Increasing Your Garden Knowledge with Your Computer, Mobile Phone or Tablet
Sue Strauss, MGV 2014

There is so much information available on the Internet and with mobile technology that Master Gardener Volunteers can be overwhelmed and confused by the many sources where information can be found. As Master Gardener Volunteers, we must make sure before we disseminate knowledge that that information comes from a verifiable source. With this in mind, we sent out an email in December 2016, asking Cuyahoga County Master Gardener Volunteers about their use of electronic resources to further their knowledge of horticultural subjects.

There were several answers to that email, and we will try to summarize some of the "apps" and other Internet sites used below. Gardeners who do not use mobile phones or tablets, but do use the Internet have the most comprehensive tool at their fingertips. Lois Rose, who answers hundreds of questions per year, suggests using a search engine (such as Google) and typing your subject or question followed by the word "extension." This will insure that the first sites that come up will be based on scientific data. She adds that she always uses "extension" sites or sites that end in .gov or .edu. Since our own Ohio Extension Ohioline site is being reworked, we must, for the present, rely on other states' extension sites, some of which are very comprehensive.

If a gardener can find answers with search engines, why resort to mobile devices and applications? The main reason is portability. Your smartphone is in your pocket and is almost always available to look up an answer. A tablet is portable as well and good for working at one of our Ask a Master Gardener events.

Applications or Apps
Some Recommended Applications — The apps below have all been developed by an individual or organization whose information has a scientific base.

1 — Armitage's Greatest Perennials and Annuals. This app was created by the renowned horticulturist and author, Allan M. Armitage. With 13 books to his credit, Dr. Armitage has compiled a comprehensive app. Having the app on your phone or tablet is like carrying one his reference books in your pocket. For $4.99, having this amount of accessible information is worth every penny! The app is available for iOS9 or higher and Android. The app is recognized by the American Horticultural Society.
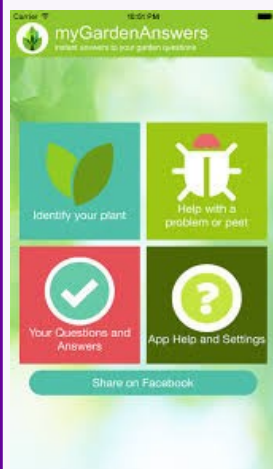
Armitage uses his app to give the rest of the gardening world his view on such varied subjects as Great Groundcovers, Great Garden Centers, Great Hats for Gardeners, and more. But that is just the start. There is a table of contents for almost every category of plant.

When you select a category, you get a list of the plants in that category. Each listing has the plant's scientific name, common name(s), hardiness zones, where to plant (shade or sun), deer rating, rabbit rating, bloom time, height, foliage color, why he included it in the app, hints for success, suggested cultivars, added notes and references. Also, as if this isn't enough, there will be several close--up photos.

When the vegetable section is selected, the gardener gets the same type of information as above, but also, there are references to different types of the vegetable within a category with suggestions, and AAS winners are often noted. Companion plants are also noted in the vegetable section.

Additional information found in this app includes a list of gardening groups and a list of independent garden centers nationwide.

2 — Tomato MD. This app is the creation of the American Phyto-pathological Society. The app costs $2.99 and runs on iOS8 and higher. The goal of this app is to assist the gardener with identification of 35 key diseases and insect problems that affect tomatoes. The information in the app is based on two reference books published by the APS, and the entire app has been peer reviewed for accuracy. From the home screen, the app user sees a tomato plant diagram and touches the part of the plant affected by the problem. The choices are leaf, fruit, stem, flower, whole plant or root. Once selected, the next screen comes up with over 50 photos. The user selects a photo and the diagnosis appears with information and treatment.   The app also allows the user to simply look up diseases and insects that affect tomatoes and gain the information in this way.   This app would be very useful at Ask a Master Gardener events.

3 — My Garden Answers With over 750,000 users, myGarden-Answers is a very useful app. The main purpose is to identify plants, and the app is capable of identifying over 20,000 different plants. The way this works is that the user takes a photo of their plant with the mobile phone, the photo is uploaded, and the user is presented with a variety of similar plants and is asked if any of them are a match. If there is a match, the user selects that matched photo, and information about that plant comes up. If there is no match, there is also a button to ask an expert, and your photo is sent to one of a team of experts who answers within 24 hours. You can store your answers and inquiries and also see other people's questions on similar topics. The app has high reviews for accuracy and reliability from its users.   It runs on an "iPad" or an "iPhone"," iOS8" or higher, or on Android devices.

The app is offered by TeamSOA, Inc. The app costs $1.99 in the "iTunes" Store.

4 — The Purdue Tree Doctor. The Purdue Tree Doctor was developed by two extension specialists at Purdue University. The main objective of the app is to help users diagnose and correct over 175 tree problems found on over 60 kinds of trees common to the Midwest and Northeastern United States. The app uses over 1000 photos to help with identifying problems. The app is available for iOS8.4 or higher and runs on IPhones or IPads and in an Android addition. The app is $1.99 on I Tunes.

In addition, Purdue also has the following apps available for Apple and Android devices for $.99 each:
Purdue Perennial Flower Doctor,
Purdue Annual Flower Doctor,
Purdue Tomato Doctor.

There are many gardening apps. Some are probably better than others. Some can be downloaded at no charge while there is a charge for others.   When choosing an app, try to find out where the app originates to make sure that the app gives good, scientifically based information.   Sometimes there are reviews available from other users.

The information collected for this article came from Cuyahoga County Master Gardener Volunteers. The variety of sources for good information with the use of the Internet seems almost infinite.   Sharing our resources and methods to obtain this knowledge can only enhance our ability to help the gardening community that we serve with good, knowledge-based information.   The information is available; it is only a matter of finding it in a way that works for each individual.   We hope that we have provided a few additional resources above for Master Gardener Volunteers to consider as we seek more knowledge and answers to gardening questions.

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Ipad — www.apple.com/ipad/
Armitage Perennials — www.allanarmitage.net
Purdue Tree Doctor and MyGardenAnswers — www.apple.com/Itunes/
Tomato MD — www.apsnet.org