Can You Dig It?

Winter 2025

We are pleased to return and are committed to providing you with engaging, educational, and valuable information.

The winter of 2025 has not been like the past few winters….we have had snow a few times, and we are forecasted to have more…we have had bitter cold, harsh winds, a bit of rain, and some beautiful sunrises and sunsets. Your writers have jumped right in to discuss winter and the effects it can have on your garden, both positive and negative; plants we can enjoy in the winter; designing tips and sowing seeds; a little bit of "This and That"; caring for our bird friends in the winter; why natives; and ending with Pollinators for Beginners.

So sit back and enjoy your favorite coffee or tea and explore what we have to offer!

Trish Reynolds
Editor

IN THIS ISSUE:

Editor……..…..Trish Reynolds

Design & Layout……..…..Rebecca Gaffney

Benefits of Winter Cold and Snow on a Spring Garden

❄ Lin Moeller

A cold winter with a blanket of snow is like a good night's sleep for a spring garden. Granted tender perennials and shrubs may suffer a bit of dieback, but the overall benefits can be bountiful.

A cold winter provides a period of dormancy where plants store energy and develop strong root systems. Plant growth is regulated by hormones and the cold temperatures will help trigger changes as the days warm and lengthen, thus the stronger roots will encourage healthy new growth. A blanket of snow acts as an insulator, shielding the soil around plant roots from temperature fluctuations.

Mild winters are kind to insects and diseases that settle into the mulch and soil surface layer. The colder ground temperature helps to control the insect population and to inhibit disease pathogens which could be harmful to plants. Many insect larvae, eggs (aphids and whiteflies) cannot survive prolong freezing temperatures, nor can many bacteria. Weed seeds also struggle with days of lingering cold as it will lessen the germination by causing the seeds on the surface and just below to die.

As snow melts, it provides a steady moisture supply that seeps into the ground for plant roots to absorb, rather than causing runoff. Freezing and thawing cycles can improve soil structure by both aerating and allowing better drainage. This process also helps to loosen compacted areas.

A good blanket of snow is called 'poor man's fertilizer' by farmers and 'old-timers.' The atmosphere is made up of about 70% nitrogen. As the snowflakes fall through the atmosphere to the ground, nitrate molecules become attached. Thus, these green-producing nutrients blanket fields, gardens and lawns. As the snow slowly melts, the nitrates trickle into the soil, feeding hungry roots. A good snowfall could be a premonition to healthy spring plants!

As shown, a cold, snowy winter is a gardener's ally: insulating soil, providing moisture and nutrients, controlling pests and fostering a period of dormancy which when spring arrives in the garden are all benefits.

The best gift of cold, snowy weather is to give gardeners rest, to sit back comfortably inside, look at garden catalogs and magazines, and plan for spring gardening!

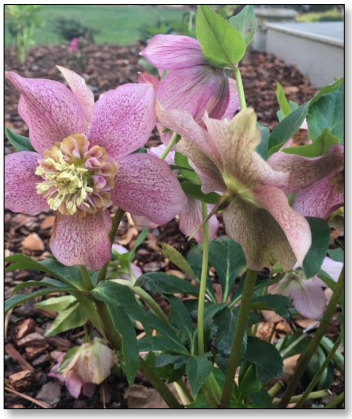
Hellebores

❄ Kim Eckert

A few decades ago, hellebores were considered a specialty perennial in most gardens. They were hard to find and only a few varieties were offered to the home gardener. Now, they are one of the most desirable perennials available. They are early bloomers, are available in a variety of cultivars, have gorgeous foliage and once established they add beauty to the garden nine months a year. Although hellebores tend to be a bit more expensive than other perennials, they bring many years of joy if planted and cared for correctly.

Hellebores of all types need rich, well-drained soil, part to full shade and even moisture. Once established, they can tolerate drought quite well. In fact, these plants can grow well under a canopy tree and provide a lush flowering groundcover. Some hybrids of Helleborus orientalis will self-seed in an area where they are happy and provide seedlings that can be transplanted elsewhere or shared with some lucky friends. Other varieties are sterile and do not seed. These are usually the double flower variety like Helleborus 'Wedding Bells', a double white.

Caring for hellebores, once they are established is fairly simple. They are generally very disease resistant and do not require fertilizer. Flowers begin to appear in early February and can last into June. The blooms can be cut back as they brown. The foliage comes up after the blooms, usually in mid-March and throughout the growing season. The leaves will begin to look shabby in late December or January and should be cut near ground level. This should be done for appearance as well as health of the plant. Cutting the foliage will help to keep any pathogens on the leaves from affecting the plant.



