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So, here we are in winter, again. After the rush and bustle of the holiday season, winter is almost a relief ... it offers us a welcome chance to be quiet and still, to watch the landscape, to dream and plan and allow optimism to take precedence over experience. Your garden is very good at waiting but have you ever thought how much activity is really going on in the garden, deep under that frozen soil? The garden is planning too! Planning to surprise us in little ways, hoping to delight us and cheer us up, determined to outwit the bugs and critters (as long as you do your part). Most of all, the garden remains our steadfast partner. Together, we make a special place.

What does a Connecticut gardener do in the winter anyway? For many gardeners, this quiet time is the perfect time for reflection and serious planning for the season ahead.

What did we learn from last year's gardening experience? What did the problems we encountered teach us? What new directions are calling us? The vital part of the planning experience is how we apply what the problems we have met teach us. If you find that certain types of plants out-perform others in your garden perhaps you should plan to grow more of them. Are you tired of certain plant material? Plan now to rejuvenate your flower beds and add new colors and shapes. Winter shows you the bones of your garden ... draw the shapes on paper, pick up a pencil and see how you could change those shapes. This is the time for dreaming of what could be because each new gardening year offers an almost clean slate to draw on. Few things are more personal than your own garden and the on-going pleasure it brings. It deserves the extra attention you bring it in the planning season.

Looking through the garden photos you took last season can help you decide which areas of your garden need improving or re-arranging. Garden books are a great source of inspiration and this is the perfect time to read or re-read some of your favorites. 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. Sometimes just looking at your garden in a new way will lead you to the answers you need.

Fortunately, your computer can take you visiting all over the country! Go to www.ilovegardens.com and see the listings for every state. Some famous viewable gardens include CT's New Canaan Nature Center (www.newcanaannature.org), Massachusetts Arnold Arboretum at (www.Harvard.edu), Rhode Island's Blithewold Garden (www.Blithewold.org), Pennsylvania's Longwood Gardens (www.longwoodgardens.org), New York's Botanical Garden (www.nybg.org), Wave Hill (www.Wavehill.org), the Brooklyn Botanic Garden (www.bbg.org), Chanticleer Gardens (www.chanticleergarden.org) and San Francisco's Filoli (www.filoli.org). If you are interested in growing

alpine flowers, The Betty Ford Alpine Gardens in Vail, Co. (www.bettyfordalpinegardens.org) maintains a fascinating web site with constantly updated information.

Acer Gardens is really excited about our new perennial, annual and shrub offerings for Spring 2024 and we'll be sending out a specific email about them as we get closer to Spring! Weather permitting, we hope to open for the season on March 27th and look forward to working with you throughout the gardening months. Plan to come in, look at all the new plants, and talk over your garden plans for the coming garden year! Our current Information Sheets are available on our web site.

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! Not all of our winter birds are tube feeders ... some enjoy eating seeds which have been scattered. The ideal feeder is a tube with an encircling platform at the bottom and a cover over the top to keep the squirrels away. Consider planting some "magnet" shrubs (in the spring) specifically to bring birds to your garden. Enkianthus, Myrica (Bayberry) and Ilex (Winterberry) will all attract birds and give you the added bonus of brilliant fall color. Don't be disturbed if doves arrive ... they are a great dropped-seed clean-up crew ... and even blue jays are useful in that role.

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.

Flower Shows

Winters can be long and gray in New England and gardeners need bright spots to punctuate the season. Look ahead and think about planning a day trip to the CT Flower Show in Hartford. The annual CT Flower & Garden Show will take place from Thursday, February 22 through Sunday, February 25, 2024 from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. with a theme of "Bursting Into Spring". There will be well over 300 booths, landscaped gardens and more than 80 hours of seminars and demonstrations (which are free with your ticket.) Vendors will man booths featuring fresh flowers, plants, herbs, bulbs, seeds, gardening books and equipment. You can even bring a ½ cup of soil to the UConn Co-op booth for free soil testing. Go to www.ctflowershow.com for further information, hours and ticket availability. What a great way to get ready for spring!

The 2024 Philadelphia International Flower Show (www.theflowershow.com) will be held March 2 – 10, 2024 and is themed "United by Flowers." The world's leading floral and garden designers will celebrate the impact flowers have on our daily lives. The 10-acre Convention Center will feature celebrations of the transformative power of gardening featuring garden presentations, design concepts and demonstrations, special events and competitions. The PHS is the world's oldest and largest indoor flower show and attracts more than 260,000 visitors annually.

Web Site

We keep working on improving our web site! It's designed to be as interactive as possible and to give you more information quickly ... and it looks terrific! Read about our services, stay up to date on coming events and future workshops, learn about our plants and products, access our quarterly Newsletter, monthly Did You Know columns and all the current Information Sheets and join us on Instagram (a great way to see what other gardeners are growing). In response to your suggestions, we will also be posting more "How To" videos! We're always interested in hearing what our customers would like to see on the web site and what would be most helpful to you. Just remember: even in the winter, we don't have full-time office coverage because we're probably working in the greenhouses growing and nurturing all those little green shoots so you may have to leave us a message!

