

[Join or renew your AMGA membership here.](#)

By joining, you support AMGA and its mission of gardening education in partnership with the University of Alaska Cooperative Extension Service. We provide continuing education, grants for garden projects, garden tours, and more, all in service to the community.

Newsletter Submissions

The deadline for submitting an item for publication is the 20th of the month. We welcome educational articles (400-600 words ideal), calendar items and announcements. Educational articles qualify for MG volunteer hours. Please disclose use of AI. Contact/send items to the editor at newsletter@alaskamastergardeners.org.

Connect with AMGA

Website: www.alaskamastergardeners.org

Facebook: facebook.com/Alaska-Master-Gardeners-Anchorage

YouTube: www.youtube.com/channel/UCvZehJprKkjQzivQvNDKopQ

Google Group: <https://groups.google.com/forum/?fromgroups#!forum/AkMGA>

Membership issues/address updates: dawn@alaskamastergardeners.org

General emails: AskMG@alaskamastergardeners.org

Mail: AMGA, P.O. Box 221403, Anchorage, AK 99522-1403