Hellebores are easy-to-care perennials that provide year-round interest. They are workhorses in the shade garden and pair beautifully with Epimedium and Carex. There are so many colors and varieties available now. Enjoy.

Note: Pictures are from Kim's Garden.

Planting With Design in Mind

❄ Pam Keeton

I love to design with things I grow and forage. Flowers, greens, berries, pods, vines – you name it! With careful planning, anyone can grow enough flowers, greens, berries, and pods to create beautiful and interesting floral arrangements year-round.

Let's Plant with Design in Mind!

Things to consider when planting for floral design include color, texture, vase life, seasons, and size. If you like to design with dried elements, keep that in mind as well. There's also a bling factor to consider - little touches that create interest.

You should also think about whether you want to replant every year, focus on plants and flowers that will come back year after year, or incorporate a variety of annuals, perennials, and bulbs.

Selecting perennial and self-seeding flowering plants, as well as certain bulbs, means you can enjoy flowers year after year without the need to replant. Daffodils and peonies are a given around here. Celosia easily reseeds itself and yarrow will rebloom for years. Celosia offers a triple benefit in that pollinators love it, and they dry beautifully!

Fruiting plants and those that produce cones and seed pods can give you interesting elements to use in design work. Poppies, nigella, and scabiosa produce fantastic pods that can be used fresh or dried. Crabapples are fun to use in design work. We added two to our property last year for the birds and for me!

There are a variety of pine trees that produce wonderful cones. Loblolly pines are everywhere on the Eastern Shore but watch out for the sharp spines on their cones. If you are considering adding a variety of pines, consider Eastern White Pine, Virginia Pine, and Eastern Hemlock.

And don't leave out vegetables! Burgundy okra produces beautiful pods and when dried, the pods often split creating stripes. Kale and Swiss Chard offer color and structure in floral design, and certain types of basil have a long vase life and add fragrance.

Greens, the Foundation for Design

When selecting bushes and trees, keep in mind what works well in designs. For instance, magnolia trees with smaller leaves and velvety brown undersides to their leaves, such as Teddy Bear and Bracken's Brown Beauty, are more versatile for design work.

Plants with variegated colors, like golden euonymus, offer a little pizzaz in floral arrangements, especially in winter. Red Twig Dogwood produces leaves that have a decent vase life in the summer, and beautiful red stems in the winter. There is also a yellow stem variety. Camellia leaves have a long vase life, are beautiful in winter, and the flower buds add interest to designs. Workhorses for me include euonymus, purple ninebark, St. John's Wort, and magnolias.

Arrangements don't necessarily need flowers! This one features a variety of greens, pinecones, and sticks.

Winter Sowing for Early Spring Blooms

❄ Kim Pawley Helfgott

As I look out at the remaining snow drifts and grey landscape, I know many of us are beginning to dream about getting our hands in dirt and longing to see flowers blooming in our garden. This article offers a five-step approach for super easy seed starting in the dead of winter to get a jump on those early bloomers.

Step 1. Purchase seeds that require a period of cold to germinate.

Some types of annual, biennial, and perennial flowers need "stratification" or a period of cool or cold to germinate and some only bloom in cooler temperatures. These cool weather seeds can be planted in late fall, winter, or early spring long BEFORE the last frost.

They are not to be confused with warm summer annuals such as sunflowers, zinnias, and cosmos, etc. that are generally planted AFTER the last frost in early May.

I have had success growing all the following cool flowers in late winter in my garden in Easton:

Hardy annuals – Love in the Mist/Nigella (Nigella damascena), larkspur (Delphinium consolida), orlaya (Orlaya grandiflora), Chinese forget me not (Firmament cynoglossum), corn flower/bachelor buttons (Centaurea), corn cockle (Agrostemma), bird's eyes (Gilia tricolor), Chinese houses (Collinsia heterophylla), sweet peas, and poppies (Papaver somniferum).

Biennials – hollyhock (Alcea rosea), foxgloves (Digitalis), sweet William (Dianthus barbatus)

Perennials - Lupines (Lupinus), yarrow (Achillea

millefolium), feverfew (Tanacetum parthenium), cone flowers (Echinacea), black-eyed susan (Rudbeckia), verbena (Verbena Bonariensis).

Step 2: Start by collecting and preparing milk gallon jugs.

Since it is impossible to sow seeds into frozen ground, covered in ice and snow, winter sowing in plastic gallon jugs is a wonderful alternative.

