

Shenandoah Valley GARDENING

Newsletter of NSVMGA, the Northern Shenandoah Valley Master Gardener Association

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One of the natural holiday decorations
EMGs fashioned for Belle Grove.
photo courtesy of Belle Grove

Virginia Cooperative Extension NSVMGA 2019 Milestone Awards

Thank you to our Northern Shenandoah Valley Master Gardener Association volunteers for giving so much of their time. Normally Milestone Awards are presented at VCE's Master Gardener College (MGC) and recognized at a membership meeting. Because this year's MGC was virtual, Milestone Awards were mailed to the awardees.

5000 hours
Lynn Hoffmann

3000 hours
Richard Howell
Lesley Mack

4000 hours
Cy Haley
Stacey Smith

1000 hours
Kris Behrends
Janet Keithley
Nancy Mancuso
Sue Rogers
Carolyn Rutheford
Mary Turner

250 hours
Nita Bearer
Kathi Bostelman
Jeff Burke
Cathy Dickey
Alice Findler
Susan Finlay
Kristin Gaulard
Susan Groom
Patricia Legeer
Mary Romanski
Patrice Vossler

500 hours
Elizabeth Bevan
Tricia Boyd
Denise Howe
James Jones
Misa Mulrone
June Newcomb
Charles Newton
Catherine Reed
Sue Rogers
Joey Waters

A Message From President Elaine Specht

Like many of you, I am glad to be putting 2020 behind us. COVID-19 forced us to see many of the Master Gardener projects we love cancelled or curtailed. Still, we were able to pivot to handling all Greenline questions via phone and e-mail ensuring that our essential role as educators and problem solvers for home gardeners continued. Our Greenlines were especially important last year given the large numbers of first-time gardeners discovering the joys of growing plants and produce.

In 2021, NSVMGA will continue experimenting with new programming outlets that enable us to safely work with the community to promote environmentally sound horticulture practices. Our popular Gardening in the Valley Symposium, which funds our scholarship program, will be completely online this year so you can hear and see the same great presenters from the comfort of your own home. We'll be offering a series of webinars for beginning vegetable gardeners throughout the spring and into summer. We are brainstorming how to safely resume our annual GardenFest in June, and have plans in the works for an appropriately socially distanced Gardening in the Valley Tour of Gardens.

Although we had to cancel two of our earliest events for 2021—the Seed Exchange and Indoor Plant Clinic at Bowman Library—work is underway to establish Seed Lending Libraries in each county, and our Greenlines are here to field all your garden-related questions year-round. Read more about our new and continuing efforts throughout the newsletter, follow us on Facebook, and check our website regularly for additional details about all our 2021 projects that serve the gardening public.

Thanks to all the outgoing leaders who guided us through the early COVID challenges, including President Bob Gail, our fearless leader who remains on the Board as Past President; Misa Mulrone, our conscientious Treasurer for two years; Sandy Ward, our diligent Secretary

of three years; and former County Coordinators: Ginny Smith (who remains our Membership chair), Jessica Priest-Cahill (who is taking a temporary step back), and Mary Turner (whose life events have taken her off to South Carolina).



I'm happy to welcome our members who are trying out new roles within the association: Jeff Burke as Treasurer, Lorna Loring as Secretary, Joan Newman our new Clarke County Coordinator; Claire DeMasi and Don Arnold, who have agreed to temporarily fill in as our Warren County Coordinators; and Jenn Adams, Cathy Adriola, and Janet Keithley, who will be splitting responsibilities as Frederick County Coordinators.

One of the many benefits of being a member of the NSVMGA is you can always stretch your capabilities into new areas. Last year, I challenged myself by co-coordinating the Class of 2020 as well as learning how to manage our website at nsvmgga.org. This year, I'm really stepping outside my comfort level as President of the association. As I continue to learn in these roles, I look forward to seeing other members take on several of my former responsibilities: writing articles each quarter for the newsletter and coordinating the Seed Exchange for 2022. I expect we will have some really key jobs to fill, so be thinking about how you'd like to grow and expand within our association.

I'm excited about the possibilities ahead for 2021, and look forward to serving you as President of the NSVMGA.

Elaine

Meet Elaine Specht Gail Fowler

On the surface, it appears as if Elaine Specht has been preparing for her new role as president of the NSVMGA her entire life. Her life resume opens with a pastoral view of the 250-acre self-described “truck” farm (mostly cucumbers and cabbage) in upstate New York where she grew up. To hear her tell it, the story almost ends there. “I was determined to get as far away from farming as possible,” she says. And, she did, for a while. She earned a B.A. in Communications from Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, a Master’s in Public Administration at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and built a solid career in government communications.

But she couldn’t shake the soil from her DNA. As an undergraduate she took a class in botany, followed by an elective to learn more about indoor plants. “That should have been my first clue,” she said. “Apparently, I didn’t get as far away as I thought I had.”

