

This Month in the Garden

by Peggy Koppmann

Forget all that hearts-and-flower stuff in February. Even chocolate can't erase the fact that February is a cruel month. The snow and gray skies go on forever, snow piles are dirty and ugly, and the groundhog is really not much of a weather forecaster. So cherish those little peeks of sunshine, watch for the snowdrops and hellebores, and remember that what is hidden by the gloom of February is still there in our dreams of the coming season.

Winter Pruning – Late February (or early March) is a great time for winter pruning of trees, shrubs, and grapevines. The critical factor here is to time your work before “bud break,” which comes as winter dormancy ends and increasing sunlight and temperatures trigger a hormonal response in plants that causes buds to swell and get ready to burst open. Late winter pruning is for plants that form their flower buds on NEW growth (growth that will occur in the coming spring) such as abelia, beautyberry, butterfly bush, summer or fall-blooming clematis, smooth hydrangeas, panicle hydrangeas, potentilla, roses, rose of Sharon, dogwoods, Japanese spirea, St. John's wort, and summersweet. Trees include oak, maple, and birch. Do some careful homework to determine the best timing for pruning of fruit trees and grapevines. Take a closer look at: <https://empressofdirt.net/late-winter-pruning/#plant-list>.

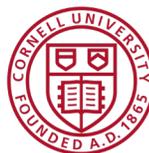
Make Your Move – While you are planning this year's vegetable garden, remember to plan to rotate your crops to prevent the spread of garden pests and diseases. The general rule is to rotate plant families such as legumes, brassicas, and nightshades among your planting beds or areas. Vegetables in the same family may be susceptible to the same diseases and insects, and some soil-borne diseases can last in the soil for several years. Multiple beds, planting plots, or zones lets you move things around each season, but be sure not to mix soil from different locations to prevent spreading disease and pests overwintering in the soil. Vegetables in the same botanical family also pull the same nutrients from the soil. We know beans (Fabaceae) can help fix nitrogen in the soil, so planting melons, squash, or cucumbers (Cucurbitaceae), which are heavy nitrogen feeders, the following year may improve crop health and yield. Crop rotation and nutrient utilization are fascinating topics. Dive in at <https://www.almanac.com/crop-rotation-101-tips-vegetable-gardens> or <https://>

yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu/how-to/crop-rotation-vegetable-garden.

Calendar Calculations: When to start seeds is the big question for gardeners who want to get a head start on the growing season and save some money. There are some excellent resources available to help you with those calculations, but the determining factor is the “last frost date.” Dave's Garden and the Farmer's Almanac both list our Zone 6b frost date as April 24-25. But gardeners know how unpredictable our spring weather can be, especially in southern Erie County. Also keep in mind that some crops can be direct-sown very early (lettuce, spinach, peas, etc.). Once you decide on the date you will use for your calculations, check out Margaret Roach's excellent seedstarting timetable at <https://awaytogarden.com/when-to-start-seeds-calculator/>.

Get Rid of the Scale: No, that's not dieting advice. We're talking about scale: the persistent, yucky, honeydew-producing, sap-sucking, stubborn houseplant scourge. Do some research to determine if you have soft scale or armored scale; soft scale is easier to kill. It usually appears in clusters of 1/16 to 1/8-inch-long insects that secrete a sugary honeydew, which can attract other fungal organisms that produce sooty mold. Scale insects suck plant sap, creating cellular damage that weakens the plant. Notoriously difficult to remove, and requiring patience and persistence to eradicate, some gardeners will discard an infested plant. If you do try to treat scale, quarantine the plant to reduce the chance of spreading the infestation to other houseplants. For thoughts on treatment, start with <https://extension.umd.edu/resource/scale-insects-indoor-plants/>

And then...Keep an eye out for houseplant pests; wash and sterilize seed-starting containers with a solution of 1 part bleach to 9 parts water; be careful not to overwater houseplants; keep a fresh water supply for the birds; stay off the lawn and flower beds; look for disease-resistant seeds when purchasing; order trees, shrubs, and seed mixes from Erie County Soil and Water Conservation District and then sign up to volunteer to help at the sale. Skip the roses and consider heartleaf philodendron or string of hearts as alternatives that will last way beyond roses. And, of course, keep in mind that February 14 is also National Cream-Filled Chocolates Day. Act accordingly.



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