



Gardening with Acer

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This is certainly one winter all Connecticut gardeners will remember! Mother Nature does have a habit of clearing her throat to get our attention ... and then trapping us in the house to mull over the difficulties she has thrown at us. BUT ... Mother Nature also gives CT gardeners a special present every year: the time for dreaming and planning and hoping, for thinking about all the things your garden could be in the future. (It's up to us to be a little realistic! There are only so many hours in the day and the CT gardening season is only so long.) Spring and flowers and green leaves seem a long way away but this quiet time of the year is ideal for reflection and planning for the gardening season ahead. Winter shows you the basics of your garden. It's up to you to decide how to arrange what surrounds those basics.

Looking through your photos can help you decide which areas of your garden need improving or re-arranging. Garden books are a great source of inspiration. Seeing how other people have solved problems can often help us find solutions to our own garden dilemmas and, indeed, help us to recognize problem areas. Gardeners have an innate optimism that propels them forward to brighter days. Gardeners dream and plan and doodle on graph paper because they know that Spring will come, the warmth will return, bulbs and flowers will bloom and birds will sing. Gardening shows that you believe in tomorrow and it's worth the long winter wait!

Reminder

Our goal is always to make the Newsletter easier for you to work with and to enjoy! To do that, we will use the Newsletter for gardening help and general information and use email and the web site to give you quick updates on sales, workshops and other on-going events (including our popular videos) ... please get in the habit of checking both on a regular basis. We expect to add new material to the web site regularly... our Information Handouts currently include many sheets on Plants, Seasonal, How To's and Garden Challenges. By all means let us know, by email, what you'd like to see covered. We get some terrific ideas from our customers! Please let us know what you find most useful as we all adapt to a constantly changing gardening world.

The Plant of the Month will be available at the nursery from the first of each month on and will be announced on the web site. These plants are carefully chosen to showcase current bloom and are featured at the nursery from April through October. The web site will keep you current!

Bird Feeding

February is National Bird Feeding Month. Our over-wintering local birds are primarily seed eaters and feeders should be sited in the sun with wind protection available and shrubbery nearby for warmth and protection in the night. Many bird seed mixtures are available but safflower seeds are particularly popular because most squirrels don't like them. Hanging oranges from low tree limbs will attract some birds such as Baltimore orioles, woodpeckers and finches. Many birds also enjoy eating slices of apple or pear... some are said to be fond of peanuts, nuts, pumpkin seeds, popcorn and Cheerios! Consider planting some "magnet" shrubs (in the spring) specifically to attract birds to your garden. Enkianthus, myrica (bayberry) and ilex (winterberry) will all attract birds and give you the bonus of brilliant fall color.

Don't be disturbed if doves arrive ... they are a great dropped-seed clean-up crew!

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology has developed some terrific resources for bird lovers:

Merlin: a bird identification app keyed to the sounds a bird makes.

Feederwatch.org: Helps identify birds and the foods they eat.

The National Wildlife Federation (www.nwf.org) has a series of articles available on its web site on how to create a wildlife habitat in your garden. Providing food, shelter and water for wildlife, as well as a protected place to raise their young, can help you qualify to become an official Certified Wildlife Habitat.

Acer Gardens' Theme of the Year: Updating Your Garden

All gardens change as they mature: the surrounding landscape may have altered, some trees or bushes insist on outgrowing their allotted space, our lives change and we want to use the garden differently now. A few simple updates and changes may be all it takes to help you enjoy what you have created even more. The time may even have come to make more dramatic changes to the garden. You may have some un-used space (that no-longer-needed swing set for example which could make a new seating area or display a stand of flowering bushes.) Perhaps you'd like to create a dramatic focal point or use winding paths to move from one garden area to another. Is your garden the right size for how you live now? Do you just need to simplify the over-all garden design? Is it time to reposition some flower beds? Do you like your current flower bed color choices? Adding plants with unusual foliage can bring a slightly boring flower bed to life! As you think about your garden you may find that it is exactly right for your way of life but adding some new containers or a pair of urns would bring in a little zing.

Updating doesn't always have to be super-dramatic. Small changes can bring big results. We'll describe suggestions and choices throughout the gardening season and are always ready to help. Bringing photos when you come to the nursery is a good idea!