When Elaine and her husband Dan returned to Blacksburg, where they had met as undergrads, they bought their first home on a lot measured in square feet rather than acres. After 18 years, they had maxed out the property’s potential, planting gardens and trees that would eventually encroach on the house. That was her second clue: She enjoyed doing it. So in 2010, when the Spechts decided to move to Shenandoah County where Dan’s family had an ancestral connection, they looked for property with plenty of room to grow – flowers, plants, trees, fruits, and vegetables. Now, a decade later, the property has been transformed from farm field to a four-season wildlife habitat.

In preparation for a planned early retirement, Elaine had enrolled in the NSVMGA Class of 2014. “I wanted to remain active,” she said, “and taking steps to become a Master Gardener was a logical choice.” She was ready to get back to her roots. “When I worked in an office, it didn’t matter whether it was May or November, the tasks were generally the same. I spent most days in front of a computer screen,” she recalled. Gardening was her connection to the natural cycle of life, requiring brawn, brain, and creativity. “I am my best self when I am immersed in, not just observing, all that’s happening outdoors,” she said.

Like a puzzle coming together, Elaine’s career experience in communication and event planning fit nicely with her passion for gardening. As a Master Gardener, her resume continued to grow: Seed Exchange leader, 2016-2020; Web Master, since 2019; Co-leader (with Stacey Morgan Smith) NSVMGA Class of 2020. In 2017, her desire to go “more than an inch deep” in studying soil science prompted her to earn a certificate in horticulture, on-line, from North Carolina State University. Fortuitously, this experience in online education, coupled with her expertise in emergency planning for government agencies, helped her navigate many of the challenges she and Stacey faced leading the first NSVMGA hybrid (online and in-person) Class of 2020 and, seamlessly, transitioning it to Zoom when the pandemic forced the cancellation of in-person meetings and labs.

As NSVMGA president, Elaine’s priority is to get members re-engaged. “Understandably, it has been a challenge keeping the organization relevant during the pandemic,” she said. “It’s important that we stay engaged with each other by finding safe ways to keep our programs alive and growing.” Her goals include encouraging members to take on personal stretch goals: sign up for a new project, try a different activity, or take on a leadership role. “Maybe it’s as simple as learning how to participate in Zoom meetings so all members can feel part of the whole again,” she said. She also plans to start the process of updating the NSVMGA Strategic Plan, required by the organization’s bylaws. Other items on her “to-do list” include helping the NSVMGA Class of 2020 members complete their initial volunteer hours, launching a new online webinar series for beginner vegetable gardeners, and increasing the visibility of the NSVMGA with the 2021 Garden Tour. “The pandemic brought out a lot of backyard gardeners, so the community needs us more than ever,” she said.

Author’s Note: Certified as a [NSVMGA Wildlife Habitat](#) and a [Monarch Waystation](#), the Specht property in Woodstock will be among those featured on the NSVMGA 2021 Garden Tour, June 26, 2021.

Gardening in the Valley Symposium 2021 - Save the Date

The NSVMGA's annual Gardening in the Valley Symposium will be held virtually on **March 6, 2021**. "We continue to strive to provide interesting and varied educational content relevant to the Shenandoah Valley region," says organizer Lynn Hoffmann.

The full day continuing education symposium will feature four speakers and topics (see below). Morning and afternoon sessions will be separated by a lunch break that will give you time to eat and stretch and listen to other short topics including highlights of the Frederick County FFA, and a VCE update on the Spotted Lanternfly.

Registration via our website, <http://nsvmgga.org/events/symposium/> will open in **mid-January**. The registration fee is only **\$45**, and there will be door prizes and a silent auction.

Urban Beekeeping and Apiculture's Role in Sustainable Urban Agriculture

Brad Garmon

www.commonwealthbee.com

Mr. Garmon is the owner and chief apiarist of the Commonwealth Bee Company, a Certified Naturally Grown urban apiary and apicultural services company located in Falls Church. He provides locally raised honeybee colonies, honey, wax products, support services and colony relocations.

Brad obtained his B.S. from Roger Williams University in Rhode Island and his M.S.N. from the University of Virginia. He works as a pediatric intensive care nurse in Fairfax and is the father of four-year-old twin girls.

Herbs for Healing and Health

Sondra Baker Johnson

www.naturescommonscent.club

Ms. Johnson was born in England and grew up in the Washington, D.C. area. Her English grandparents were gardeners, and her grandmother used herbs extensively, especially in cooking. The cookbooks she used were called "housekeeping" books and included information on caring for the sick. Many of these early recipes are the basis for her products.

She began studying herbalism in the 1980s and put it to practical use with her family, pets, and farm animals. Her hobby turned into a Front Royal based business, Natures Common Scents, LLC.

Raised Beds vs. Traditional Gardens

Lynne Phillips

www.naturalartgardencenter.com

Ms. Phillips is the manager at Natural Art Garden Center located in Toms Brook. Lynne grew up on a farm and is an avid vegetable and plant gardener.