- If I do not have any available, Starbucks or Rise Up coffee shops gladly give gallon jugs away for free.

- Remove and dispose of the top cap.
- Clean milk gallon jugs with bleach or disinfectant. I have learned from experience that without a thorough cleaning, the soil will grow mold and plants will not thrive.
- Each jug is cut almost all the way around the middle (so it can open and close).
- Insert at least 4 slits at bottom on the jug for drainage.

Step 3. Purchase or create your own seed starting mix.

- I prefer to make my own seed starting mix. Although it takes effort to mix ingredients together, it can be more economical and occasionally more effective than using premade seed starting mix. You may prefer to buy seed starting mix or promix, but don't use potting soil as it is too heavy for seeds to germinate. My favorite seed starting mix includes the following components, all of which can be ordered on Amazon:
    - One-third coconut coir - holds moisture, more environmentally friendly than peat moss, and easy to store as it packaged in hard bricks.
    - One-third sphagnum peat moss.
    - One-third combined perlite and vermiculite – for aeration/drainage
    - Top with dried kelp and/or worm castings – provides some organic fertilizer
- Clean and sterilize a large plastic storage tub with a locking top so the mix can be covered and stored for future use.
- Once the coir is well saturated with water, mix in the peatmoss, vermiculite, perlite, and then top with a handful of dried kelp or worm castings.
- Fill each milk jug about a third with seedling mix (approximately 4 inches) and pack down lightly.

Step 4. Planting the seeds.

- Sow one type of seed in the seedling mix. Take note whether the seed should be placed on top of the soil or covered lightly. Some seeds need darkness and some need light to germinate.
- Spray the seeds lightly with water.
- Use duct tape to seal and close the top and bottom of the jug together.
- Write name of seed on outside of the jug with a "garden marker" – these are permanent pens that will hold up to the weather and can be purchased in bulk on Amazon.

Step 5. Germinating, growing and transplanting the seeds.

- Place the jug in a mostly sunny spot anywhere outside.
- Check occasionally to see if the mix might need additional water and whether the seeds are beginning to sprout.
- Once (at least some of the) seeds look established and have "true" leaves (two sets of leaves), you can remove the duct tape and let them get direct sun and air. Put down the top cover of the jug if the weather is expected to go below freezing for an extended period.

- Insert inches apart in an established garden bed. Insert a garden marker to identify the type of flower.

Depending on the type of seed, they should bloom in May or June.

For more information, you may want to join the Facebook page on "Winter Sowing." There are lots of photos of milk jugs showing the progress of different types of seedlings and many relevant questions, suggestions, and comments.

Better yet, join us on March 11, when Janet Mackey will have her workshop on ***"Starting Plants from Seeds."*** 10am at Holy Trinity Parish Hall in Oxford…. a lecture and hands-on seed starting .

As Janet says, "All you need to bring is your enthusiasm. TCGC will provide the rest!"

This and That

❄ Trish Reynolds

It is always fun, and sometimes a challenge to come up with a subject for my article for CYDI…I can make suggestions to our writers, sometimes they follow through; other times they do what makes them happy! So, for this issue I am going to write about a few items – short and sweet!

Winter flowering plants we can enjoy now or shortly

Galanthus, or Snowdrops, is a small genus of approximately 20 species of a perennial bulb. They generally flower from January to March, but the exact timing depends on the weather….This year, I haven't seen them in flower, but they are starting to pop up. Plant in the late fall….in sun or part shade, perhaps as I have done under a tree.

Erantis hyemalis, or Winter Aconite, is a favorite of mine. They are part of the buttercup family, Ranunculaceae, and sadly a non-native. Despite that I have to have them in a spot in my garden as the beautiful yellow flowers just light up the day….and as you can see from my picture (2024) the bees just flock to them They prefer cooler climates and like partial shade or under a deciduous tee or shrub where they get winter sun, but are cooled in the summer. One caution, the entire plant is poisonous, especially the tuber….so if you have a pet that likes to dig, or a young child, this might not be the plant for you.

Cornus Mas, or Cornelian Cherry Dogwood, is a small tree or large shrub native to Europe and Asia. It is a member of the dogwood family and is known for its early spring flowers that appear in dense clusters before the leaves.

The fruit containing one seed is a bright red, slightly oblong in shape, appearing in mid to late summer, When I take a walk around in February, I always stop by to see if my Cornus Mas is flowering…a sure sign for me that spring can't be far away!