Winter Gardening

Taking the time to plan your gardening year during the winter months has many advantages ... one of the biggest is that this is the ideal time to take a good look at what you really need in your current life. Have you recently down-sized to a smaller home? Have you just bought your first home and did it come with a garden that doesn't suit your life-style? Have you simply out-grown some aspects of your garden? You may need to spend a little time "right-sizing" the landscape you live in ... and the easiest way to do that is with a pad of a paper and a pencil! A small-space garden can be as appealing as an expansive one. You don't have to give up your favorites ... you just need to choose the right varieties for the space available.

Forcing Flowering Branches

Look ahead to Spring! Branches of forsythia, witch hazel and pussy willow can be cut and forced in February. Crab apple and flowering cherry, cut in March, will usually bloom in 3 weeks.

Many gardeners find that forcing flowering bushes is easier than forcing spring-blooming trees. Count back 6 weeks from the time a flowering shrub would be in bloom in order to establish the earliest time you can force a plant. Cut the branches and bring them into a cool spot and plunge the stems into warm water. (Many people put the bottoms of the stems on a cutting board and smash the cut end with a hammer first.) After a few days, move the vase into regular house temperatures and keep it filled with water. Change the water every few days. Once the blooms appear, display the branches in a warm area, away from any cold drafts.

Growing Succulents Indoors

Succulents are considered easy-to-please and many gardeners bring them indoors for the winter and expect them to act like any grateful house plant being taken care of through the winter and some will indeed survive dry indoor conditions with relative ease. But that doesn't mean that you just plunk them down and ignore them most of the time! Following a few simple rules will help you keep your chosen succulents happy and healthy.

Limit your indoor succulents to the very hardy: sedums, crassula, aloe, snake plant, kalanchoe and burro's tail. Those plants will tolerate temperature and sunlight changes.

Don't overwater. Succulents don't actively grow in the winter and like their soil dry. Let the plants dry out completely between waterings ... good drainage is key!

Give the plants as much sun as possible ... a southern exposure is ideal with 3-4 hours of daily sun. They are, after all, desert plants.

Succulents may lose a few leaves during the winter but do not require fertilizer as they are not growing.

Many gardeners find that choosing succulents with green leaves (not blue, gray or purple) gives a greater chance of indoor success. Concentrate on a variety of green shapes and give them extra breathing room.

Often-Asked Questions

My rhododendron leaves look awful. Are my bushes dying?

Don't worry when your rhododendron leaves curl up in the cold; the bush is protecting itself from harsh weather. This process actually helps rhododendrons thrive in cold climates. Freeze damage is minimized as the leaves slowly thaw out and open as the temperature climbs.

Should I spray my evergreens in the winter? What about using deer repellents?

In the middle of February, or whenever "the thaw" comes, it's a good idea to re-apply Wilt-Stop to your evergreens and rhododendrons ... assuming you sprayed them in the fall! Try to spray during a dry period when the temperature is above 32 degrees.

If you are using deer repellents remember that deer quickly get used to certain scents and are lazy about changing established routes so it's a good idea to change repellents often, re-applying them after heavy rain or snow.

I'm already sick of this winter gray and gloom! How do I plan ahead and get more color into next year's winter garden?

You can always add more color to a winter landscape by using plants, trees and bushes noted for their berries or bark (planting in the spring will give your choices plenty of time to "settle in" before winter comes.) Berries are the prominent feature in Hollies, Winterberry and Chokeberry. Shrubs like Red or Yellow Dogwood will give flaming color throughout winter. Paperbark Maple and River Birch give exfoliating bark in colors ranging from cinnamon to orange. Some Japanese Maples ('Coral Bark') intensify their color in cold weather. Miscanthus grasses give interesting foliage and seed heads all winter long and provide birds with a safe refuge. Japanese Andromeda gives year-long interest.

Think about planting evergreens (available not just in green but also in blue and yellow tints) where you can see them from the house. As a bonus, fill a winter-safe outside container with evergreen cuttings or a small evergreen (plant it in the garden when spring comes) and position it near the outside door you use the most. A few colorful bird houses, placed so that you see them from the house, can bring a smile!