Lynne graduated from Virginia Tech in 1995 with a B.S. degree in Agricultural and Applied Economics. Her hobbies include knitting, reading and kayaking. She is a Class A Virginia Contractor as well as ICPI certified, and a member of the Virginia Nursery and Landscape Association and OFA-Association of Horticultural Professionals.

Evolution of a Family Farm: Staying Profitable and Viable

Rose McDonald and family

Mrs. McDonald descends from a proud line of multi-generation family farmers in Frederick County. Rose has instilled a love of the land and commitment to feed oneself and others, while contributing to community as a volunteer and leader, to her daughter, Hannah and son, Brandon. Both children have been raised in the VCE's 4-H, shooting clubs, and the award-winning Golden Horseshoes Club of which Rose is project leader. Brandon is a past recipient of the NSVMGA Scholarship.

Volunteer Coordinator Message

Stacey Morgan Smith

Happy New Year 2021! We are hard at work planning the year, and our Extension Master Gardeners and Interns are discussing more opportunities to serve our communities, even as they look at a few more months under state restrictions. If you follow our [Facebook](#) page and [website](#), you'll be the first to know about projects and events.

One new project is an offshoot of our very popular [Seed Exchange at Blandy](#). While we had to cancel the January 2021 event, we look forward to seeing you in 2022. In the meantime, we're setting up Seed Lending Libraries in each county. Those libraries provide homeowners with the opportunity to grow seeds; and if they're successful, they can pay it forward by returning seeds for others to grow! We'll share more about this initiative in the spring newsletter. If you work at a business with public access, such as a government building or library, and you have room for a couple of plastic shoeboxes, please contact us at NSVMGANews@gmail.com, and we may be able to set up in your location.

The Northern Shenandoah Valley has seven new Extension Master Gardeners! Please congratulate **Jenn Adams, Debbie Talley, and Gail Fowler** in Frederick County; **Mary Jane Korrigan, Rochelle Dornatt, and Chris Jorgensen** in Shenandoah County; and **Cynthia Gee** in Warren County.

For those volunteers who would like to help with the local association's planning, please consider serving on one of our committees or in another leadership role. Get in touch after the new year, and we can talk about your interests, and where you might want to serve. You may also want to get involved with the state association, and I'm happy to discuss that with you, too.

To all of our 160 or so NSVMGA members, thank you for all of your hard work during a difficult year. You inspire me and are the reason I love serving our unit as coordinator. I look forward to 2021 volunteering with you all remotely and, at some point, in person together.



*photo by
Stacey Morgan Smith*

Plant-a-Thank-you Program — Phase Two

Lynn Hoffmann

When COVID-19 started last year we had no idea that the way we lived would change so dramatically. In June of 2020 the Extension Master Gardeners (EMG) donated more than 200 plants to local hospitals' emergency rooms to say thank-you to nurses and ER staff for their efforts during the pandemic.

We hoped that this craziness would be short-lived! But almost a year later, we still have not returned to the norm that we were used to. So the EMGs are continuing our Plant-a-Thank-you Program, and this time we are adopting one school in each of the five counties that the NSVMGA serves.

Many teachers have taught virtually as well as in person and have needed to change their teaching style on almost a moment's notice. The challenges for the school system have been unbelievable, but our teachers and staff are still working to uphold the standards we expect from our educational system. They are working hard to teach our children and grandchildren in these challenging times.

Small house plants are being propagated from EMG plants. Coffee mugs and tea cups will be used as vessels for plants. Small hanging bags of potpourri will be given to the bus drivers to provide a little bit of a 'garden essence' in their buses.

Valentine's Day is on its way, and it's a great time to give our thanks and appreciation to these special people. The cups will be decorated and delivered to the schools just before February 14.

If you are interested in helping please contact Lynn Hoffmann at gwendydog@gmail.com.

San Damiano Retreat Center Lynn Hoffmann

Sensory gardens are a place to meditate, feel secure and safe in the midst of the hectic world around us. The San Damiano Spiritual Life Center is a secluded place of peace and meditation where many people have experienced a great feeling of serenity when they participate in retreats held at the bucolic setting in Frederick County, south of Winchester, Virginia.

The retreat property is filled with garden settings throughout the campus. Your first glimpse of a secluded and peaceful area is the inner courtyard as you walk in the front doors, beckoning you to enjoy a beautiful area of shrubs, trees, and green tranquility.

Deacon Maines, Director of the Center, wanted to refresh the courtyard and directed Vanessa Lewis, the Center's Hospitality Manager, to suggest ideas and ways to accomplish the task. Ms. Lewis reached out to the Northern Shenandoah Valley Master Gardeners (www.nsvmgga.org)

in August 2020, requesting assistance regarding the inner courtyard. The assistance was in the form of horticulture and how the area could be improved and maintained. Helen Lake, an Extension Master Gardener (EMG) and a certified Horticultural Therapist, along with fellow EMG and parishioner at Sacred Heart of Jesus, Lynn Hoffmann, met with Vanessa in late August. Discussing the overall objectives and goals of the staff at the retreat, we came up with a three-phased plan that would include two educational classes and working sessions beginning in September 2020 and into the Spring of 2021.