Feeding the Birds, and not just seeds

(Article found by Trish Reynolds)

Many people think all the birds fly south for the winter. They might be very surprised to learn just how many birds live in our area all year round. Some birds even come to our area in the winter, then spend warmer months further north. Like all other living creatures, their survival requires food, water and shelter.

1. Leave leaf litter on the floor of your gardens.
Most overwintering songbirds spend much of their time foraging through the leaf litter on the floor of your garden looking for the tiny insects and insect eggs that will sustain them throughout the long cold. If you painstakingly clean every leaf off your garden in the fall, you are destroying the birds' main food source.

2. Provide thick growth.
Birds take shelter in the protective boughs of evergreens or within any shrubs that provide thick growth. Juncos and tree sparrows often take shelter on the ground under the warm boughs. They especially appreciate a stand of several evergreens massed together.

3. Clean your birdhouses, then leave them up for the winter.
Many birds take shelter from the wind in an empty birdhouse. Chickadees and downy woodpeckers especially enjoy enclosed cavities. Clean out your bird houses of any old nesting material at the end of the summer. To help prevent disease and possible parasite infestation, wipe them down or spray them with a ten percent Clorox solution.

4. Provide native plants with edible fruit, berries, and seeds.

Most native perennials provide seed heads which birds eat throughout the winter. Rudbeckia, coneflowers, Salvia, Coreopsis, sunflowers and most daisy-like flowers are some of their favorites. Also, asters, ironweed, goldenrod, mountain mint and many grasses provide needed food for the birds. Sure, you may want to deadhead some of these for prolonged blooms throughout the summer, but starting in late summer, let the seed heads stand.

Sure, you may want to deadhead some of these for prolonged blooms throughout the summer, but starting in late summer, let the seed heads stand.

Native hollies, Viburnum, beautyberry, spicebush, chokecherry, and Virginia creeper do their part by providing berries for hungry birds throughout the winter. In shopping for some of these shrubs, always look for the natives. Most have non-native cousins that the birds will ignore. Any well-informed nursery person should be able to help you in selecting the native. If he doesn't know, ask to speak to the manager, or shop at a different nursery.

Some trees that provide fruit that birds love include American crabapples, serviceberry, mulberry, eastern red cedar, and dogwood. If you enjoy seeing songbirds in your garden, make it a late New Year's Resolution to add some of these plants to your property in the spring.

5. Keep bird feeders filled.
This is the time of year when bird feeders are really appreciated. They will probably need to be refilled every day. It's important for the feeders to be close to shelter where small birds can quickly find refuge from predators, however, not so close that a cat can hide within the thick branches then jump out to grab the unsuspecting bird.

Keep in mind that different bird species have different feeding requirements. Some prefer a hanging feeder while others require a tray feeder. The base of a tray feeder should be screened to allow water to pass through so seed does not get mildewed and rot.

Please note that bread is junk food for birds.

6. Provide drinkable water.
One of the most important things is providing water. Birds need drinkable water which is often difficult to find in icy weather. I use a birdbath heater which has worked well for many winters. It prevents the water from freezing, even on the very coldest days. The bath is a very busy place!

All these suggestions not only help our bird friends but provide us with entertainment on long winter days. Obviously, planting native trees and shrubs is not something you can do today, but investing in a feeder, suet holder, birdbath heater, or birdhouse is something you could do immediately. Then plan ahead to invest in at least one native tree or shrub to add to your landscape in the spring.

Source: Penn State Extension

Plant at least 70% of yard in native plants to increase songbird nesting success

(Lin Moeller thought we would be interested in this!)

Tips for Attracting Pollinators and Wildlife

Carolina chickadees are not able to successfully raise enough young to maintain their population numbers in areas where less than 70% of the plants are native species, according to new research from the University of Delaware. The study was conducted in backyards throughout Washington, D.C.

Carolina chickadees are common visitors to backyards and will often nest in nest boxes. However, new research shows that if more than 30% of the plants in their home range are non-native, then they won't be

able to raise enough young to sustain their population numbers. Photo credit: Dan Pancamo, cc-by-sa 2.0

The research looked at the relationship between Carolina chickadee nesting success, percentage of native vs non-native plants within the chickadee's home range, and the abundance of spiders and caterpillars. Carolina chickadees were chosen for the study because they are common backyard visitors throughout much of the eastern U.S. They are also primarily insectivorous birds, especially during the nesting season.

The researchers found that as the percentage of nonnative plants within a 164 foot radius (average size of a chickadee's home range) of the nest box increased,

1. the number of spiders and caterpillars declined,
2. more spiders than caterpillars were consumed by the nestlings, and the number of baby Chickadees that survived for 21 days (when they typically become independent of their parents) declined.