Some of my plastic pots are odd-sized and I'd like to use them again. Can I clean them?

Plastic pots are easily cleaned by soaking them in a bucket containing a solution of 1 part household bleach to 9 parts of water for 20 minutes. Then put the pots in a solution of dish detergent and water, using a scouring pad on stubborn stains. Rinse and dry.

I know how busy we'll be in the Spring ... are there any chores we can get out of the way now?

Have all your garden tools and shovels cleaned, oiled and sprayed now. Some gardeners paint a splash of red on handles so that they can find their tools easily if they are dropped in the grass or at the edge of a bed. Treat yourself to a new pair of gardening gloves and a really spiffy hat!

Tidy up the garage. Get rid of any cracked plastic pots or plastic pot-saucers. If you didn't do it in the fall, clean out the wheelbarrow! Arrange your dirt/compost bags in a spot easy to access.

When should ornamental grasses be cut down?

Mid to late March is the ideal time to cut ornamental grasses almost to the ground. Use strong garden twine to tie the grass together about 8-12" off the ground. Cut below the twine and the grass will be already bundled for removal.

I don't have room for mass plantings but I'd like to bring more organization to my garden. How?

One time-honored way is through the use of repetition so that your eye will see the whole rather than the pieces. Repeat key plants, shapes and colors throughout the garden; planting 3 of each plant will help control the over-all look and keep the flower beds from looking "busy".

Repeat a common color in plant material. Working with the natural shape of your landscape, and incorporating your existing trees, you can use paths to move from place to place. Keep "accents" confined to planters until you can judge if you like the "look" you have created.

There's a lot to be said for getting a large pad of graph paper and drawing on it the outline of your house, deck, patio and over-all property. Add existing flower beds and then, with a different color pencil, start playing with outlines and shapes. It's fun and, very often, only small changes will make you happy.

We're gardening more and more by using groups of similar containers near the terrace and other locations. How do I plan "the look" for these pots?

Designing groups of pots is very similar to designing a flower bed: pick your colors, allow for differences in height and width and plan your bloom times. Your pots don't all have to match (they could all be variations of one color) and those same pots can always be re-arranged as the season advances. Make your life easier by using plant neighbors/companions with the same watering requirements! Plan bloom times to stretch over a long time period so that there is always something ready to "take over" and draw attention.

Do I prune the hellebores before or after they bloom? That foliage looks pretty awful!

Did you plant Hellebores last year? If you did, you will shortly be enjoying the very first of the early spring flowers, some of them often peeping through the last of the snow. In colder garden zones some of the leaves may have become windburned and turned brown and should be removed.

If the entire plant looks bad at the end of the winter, cut all the foliage back before new leaves and flowers emerge.

Because they bloom so early, Hellebores combine well with other light shade loving plants such as ferns, tiarella, pulmonaria and the earliest daffodils. Many gardeners site them on gentle slopes, the better to enjoy the inside of the flowers. After flowering, remove the faded flower stems to encourage next year's growth.

Last spring's late cold snap took me by surprise. How can I defend my plants?

Most bushes and plants, hardy in this zone, actually make their own version of anti-freeze and are able to survive our erratic winters quite well. However, a late-season cold snap which hits just as the plant is beginning to adjust to warmer temperatures can cause new shoot die-back or winter kill. Plant location and exposure to frost pockets are also factors in avoiding problems. Watch weather reports and be prepared to cover new growth with a bedsheet (do not use plastic) when frost warnings are issued. Established plants/bushes/trees hit by a late frost one year will usually bounce back the following year.

Thinking Ahead for All-Season Color and Bloom

All gardeners are interested in getting as much bloom as they can from their plants. Large blocks of color add impact to a garden and the best and easiest way to achieve that goal is to use perennials that are in bloom for extended periods of time and do not require too much maintenance. Deadheading faithfully will help to extend bloom times. Some individual cultivars may need a little pruning or cutting back during bloom time. Choosing carefully will help you move from bloom time to bloom time without losing the overall look of the garden. Consider adding some of these plants to keep your beds looking full throughout the growing season:

<u>Plant</u>	<u>Common Name</u>	<u>Bloom Time</u>
Geranium 'Rozanne'	Cranesbill	May – July
Gaura	Wand Flower	May - September
Scabiosa	Pincushion Flower	May – September
Achillea	Yarrow	June - August
Echinacea	Cone Flower	June – August
Gaillardia	Blanket Flower	June - August
Nepeta	Catmint	June - September
Coreopsis	Tickseed	June to first frost
Perovskia	Russian Sage	July – September
Phlox paniculata	Garden Phlox	July – September
Rudbeckia	Black-eyed Susan	July – September
Sidalcea	Miniature Hollyhock	July – September
Agastache	Anise-Hyssop	July to first frost
Cimicifuga	Bugbane	September – killing frost

Planning for Pollinators

Pollinators have been called "nature's crop dusters" ... without them we would be missing many of our favorite flowers, wildflowers and vegetables. There are a number of ways to attract pollinators and keep them working for you but they are happiest in natural settings that resemble the floral landscapes which attract them in the first place. We tend to think of pollinators landscapes which attract them in the first place. We tend to think of pollinators as being only bees but butterflies, moths and birds are all doing the same job.

The bumblebee population is declining. Many gardeners are going out of their way to attract Mason bees because they are incredible cross-pollinators, gathering pollen and nectar on the same visit. (Do not confuse them with Carpenter bees ... Mason bees are a different species and are gentle and friendly.)

Arriving early in the season, they are invaluable for pollinating fruit trees. They are not interested in eating your house! Very sociable, Mason bees are happiest living in special houses, readily available at garden supply stores/catalogs.

Winter is the perfect time to choose ways to make your gardening easier on yourself and on your own landscape. Increase the number of pollinator visitors with simple additions:

Garden in the sun. Even late into the fall, you will find bees hanging onto flowers and sunning themselves.

Cultivate native plants. Natives are four times more attractive to native bees than anything else.

Plant in clumps. Clusters of one pollinator-friendly plant will draw more visitors.

Aim for extended bloom. Have at least 3 species blooming in each season.

Select flowers in bright colors. Vary the shapes of the flowers to accommodate different pollinators. Many pollinators find single flowers easier to access than doubles.

Be careful what you use to control disease and insects; today, there are many safe options.

Plant alyssum around roses to attract aphid-eating insects.

Help your vegetable garden attract pollinators and beneficial insects by planting basil, cilantro, oregano, marigolds and alyssum to bring the “good guys” to your garden.

Honeybees: Attracted to sweet/minty scents, plants on which they can perch and blooms fully open in the daytime. They prefer flat, shallow blossoms and actually retain a memory of plants they have visited! Try iris, mountain laurel, violets, cosmos, hollyhock, phlox, nepeta, salvia, lavender and roses.

Bumblebees: Long-tongued and heavier than Honeybees, Bumblebees are sun worshippers. Twice as fast as Honeybees, Bumblebees carry a great deal of pollen per trip because they are so much larger and are not making much honey. Consider using: columbine, snapdragons, monarda, monkshood, candytuft, agastache, and buddleia.

Hoverflies: Although they are true flies, hoverflies look like small bees or wasps. (They are often described as “nature’s helicopters” because they literally hover over flowers, dart away and then come back to hover again.) Hoverflies are highly effective in eating aphids; they are attracted to small flowers, especially alyssum.

Butterflies: Although oddly enough butterflies taste with their feet and don’t get much pollen on their bodies, they are still highly efficient pollinators. They like brightly colored red, orange, purple and yellow highly-scented flowers which grow in clusters and are fully open during the day. Growing asters, sedum, sweet William, marigolds, coneflowers, zinnias and buddleia will be sure to attract them.

Moths: They don’t get much attention, but moths are the night-shift pollinators in the garden. Appearing in the late afternoon, moths are attracted to all the nocturnal, heavily-scented flowers. Many of those flowers open in late afternoon and bloom into the night; most of the flowers have long-throats and the pale flowers stay visible for a long time. Attract moths with nicotiana, gaura, stock, honeysuckle, moonflower, evening primrose and night-blooming jasmine.