There have been two classes on sensory and therapeutic garden design and basic landscape design at San Damiano for the 20 volunteers and several staff members who have signed on to renew and rejuvenate the inner courtyard. The goal is to create a meditative and therapeutically healing environment for everyone who comes to the Center.

Currently, most of the people involved in this project are EMGs from the surrounding counties (Clarke, Frederick, City of Winchester, Shenandoah, Warren and Page). The next step is to invite and encourage (with the help of Vanessa and Deacon Mark) parishioners from local parishes and anyone who would want to help in maintaining and learning about sensory gardens.

Areas of the courtyard have been divided into teams which will prepare designs, suggest rejuvenation plantings, design a rosary/labyrinth and herb garden areas. In the herb areas we will try to use herbs from the varied cultures that visit the retreat. Healing herbs noted in the Bible and herbs from regions from Central and South America and Asia may also be incorporated into the area.

This past fall, the area was cleaned up and pruned for the winter season. After Deacon Maines and his staff review the proposed plans, the Extension Master Gardeners will start implementing the upgrades in the spring of 2021. **If anyone is interested in volunteering or bringing out youth groups or homeschool groups to help, they can contact Vanessa Lewis at her email. Vanessa.Lewis@arlingtondiocese.org**

Information about San Damiano can be found at the web page <https://www.arlingtondiocese.org/san-damiano-spiritual-life-center>

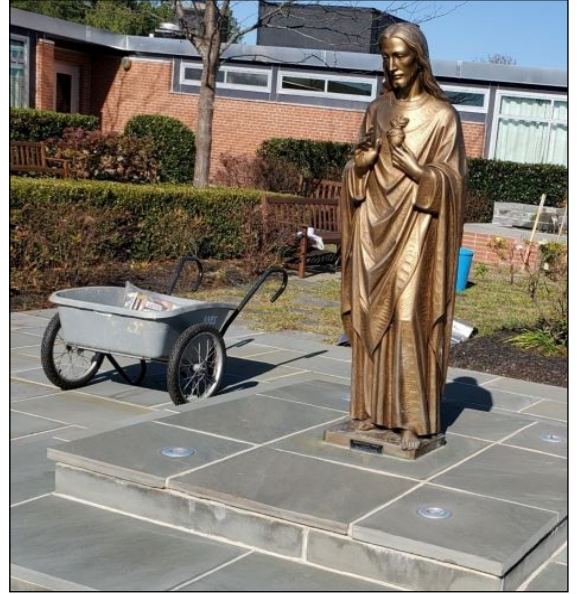


photo by Lynn Hoffmann

Wake Up Your Winter Garden

Lesley Mack

Did you plan your garden just for the spring or summer months? Did you plant a few fall favorites? Why not make plans for a winter garden that looks almost as incredible as some gardens do in spring or summer?

Creating impact with the least amount of effort can start by focusing on one garden area. Pick an area that you gaze at often during the winter, rather than a remote part of your yard. Once you have decided on an area, there are some obvious ways to punch it up. Seek out native plants that provide winter interest and drama with their berries, evergreen leaves, or structures.

Some native berried plants of interest are American cranberry bush, (*Viburnum trilobum*) (center photo below), Winterberry, (*Ilex verticillata*) or Beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*). The cranberry bush and winterberry have bright red berries that persist into the winter, becoming food for the birds. Winterberry also comes in a soft coral color *Ilex verticillata* 'Winter Gold'. Beautyberry is a wonderful purple color that the birds will feast on, as well.

Since evergreens are an essential component to the winter garden, we usually rely on pines as our main source. While these evergreens can be the tall stately focal point, textured shrubs or simple ground covers (photo at right) can also mesmerize us in the winter garden.

Coastal doghobble (*Leucothoe axillaris*) and *Rhododendron maximum* are medium to large, upright, loose, multi-stemmed, evergreen native shrubs that add interesting textures and color. *Leucothoe* also comes in a "Rainbow" form which can add even more punch during the winter months. Ground covers like mosses bring a sense of age and place to a garden; with them, a space feels more peaceful and calm.

Of course, *Magnolia grandiflora* (left photo) and deciduous trees create their own structural poetry. *Magnolia grandiflora* is a broadleaf evergreen tree that is noted for its attractive dark green leaves. And who can resist a few magnolia leaves artfully designed during the holidays? Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis virginia*) is a small tree with its shaggy, spidery winter blooms with long, crinkly petals, clustered up and down the length of the branches.