In areas where 70% or more of the plants were native, chickadees thrived and the parents were able to raise enough young each year to sustain or grow the population. In areas where less than 70% of the plants were native, the parents weren't able to raise enough young to sustain the population. The researchers attributed this finding to the decline of preferred prey (caterpillars).

Many species of insects have specialized diets and only eat plants in one genus or family. This is especially true when it comes to caterpillars. The monarch caterpillar is probably the most familiar example of a caterpillar with a highly specialized diet, but they aren't the only species with a specialized diet.

Unfortunately, many of the non-native plants popular for landscaping aren't closely related to our native plant species and aren't used by our caterpillars and other native insects. As non-native plants increase, there is less food available for caterpillars. Less food for the caterpillars means fewer caterpillars. Fewer caterpillars means less food for the songbirds and other animals that eat the caterpillars. Less food for songbirds and other animals means fewer of those animals.

Although this study just looked at Carolina chickadees, it is likely that the general findings are applicable to many of our other insectivorous songbirds. Therefore**, if you are interested in providing a healthy habitat for the songbirds in your yard, try to have at least 70% of the plants in your yard be native to your area.**

This article was part of Shannon's original Kentucky Pollinators and Backyard Wildlife blog which evolved into the blog for Backyard Ecology.

Backyard Ecology: Exploring Nature in Your Backyard

Nature isn't just "out there." It's all around us, including right outside our doors. Hi, my name is Shannon Trimboli, and I am the host of Backyard Ecology. I live in southcentral Kentucky and am a wildlife biologist, educator, author, beekeeper, and owner of a nursery specializing in plants for pollinators and wildlife conservation. I invite you to join me as we ignite our curiosity and natural wonder, explore our yards and communities, and improve our local pollinator and wildlife habitat.

Learn more or subscribe to my email list at www.backyardecology.net.

Editor's Note:

We are going to switch from Winter to Spring with our next article coming from Myra Gons. Spring is just 40 days from today (2-10-25)!

Pollinators for Beginners

❄ Myra Gons

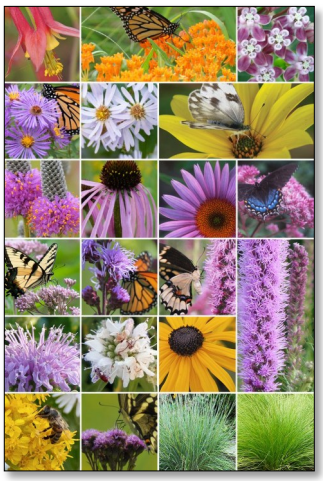
Planting a pollinator garden is not a difficult process—if it were, few people would want to try it! It's as simple as choosing a location and adding some plants.

The hardest (but fun!) part might be buying the plants! You don't even need to test or amend the soil. In fact, the native plants preferred by the pollinators are happier without nutrient-rich soil.

I love watching the bees, butterflies and bugs pollinator plants attract, so I suggest choosing a location where you like to sit and relax, keeping in mind that typically the insects will prefer a sunny or partially sunny garden.

You don't need to start from scratch either. If you have a garden near your favorite sitting area, try adding pollinator plants to it. I must warn you, though - you might find yourself adding more and more natives that pollinators prefer and taking out the others!

(Photos source: Internet)



While I grow pollinator-friendly plants in several garden beds, I planted my favorites where I can watch the buzzing while relaxing in our hot tub. These include: Asclepias (butterfly weed), Agastache (anise hyssop), several different Echinaceas, Liatris (blazing star), and Pycnanthemum (mountain mint). Calamintha Nepeta 'Montrose White' also resides there. Calamint is not a native, but don't tell all the bees and bugs in my yard—it has so many critters on it that the plant buzzes and vibrates all day long!

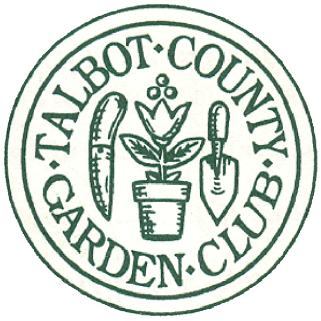
Helpful websites:

https://xerces.org/pollinator-conservation/pollinator-friendly-plant-lists

https://marylandgrows.umd.edu/2020/06/08/what-should-i-plant-to-help-pollinators/

We hope you have enjoyed this issue of CYDI….and we look forward to seeing you again in a few months! Stay warm, check out those seed catalogues, and dream of spring!

Trish Reynolds, Editor



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