Birds: Flowers attracting birds need to be shaped to accommodate those whirring wings and their stems must be strong enough for perching. Hummingbirds, key to native wildflower pollination, are attracted by red flowers but other birds head for the nectar available in many summer flowers. Birds have no real sense of smell but bright colors, especially red, attract them all summer long. Plant columbine, agastache, salvia, penstemon, trumpet vine and bee balm to bring them flying in.

Adapting Native Plants to Garden Beds

A native plant is simply one that occurs naturally in a particular region without human introduction. In other words, it was growing in New England (in one form or another) before the pilgrims stepped ashore! Using natives is the plant version of “shopping local”! A native plant is well adapted to this region’s soil, moisture and weather conditions and is crucial to native wildlife. It has been estimated that native plants provide food and shelter for 10-15 times more species of birds, butterflies and pollinators than non-native plants. They are usually low maintenance with natural defenses to pests.

Many native plants, or wildflowers, will do well mixed into a cultivated garden as long as their soil, sun and moisture requirements are met. Choosing plants that have long since habituated themselves to your local conditions gives you a head-start. (Mixing sun plants with woodland plants will not help you succeed so plan accordingly!) Natives tend to be quick-growing and long-lived, disease resistant and pest free and easily withstand dramatic climate changes such as drought and blizzard and the ups and downs of the New England climate. Once established, they need very little fertilizing and watering. Any tendency to invasiveness can be easily controlled by pulling up self-seedlings.

In the wider conservation picture, natives’ growth habits and root structures keep soil in place and store water. The plants are pre-programmed to produce fruit, nectar, seeds and nuts at various times of the year in sync with the local fauna. Making space for native plants in your garden almost guarantees a procession of birds, butterflies, insects and mammals seeking food and shelter. Visually, growing natives connects the boundaries of your garden to the wider natural landscape. How can you lose?

The New England Wildflower Society has some recommendations for natives guaranteed to thrive. Choose from:

<u>Plant</u>	<u>Common Name</u>	<u>Grows In</u>
<i>Aquilegia Canadensis</i>	Eastern Wild Columbine	Sun/partial shade
<i>Aruncus dioicus</i>	Goatsbeard	Sun/partial shade
<i>Aster novae-angliae</i>	New England Aster	Sun
<i>Boltonia asteroides</i>	Boltonia	Sun
<i>Cimicifuga racemosa</i>	Bugbane	Sun/partial shade
<i>Echinacea purpurea</i>	Purple Coneflower	Sun
<i>Eupatorium fistulosum</i>	Joe-Pye Weed	Sun
<i>Lobelia cardinalis</i>	Cardinal Flower	Sun/partial shade
<i>Monarda didyma</i>	Bee Balm	Sun/partial shade
<i>Oenothera fruticosa</i>	Sundrops	Sun
<i>Phlox maculata</i>	Wild Sweet William	Sun/partial shade
<i>Tiarella cordifolia</i>	Foamflower	Shade
<i>Vernonia novaboracensis</i>	Tall Ironweed	Sun
<i>Veronicastrum virginicum</i>	Culver’s Root	Sun

Getting Ready for Spring

Clean-up and rake the garden beds. Dead leaves blow around all winter and lodge in bushes and plants. You need to remove these before mice and voles decide to move in!

Take this opportunity to cut down and clear off dead daylily and hosta foliage and tidy up anything you overlooked in the fall. Trim up any branches damaged in winter storms.

Remove winter mulch from flower beds gradually. Any bulbs coming up now will not be bothered by a late frost.

Cut down any perennials you left standing in the fall. (Cut back gaura, lavender, perovskia and Montauk daisies later when you start to see bud-break.) Watch for frost-heaved plants and push them gently but firmly back into the ground.

Weed! It's amazing, but weeds can and do grow in and survive Connecticut winters all the time. The Spring Garden Chores Information Sheet is available on the web site: (www.AcerGardens.com).

Available Spring products at the nursery will include pelletized lime, pre-emergent fertilizer, lawn and garden fertilizer, our own soil blends, organic lawn and garden products, grass seed and straw as well as control products for deer, insects, rabbits, voles, weeds, and disease. Late April/early May is the ideal time to apply lime, if needed, to the lawn; fertilize and use pre-emergent weed control.