A winter garden does not have to be uninspiring, there are dozens of ways to keep a garden full of life in the cold season. Featuring berries: including plants with interesting leaves or leaf color; highlighting unusual branching structure or winter flowers are some of the ways to create winter interest...and if you plant natives, their presence will entice the birds and animals with their food and shelter, while you enjoy the incredible impact you have created.

Additional native species information can be found at:

photos by Lesley Mack

<https://mgmv.org/2017/11/27/native-plants-for-winter-interest/>
<https://vnps.org/about/>
<https://www.plantnovanatives.org/evergreens>



New Vegetable Webinar Series

Jenn Adams

The global pandemic of 2020 saw the rise of many new gardeners trying their hands at growing their own produce. In anticipation that the trend will continue in 2021, the Northern Shenandoah Valley Master Gardener Association has created a **FREE Webinar Series for Beginning Vegetable Gardeners** offered via Zoom. Through a series of six one-hour online sessions, certified Extension Master Gardeners and Interns will take participants from buying seeds, starting seedlings, and setting up the garden space all the way through to harvesting produce, saving seeds for next year, and preparing for the next growing season.

Sessions will be on the **third Thursday** of each month from **February** through **July**. Participants can pick and choose which sessions they would like to register for, but we hope people will register for them all! After registering, participants will receive an e-mail message with the link for joining the Zoom session. There is a different link for each session in the series.

During live sessions, participants will be able to submit questions to the presenters. Sessions will be recorded and posted [at 2021 Webinars | Northern Shenandoah Valley Master Gardener Association \(nsvmgga.org\)](#) for later viewing. If you would like to participate in planning and presenting the sessions, please contact Jennifer Adams at jadam2@su.edu.

Sessions

1. Planning the Garden: Selecting and Starting Seeds

Thursday, February 18, 7 p.m.

Start off on the right foot by planning what seed to buy and how much you'll need. You'll also learn tips for starting seeds indoors, plus how succession planting can help ensure a bountiful harvest all summer long.

2. Setting up Your Garden Space

Thursday, March 18, 7 p.m.

Learn how to choose and prepare an area suitable for your vegetable garden. This session will cover the importance and steps for testing the soil and making appropriate amendments before planting—including using compost as a soil amendment—and some tips for growing in raised beds.

3. Maintaining the Garden

Thursday, April 15, 7 p.m.

Unfortunately, a garden won't take care of itself. From weeding and watering to keeping an eye out for pests, find out what you should be doing throughout the season to care for your vegetables. This session will include some show-and-tell about tools you'll need to keep your garden in top shape.

4. Planting and Harvesting Your Produce

Thursday, May 20, 7 p.m.

When should you plant and when should you pick? Plant too early, and tender seedlings could be killed by frost. Pick too early, and you may be missing out on having great tasting veggies. In this session, you'll learn both when and how to plant some of your favorite veggies and then when to harvest at the peak of readiness.

5. Saving Seeds and Composting the Biomass

Thursday, June 17, 7 p.m.

Not all seeds are the same. Find out which you can save and how, while helping to save money and select for the most desirable traits. Plus, learn what you can safely compost after the harvest is complete to create your own organic soil amendment.

6. Preparing Your Garden for the Next Season

Thursday, July 15, 7 p.m.

As one growing season comes to a close, it is time to plan for the next one. Whether you are preparing to plant again for a fall harvest or putting the garden to bed until next spring, steps you take now—including taking good notes about lessons learned this year—will pay off later. This session will discuss using cover crops to preserve and replenish the soil and season extenders to help you grow a fall crop.

Register for all sessions at [2021 Webinars | Northern Shenandoah Valley Master Gardener Association \(nsvmgga.org\)](#). Registration will be live at the end of January.

Seed-Starting: How Easy it Is!

Will Daniels

Many gardeners like to start seeds indoors in late winter. They've surely come up with their own variations on the process that have led to success, as there are a number of ways to go about growing indoor seedlings. But in case anyone has hesitated to get involved because the hobby seems tricky or expensive, I'd like to assure them that seed-starting is quite easy and requires a minimum of expense. So jump right in.

I don't have the last word on the subject. Many years ago, I found a way that works well enough for me, and have changed it very little. There are just two points that have seemed most essential:

1) LET THERE BE (LOTS OF) LIGHT

How do you get lots of light—a full day's if using a south window, or more hours than that—with artificial light? Because full light from windows can be blocked by trees or eaves, and the space for plants is so limited, I've always relied on standard four-foot shop lights with two fluorescent bulbs. The *VA Cooperative Master Gardener Handbook* (p. 355) tells us that these fixtures perform well, so no need for specialized grow lights. The Handbook advises using one warm and one cool bulb together, and others specify replacing bulbs every few seasons --but I confess to following neither recommendation.

