

This Month in the Garden

by Peggy Koppmann

Optimism runs deep in gardeners. We welcome days that are ever-so-slightly longer, the possibility of a January thaw, and the tempting seed catalogs with their photos of beautiful flowers and vegetables, and we keep a countdown to March 20. Preserving our optimism can be difficult these days but gardeners understand that our work is not just about tending the garden but recognizing that hope endures in the garden and in our lives. That is our gift – to grow, learn, fail, change, persevere, and flourish in an uncertain world.

Horticultural Housekeeping - Dusting is a routine household chore, but we don't often think of dust accumulation on our houseplants. A layer of dust impacts the amount of sunlight available for photosynthesis. Optimum light conditions are already difficult to achieve in winter, so cleaning houseplants allows them to take advantage of available light. A damp cloth or a bath in the sink or tub will often do the trick but depending on your plant type, (small leaves, prickly spines, fuzzy textures), a microfiber cloth or gloves, or a paintbrush may do the job. Or you can turn to socks, a toothbrush, or cotton swabs. Whatever you choose, be sure to clean both sides of the leaves and in the leaf-stem crevices. Avoid leaf-shine products. They leave a residue that can clog stomata and interfere with oxygen and CO₂ exchange.

Icy Info – Gardeners look for ways to reduce the need to “salt” areas of snow or ice accumulation on sidewalks and driveways. The general rule is to avoid sodium chloride. Fine Gardening advises “Products containing calcium chloride, potassium chloride, and magnesium chloride are significantly less detrimental to soil and plant health. These widely available products melt frozen sidewalks as efficiently as salt does, but with fewer negative environmental consequences. Read the labels when purchasing these products to be certain you are taking home the correct formulation.” The article has some excellent additional ideas including coffee grounds, sawdust, wood ash, and (!) – sugar beet juice. See more at <https://www.finegardening.com/article/garden-friendly-snow-clearing-and-salt-alternatives>

Seed Savings – Seeds are expensive, at least compared to past history. Many gardeners have seeds they have saved or never got around to planting so the question is will they still grow. You can test for germination viability by putting some seeds between two damp paper towels. Place the towels in a zip-lock bag and wait a few days to see if germination occurs. For a step above that basic method, check the seed packets for germination temperatures and time needed for germination. You can also check the excellent reference at <https://www.johnnyseeds.com/growers->

<library/methods-tools-supplies/harvesting-handling-storage/seed-storage-guidelines.html> Save some money by doing the germination tests and the savings to purchase those specialty seeds you've been coveting – like Wooly Kate Yellow Tomato seeds!

Head start on Spring - Pansies are cute and their cheerful little faces bring smiles in the early spring. Since it's too early to start most vegetables and flowers, try starting pansies from seed. They'll take about 7 – 14 days to germinate and then need about 10 weeks to be ready to plant outside. The timing works for gardeners who need something to grow during the long winter days. Use a good seed starting mix that has been moistened and surface sow the seeds making sure they have good soil contact. Place the trays in a large black plastic bag to keep them in the dark. Put the trays in a cool location (65 - 75 degrees F is ideal) and check the bags every couple of days to be sure the soil is moist. Once germinated, move them into good (!) light. The hardy little beauties can be transplanted in the spring as soon as you can work the soil. Winter sowing (in clear milk jugs) is another option.

Speaking of Seeds – January 31 is National Seed Swap Day. It has been celebrated nationally since 2006 and has grown into a tradition of sharing seeds, gardening experiences, and building community. Swapping seeds helps preserve plant varieties including heirlooms, increases biodiversity, saves money, and builds our WNY community of gardeners. Many Erie County libraries have seed libraries including the Audubon, Clarence, Boston Free, Central (Downtown), Lancaster, and Orchard Park. Watch for locally advertised events or just organize your own swap among gardener friends. For additional information take a look at <https://seedsavers.org/events/national-seed-swap-day/>

And then – *Allow ice to melt naturally off trees and shrubs; prune off broken or damaged branches to prevent the bark from tearing; keep an eye on dormant plants, bulbs, and tubers to ensure they don't dry out or are over watered; check houseplants for aphids, spider mites, scale, mealybugs, or white flies (poinsettias are notorious for white flies); keep houseplants away from cold windows or drafts; prune viburnums to remove viburnum beetle egg cases; finish cleaning, sharpening, and oiling moving parts of your cutting tools so you are ready for late winter pruning; consider a mini-humidifier for your houseplants; enjoy the quiet of winter days and dream about how wonderful your garden will be this year.*



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