Using Small Tuck-in Plants

Tucking small plants into a garden allows the gardener to fill gaps, add texture, or provide seasonal interest at the edges of large flower beds or to fill in spaces used by ephemerals early in the season. Use small plants to fill empty spots between established plants or along the front of beds for a continuous look. Every year, more and more perennials and annuals are introduced in small or patio-sized cultivars and they are excellent tuck-ins, especially useful when you want to introduce a new bloom color but aren't sure how far you want to go!

- Group in Threes: Plant in odd numbers, especially threes, to create natural-looking groupings that are visually pleasing.
- Vary Foliage: Combine plants with different leaf textures to add depth.

Think Ahead to Cool-Season Vegetables

Every year, more and more gardeners discover the pleasure of growing some of the vegetables they eat. A successful vegetable garden is happiest with 8 hours of full sun daily and some protection from excessive winds. Raised beds and containers make good alternatives to full-size gardens although containers will require more watering. Adding organic matter to the soil will give your vegetables a boost and help drainage. Vegetables can be tucked into gardens easily. Lettuces are ideal for containers or even the front of garden beds. Tomatoes decorate many a patio or terrace, mixed in with herbs; cucumbers can be grown on a trellis or pergola; the many new dwarf varieties and bush forms of plants allow space-saving techniques and going vertical will give you more room. Adding natural insect repellents to herb and vegetable gardens (basil, nasturtiums and marigolds) will help you grow vegetables successfully. Pre-started vegetable plants are best suited for container growing and will give you a head start.

Probably the most important concept for a vegetable gardener to live by is: "Rotate the Crops!" Failure to do this can result in declining harvests and plants that do not thrive or grow to expectation.

Plotting your garden on graph paper will help you establish boundaries and maximize your available space. If you are planting in rows be sure to leave access routes for weeding and fertilizing and leave enough room for the plants to grow and spread. Square foot gardens (4' x 4') have proven very helpful for smaller vegetable gardens. Divide the area into 16 squares and space plants accordingly.

Use stakes or a trellis to send vines upright and save even more space.

Many vegetables can be planted as soon as you can work the soil. Known as “cool season vegetables”, they include Swiss chard, spinach, kale, onions, shallots, cilantro, kale, shallots, peas, cabbage, broccoli and cauliflower. Leeks are slow to establish and are best planted as seedlings. Leaf lettuces, such as black seeded Simpson, arugula, and mache are harvested young and re-planting every 2 – 3 weeks will keep you harvesting until the heat of the summer.

A beginner’s vegetable garden could include tomatoes, zucchini, peppers, bush beans, leaf lettuce, beets, carrots, kale and radishes. Add some marigolds to discourage rabbits!

As a general guide:

Sow or plant in cool weather: beets, broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, lettuce, onions, parsley, parsnips, peas, radishes, spinach, swiss chard, turnips.

Sow or plant in warm weather: beans, carrots, corn, cucumbers, eggplant, melons, peppers, squashes, tomatoes.

Sow or Plant to Give 1 crop per season: corn, eggplant, leeks, melons, peppers, potatoes, squashes, tomatoes.

Re-sow for additional crops: beans, beets, carrots ,lettuce, radishes, spinach, turnips.

As the season progresses and the temperatures rise, be sure to include a few flowers and herbs to help attract the pollinators so necessary to a successful vegetable garden. Attracting honeybees, bumblebees, butterflies and moths is made easier if you include some plants of cosmos, oregano, marigold, alyssum and zinnia.

Our Information sheet on **Growing Vegetables** is available on the web site (www.acergardens.com)

Garden Help Lines

As the season kicks off, questions can arise and UConn’s Cooperative Extension System is available to answer questions on many garden topics including plant insects and diseases. They can be reached at 1-877-486-6271 or (www.ladybug.uconn.edu/index.html)

The Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station will answer inquiries on lawn problems (860-683-4977), soil testing (203-974-8521) and plant disease issues (203-974-8601).

Opening Day

Acer Gardens expects to open, weather permitting, March 25, 2026. Watch the web site for the exact date as the time gets closer because this is, after all, New England and Mother Nature sometimes has her own ideas! We look forward to seeing you back at the nursery as we start a new and exciting gardening season together! See you soon!

Acer Gardens
Linda Z. Lynch
Editor & Writer