Recently, an alternative to fluorescent lights has arrived. LED shop lights don't cost much (around \$25 for the preferred 5,000 lumens model), and the longevity of the bulbs is such that they may outlive me. To run each light for a growing season will cost around \$5.00, calculating from figures given on the box. A single fixture, with two narrowly spaced strips of bulbs, adequately spread enough light the entire width of a 12" nursery tray. The outer seedlings may lean in a bit, but they can be rotated to the center every week or so.

How you suspend the lights depends on where you'll be using them. Basement rafters work great. Lacking a basement, other ways to hold the lights over the seedling trays can be devised. My purely functional set-up is shown in the photo. I was lucky to find a shop light in a stand-up frame while nosing around a thrift store. The light can be raised and lowered to keep the bulbs just a few inches above the plants. If the plants brush against the bulbs, though, they won't be harmed.

Running lights on the same cycle as our own optimum sleep cycle (16 hours on, eight off) has produced good results. Inexpensive timers make on/off automatic.

2) USE A GOOD SEED-STARTING MEDIUM

That may seem obvious, but it can be tempting to use less costly mediums that are best used to pot plants. It's true that seeds can germinate in almost anything, needing just a little moisture and some warmth, but for a high germination rate and best growth, it's worth spend-

ing more for a light, fine starting mix based on peat or coconut coir. Some seeds are expensive, so you don't want a low success rate. Seed-starting mixes balance good drainage with moisture retention and don't promote growth of mold.

Seed-starting mixes are called "soiless," meaning that after the plant has used the nutrition contained in the seed, it needs extra fertilization. A weak chemical or organic fertilizer every couple of weeks will do. Some mixes already contain the needed nutrients.

In the category of "what else?" here's a list to consider.

- Seeds of perennial plants may require cold stratification in the refrigerator or outdoors to break dormancy. Not all seed packets tell you that, so consult the internet if in question. Some seed-starters prefer not to bother with seeds that need this treatment.
- Bottom heat is advised for seeds such as tomatoes and peppers to raise soil temperature to about 75 degrees. Heating mats can provide this warmth, but they probably aren't necessary at regular room temperature if you don't mind waiting a few more days.
- Although you might itch to start your seeds shortly after the new year, in most cases it's better to wait until late February to start the first wave of plants. There will still be at least 10 weeks for seedlings to grow before it's time to harden them off outdoors. Plants grown too long under lights may become leggy and weak.
- Seeds can be started in flats or in cell packs and small pots. I find cell packs to be convenient and reusable over several seasons.
- Germinating seeds, and seedlings, can be watered from below, by pouring a half-inch of water into the tray. If you bottom water, it's important to check that you're a using tray without holes, as I learned.

Several hundred plants can emerge from your nursery by planting time. The only problem, then, can be where to put them all!

Reference: VA Cooperative Master Gardener Handbook



At left: The domes help to keep air inside moist.
3 shop lights = 6x trays of seedlings (288 plants)

At right: grow light mounted under top of book shelf
photos by Will Daniels

The Box Huckleberry – One of the Oldest Living Organisms in the World

Joyce Watson

On a recent nature outing to the Tuscarora State Forest in Perry County, Pennsylvania, my daughter and 6-year-old granddaughter visited the Hoverter and Sholl Box Huckleberry Natural Area. Located near New Bloomfield, the box huckleberry colony is said to be at least 1,300 years old. The trail through the area winds itself back towards the road. Near the road, there is a historic marker denoting that this is a National Natural Landmark.

Another less accessible box huckleberry site, called Losh Run, sits alongside the Juniata River, a tributary of the Susquehanna River, near Route 322/22. This box huckleberry site is thought to be around 8,000 to 13,000 years old! This was a once massive colony stretching over a mile and covering 100 acres. During the 1960s and 70s much of the colony was destroyed due to road construction and development.

The low-lying evergreen box huckleberry (*Gaylussacia brachycera*) belongs to the Ericaceae family, which is comprised mostly of acid-loving plants and is a close relative to the blueberry. It grows in the full shade of pine and oak forests. It has one-inch oval leathery glossy leaves that resemble a boxwood shrub. Its ornamental white or pink bell-shaped flowers produce dark blue, tasteless berries in summer. In late fall and winter the leaves acquire a bronzy hue, lending a bit of color to the winter woodland.

The plant is self-sterile and reproduces asexually by rhizomes. A single huckleberry stretches for hundreds of feet in all directions. The slow-growing colony spreads by means of runners whose average growth is about six inches per year. Growth rate, coupled with the area occupied, is the means of determining the age of the plant. Read more about how botanists determine age in Rob Nicholson's article in the Harvard reference listed below.

The box huckleberry was first discovered in Warm Springs, Virginia, in 1796 by French botanist Andre Michaux. Fifty years would pass before it was seen again in 1846, this time in Pennsylvania. The plant was found in Perry County by Professor Spencer F. Baird of Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

The rare native shrub is classified as a threatened species by the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. Other younger more southerly colonies can be found in Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland and Delaware. A colony in North Carolina was discovered in 2003.