Spring Workshops to Look Forward To

The nursery will be expanding all its workshop offerings in 2024. Watch the web site and your email for further announcements as the season progresses; we always look forward to hearing your suggestions on possible future workshops and gatherings! At the moment, we are busy planning on the following workshops:

Start the Season Pruning with Bill. Learn What, When and How and make your life easier.

Containers. Easier ways to keep your containers gorgeous as the gardening year moves along.

A Children's Vegetable Workshop. Bring your child or grandchild and discover, together, how much fun it is to grow easy vegetable/salad combinations.

Growing Succulents. Easy ways to add and adapt these increasingly popular plants to your own garden.

New and Exciting Annuals. Join Rosemary and explore the latest and best of annual cultivars.

Acer Gardens' Theme of the Year

Most gardeners will admit to being slightly overwhelmed with the number of plants available. Some become popular almost by chance; some become over-used simply because they are so dependable. This season, Acer Gardens is going to showcase Underused Plants and Shrubs. There's always more than one choice for a specific need or problem area and we'll take a look at "what else is out there". There are bound to be surprises along the way!

The Really-Must-Do-Now List

This is the time of year many gardeners don't really have an urgent list! Now is the time for dreaming and planning and hoping ... for thinking about all the things your garden could be in the future. Just be a little realistic! There are only so many hours in the day and the CT gardening season is only so long. Are you still doing some things the hard way just because you always have? Are you still growing some flowers you don't really care for anymore? There are so many new cultivars out there waiting to be tried. Maybe this is the year to head off in a different direction!

Take the time to really look through all the garden catalogs that will pour in! What a perfect time to consider changes to your own garden: new additions to flower beds, new colors and new foliage choices.

Plan your garden's over-all look for this coming season including container placement, cutting gardens, hanging baskets, perennial beds and ground covers. Location is everything! You may want to screen unsightly views with evergreens or flowering shrubs. Make sure your terrace or deck includes some fragrant plant material. All gardens change as they mature and careful editing and/or additions will help you enjoy what you have created even more. In fact, the surrounding background landscape also changes over time and may alter the way you look at and use your garden. All these factors affect your over-all garden plan.

You may actually find that your garden is exactly right for your way of life. Certain plants become "hot" in gardening circles but that doesn't mean they're right for you and that you should change your garden just to accommodate them. Be selective. If you're attracted to a plant but it doesn't really "fit" perhaps it would work as a container plant. Your garden is a reflection of your style, not someone else's. It's meant for your enjoyment.

Keeping Winter Blooms Going

As you enjoy the bulbs you have forced, remember that paper whites will not bloom again and should be discarded.

When the amaryllis bloom is finished, cut off the stem but keep caring for the plant. Give it a bright, sunny location in the house and fertilize regularly. In summer, when all danger of frost has passed, put the amaryllis out in a protected part of the garden where it will receive about 5 hours of sunlight and some afternoon shade. Fertilize lightly until August and leave the plant alone until Labor Day. Then, cut off the leaves, and place the pot in a **dark** cellar, withholding all water, and store in the dark for at least 2-3 months. They need to rest about 8-12 weeks and are happy being pot-bound. Gradually bring them upstairs, water, and place in the light. Before you know it you will see new leaves and a developing bud.

Poinsettias prefer a day temperature of 67 degrees and like a humid environment. The bright, indirect light of an east window suits them but avoid drafts. Put the plants outside for the summer, trim back and repot in late summer and, well before frost, bring them back into the the house as the daylight begins to shorten.

Winter Landscaping Tips

When winter comes, gardeners miss gardening! They look out the windows at their landscape and say "Humpf! Everything is brown and blah. No leaves, no flowers, no green!" They look at their houseplants and smile but it's not the same because it's not a landscape. More Humpfs!

But there are some things you can do to give yourself a little boost as you look at your winter garden. (You may have to plan ahead, but gardeners are used to that.) The main goal is to see something bright and cheerful when you look outside.

Grow shrubs and trees which produce winter berries. Hollies are the best choice of all.

Plant trees with interesting and colorful bark. Dogwood shrubs, birch trees, paperbark maples and Japanese stewartia all have colorful and textural bark in the winter.

Position evergreens so you can see them from the house, varying the shapes and sizes. Think about adding an evergreen with yellow-green needles.

Leave ornamental grasses uncut. The tall stalks and seed heads add color and structural interest and provide a refuge for birds. (You can cut them down in late March.)

Add brightly-painted and decorated birdhouses and position them so that you see them all day long. Put a bright wreath on your front door and add another to the deck.

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 cutting.

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 to 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.

Seasonal Reminders

In the middle of February, or whenever “the thaw” comes, re-apply Wilt-Stop to your evergreens and rhododendrons. 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-apply repellents after heavy rain or snow.

Clean, oil and sharpen all your garden tools and shovels now. You’ll be too busy in the spring! 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 an effective gardening hat. Remember last July?

Towards the end of March cut ornamental grasses down to the ground. Use strong garden twine to tie the grass together about 12” off the ground. Cut below the twine and the grass will be already bundled for removal.