References:

[The Pennsylvania Center for the Book - Box Huckleberry Plant \(psu.edu\)](http://psu.edu)

[2011-68-3-little-big-plant-box-huckleberry-gaylussacia-brachycera.pdf \(harvard.edu\)](http://harvard.edu)

[National Natural Landmarks - National Natural Landmarks \(U.S. National Park Service\) \(nps.gov\)](http://nps.gov)

[Exploring Ancient Life at the Hoverter and Sholl Box Huckleberry Natural Area in Perry County - UncoveringPA](#)

[Microsoft Word - 10831_Aneides_aeneus.doc \(state.pa.us\)](http://state.pa.us)

elibrary.dcnr.pa.gov/GetDocument?docId=1742378&DocName=sf-FD03-BoxhuckleberryNA-trailguide.pdf



In 1967 the box huckleberry colony was designated as a National Natural Landmark. Photographed at the marker are my daughter, Alyssa, and granddaughter, Nina. The box huckleberry can be seen behind them.

photo by Lucile Dupperon

Winter Snow and Cold: Good or Bad for the Garden? Elaine Specht

Winter is upon us, so what does that mean for the garden? Are winter snows and cold temperatures good or bad? The answer is: a little of both.

The Bad

- Heavy snows and ice can break tree limbs and the branches of shrubs. If you see snow or ice accumulating on your plants and can SAFELY shake it off, do so. If it isn't safe, however, best to wait for the temperature to rise and let Mother Nature do the work.
- Without protection from snow, constant freezing and thawing of the ground can cause frost heave, which can break roots or push plants out of the ground and expose the roots to harsh drying wind.
- Snow can provide cover for harmful pests such as rabbits and voles that gnaw on the tender bark of trees and shrubs. Clearing snow away from saplings can help prevent damage to young trees that are still getting established.
- When temperatures are too warm, plants begin budding and blooming. If this is followed by a cold snap, then tender new growth may be damaged. Consistently cold temperatures are better until it is really time for spring weather to return and stay.



photo by Elaine Specht

For more about the negative impacts of snow and cold, check out the information from [Swain County, North Carolina's, Cooperative Extension](#).

The Good

- Cold weather helps kill harmful insects that overwinter above ground and in the soil so there is a decreased population the next growing season.
- Snow insulates the ground to protect it from deep freezes. When the ground is covered with a blanket of snow, earthworms and beneficial bacteria continue to break down plant debris into plant-usable nutrients.
- As snow falls through the air, nitrogen, an essential plant nutrient, attaches to the flakes. The nitrogen is released into the soil fertilizing plants as it melts.
- Melting snow infiltrates the ground more slowly, helping to water early emerging bulbs and perennials.
- Fresh-fallen snow on the landscape looks nice. If we do get more snow this season, sit back and enjoy. It's not likely to be here long.

[Lancaster County, Nebraska's Extension office](#) has shared some benefits of snow ... and they certainly would know!

**"Anyone who thinks that gardening begins in the spring and ends in the fall is missing the best part of the whole year.
For gardening begins in January with the dream."**

~Josephine Nuese

Hit or Miss Gardening: Air Plants

Jennifer Mathias

In keeping with the learn-as-you-go and small space themes, this column explores air plants. They can live in the tiniest of spaces and do not require the extensive care that many other house plants need.

Air plants are from the genus *Tillandsia* in the bromeliad family. They are native to the South-eastern United States, Central America, the Caribbean, and lower South America. These organisms are epiphytes, meaning that they cling with their roots to other objects, such as trees and rocks, for the sole purpose of having a place to live. Their nutrients are taken in by trichomes which are tiny hairlike cells on the surface of the leaves. Such creatures will flower once in their lifetime. After the bloom has died, tiny babies called pups will form at the base of the plant. Once the pups have reached a third of their mother's size, they can be divided and started on their own.

There are two types of *Tillandsia*, mesic and xeric. The mesic air plants grow in environments with higher humidity, such as rain forests. Their leaves are broader, dark green, and curled. This sort will need more watering, preferably a good weekly soaking, with filtered light conditions.

Xeric air plants tend to grow in the desert, therefore needing less water and can take more light, but not direct sunlight. Their leaves are grayish in color due to the many trichomes on their leaves.



There are three ways to water your air plant – misting, soaking, and rinsing. When you purchase your *Tillandsia*, find out which type that you have so you will know its watering needs. In my research, I have found that soaking can be done for half an hour to a few hours to overnight. This will be the “hit or miss” part of the journey. The xeric ones may do well with a good rinse for a few minutes under the faucet. After watering, always shake off the excess droplets and let your plant dry for four hours before putting back in its display. Too much moisture can cause rot, just as with other plants.

Both types of *Tillandsia* will need good air circulation and would do well with a monthly fertilization routine. Clemson University advises using a diluted liquid bromeliad fertilizer.

Now that I have a little background on these curious life forms, it's time to learn more. I look forward to writing more about air plants next time.

For further information on air plants, visit the websites below.

<https://extension.psu.edu/tillandsia-air-plants>
<https://hgic.clemson.edu/factsheet/air-plants/>

photo by Barbara H. Smith, HGIC, Clemson University

Off the Beaten Path: Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

Elaine Specht

Founded in 1670, the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh, Scotland celebrated its 350th anniversary in 2020. Located near the heart of the Scottish capital, the garden wouldn't be considered off the beaten path in normal times. As the world still deals with a global pandemic, this garden as with any that requires more than regional travel, will remain out of reach for most Americans at least in early 2021. Plus, the cold days of winter generally aren't the best time to see most gardens in person, so how about a virtual visit to the United Kingdom's second oldest botanical garden?

A quick video [Celebrating the Garden's 350th Anniversary](#) shares the history and current role of the Royal Botanical Garden in Edinburgh to explore, conserve, and explain the world of plants in the face of climate change and biodiversity loss. An [hour-long talk](#) goes into greater depth into the garden's history.

This [one-hour panel discussion](#), co-sponsored by the Royal Botanic Garden in November 2020, dives deeper into the dangers of plant extinction and the need to expand global awareness about the importance of biodiversity conservation for plants and fungi.



photo by Elaine Specht

Access spectacular [photos and summaries](#) of the various living plant collections at the gardens as well as selected [images](#) from among the three million specimens of pressed and dried plants contained in its vast herbarium.

You can even see a [video message](#) from His Royal Highness, Prince Charles, Patron of "The Botanics," whose passion for plants and gardening is well documented.

It all makes for an interesting and pleasant visit from the comfort and safety of your own home.

Winter Activity Alert — Make the most of your sofa time this winter and take a virtual botanical tour. There are many options available. Here are a few other possibilities for you to consider. Grab a cup of hot tea, cocoa or coffee and enjoy!

[Take a Virtual Tour | United States Botanic Garden \(usbq.gov\)](#)

[Take a virtual tour of 9 beautiful botanical gardens - The Spaces](#)

[Enjoy a Virtual Visit to Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden in Richmond, VA](#)

[Virtual Kew | Kew](#)

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From the Editor: Christmas Cactus *(Schlumbergera x buckleyi)*

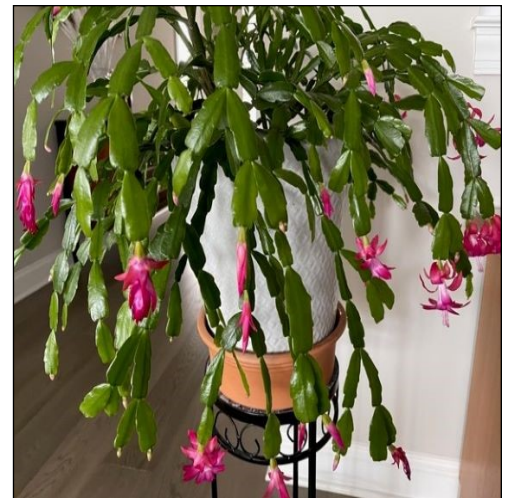
My beautiful Christmas cactus plant bloomed right on schedule, with the first flowers appearing on December 16. I am particularly sentimental about this plant as it was rooted from a four-inch clipping taken from a 100+year old plant during a propagation session I attended while going through Master Gardener training in 2017. In three and a half years it has grown to be more than two feet in diameter.

Although it is a cactus, this is a tropical plant, of the family Cactaceae, and native to Brazil. It is a popular houseplant with flattened stems, and is grown for its striking tubular cerise flowers that bloom at Christmastime.

Light is critical to ensure that a Christmas cactus will bloom. My plant resides in a sunny eastern location window, which gives the ideal bright, but indirect light that the plant likes. The Christmas cactus is known as a short-day plant and will form flowers only when day length is less than 12 hours. They need approximately six weeks of short-days to bloom.

Temperature is also key to blooming. Although 70 degrees is beneficial during the growing season, cooler temperatures are needed for flowering. From October on, the plant requires temperatures between 55 to 65 degrees Fahrenheit.

Watering, humidity, and fertilization are also elements of plant management. Over-watering causes branches to droop and break. You should water only when the top one third of soil feels dry to the touch. Use your finger to check. Mist the plant or place the container on a tray of pebbles, and keep water in the tray to create humidity around the plant. Fertilization from spring to early fall is suggested.



It was still blooming on December 29 when this photo was taken.

photo by Joyce Watson

References:

[https://pitt.ces.ncsu.edu/2015/12/christmas-cactus-care/Christmas Cactus Care | North Carolina Cooperative Extension \(ncsu.edu\)](https://pitt.ces.ncsu.edu/2015/12/christmas-cactus-care/Christmas-Cactus-Care-North-Carolina-Cooperative-Extension-ncsu.edu)
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