Planning for Pollinators, Butterflies and Birds

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 as being only bees but butterflies, moths and birds are all doing the same job so we, as gardeners, need to plan how to make their jobs easier for them!

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.

Choose common plants and heirloom varieties which are proven sources of nectar and pollen.

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.

Hover flies: 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.) Hover flies are highly effective in eating aphids; they are attracted to small flowers, especially Marigolds and Allyssum.

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.

Indoor Plants are Actually Good for You

Winters are long here in New England. Long ago, gardeners discovered that growing green things in the house all winter long actually makes us feel better and happier. Medical science now bears this out and encourages us to keep house plants.

Many herbs make wonderful houseplants and will thrive indoors. Although it is indeed a Mediterranean plant, rosemary needs to be misted regularly or it will not do well in the house. Sage, thyme, bay leaves and parsley will all flourish ... the more you cut them to use in your cooking, the happier the plants will be. Give them as much sun and light as you can and don't over water. Feed them well during their growing season, keep the foliage dusted and clean, hydrate the air and repot as needed.

Remember to turn your houseplants regularly to keep them from growing and leaning towards the light source. Do not water your plants on a strict schedule but only as the plant needs it. Overwatering kills more plants than underwatering!

Hanging Spider Plant babies can be easily rooted. Cut off the baby and float it on top of a small glass of water. Keep the water topped up and you will have roots very quickly. Plant in a good soil mixture and keep watered.

African Violets like a rich soil (special mixes are sold) and bright light but not sunlight...an east window is perfect. Don't fertilize too often (again, special mixtures are available.) Use luke-warm water when watering and water from the bottom. They propagate easily from leaf cuttings, which are usually taken in the spring. Put plastic wrap over a jar filled with water and secure with a rubber band. Poke a hole in the middle of the plastic wrap and insert the stem of the cutting. Roots will develop in a short time and the leaf can then be planted.

Succulents are favorite houseplants but many are native to cool, arid locations so too much sun and heat can cause problems. They do need to be watered, just not as often as tropical houseplants. Every 1-2 weeks for watering is about right, depending on the size of the pot, the light around it and the temperature of the room. They are happiest in bright, indirect light.

Ferns have been popular indoor plants since Victorian times because they require little care, thrive in low-light conditions and add visual interest to a room. Foliage ranges from the delicate to the dramatic with many stops in between.

Ferns have a few requirements but they are easily met, especially in New England:

Indirect lighting ... an east window is preferred.

Room temperature of 65-75 degrees F during the day, 10 degrees cooler at night.

Consistent watering with the soil evenly moist, not wet.

High humidity ... pebble-lined trays with water work well. Mist foliage often.

Fertilize lightly, once a month, from April through September.

Repot every few years, in the spring, with soil that is 50% peat moss.

Planning and Creating Focal Points in your Garden

Winter is the ideal time to get out a pad of paper and pen and start making garden lists. Gardeners are always planning and tweaking and re-arranging, at least on paper! Sometimes a vague over-all dissatisfaction with the garden can be solved by creating a focal point. (This concept is particularly useful if you are re-arranging or simplifying an existing garden.)

A focal point draws the eye, creates a point of view, gives definition, sets the “mood”, and allows you to choose how you and your visitors will interact with the garden. Basic design principles will help you decide where your garden emphasis should lie and allows you to control how the design of the garden comes together. Focal points can be created with specimen plants, groups of plants, benches, urns, statues or water features. Placement is key to success. Keep it simple for the greatest impact. You could:

Create a destination by placing a bench or a small group of garden furniture where you can relax and see your garden as a whole.

Place a large urn where it will have prominence and attract the eye.

Highlight a view by establishing a rambling path that leads the eye and the visitor towards the view.

Separate sections of the garden by placing pairs of containers so as to direct movement from one area to another.

Sometimes all it takes is a simple change of focus to create something splendid!

Rock and Alpine Gardens in the CT Landscape

Here in Connecticut, it is almost impossible not to look around and see existing rocks in your garden which could become the foundation of Alpine plantings. You don't need much space to tuck in a lot of plants as most true Alpines are not quick spreaders; this makes them ideal for containers and troughs.

Using Alpines replicates a mountain landscape in miniature. The plants grow naturally in nutrient-poor soils, prefer open areas and are drought-tolerant and slow-growing. They do not want a lot of fertilizer and are cold-resistant; most are deer-resistant. As you plan your Alpine garden, keep in mind that although many Alpine plants make their biggest showing in the Spring there are so many cultivars to choose from that a little careful planning will keep your trough blooming all summer long. Some Armerias and Achilleas are long-blooming; Dianthus, Erodium, Sedum and Thymus all bloom in the summer. Sempervivums (“Hen and Chicks”) cover a wide range of plants and do not require much watering. The nursery grows over 200 varieties of Alpine plants and is constantly expanding its collection. As the interest in “Fairy Gardens” continues, a small Alpine garden is a natural companion.

As Alpine trough gardens have become steadily popular in the last few years, some gardeners are re-discovering larger rock gardens. Rock gardens and the Connecticut landscape certainly go hand-in-hand! A rock garden is essentially a re-creation of a mountain landscape, very often on a slope. As you plan, create a scale that suits your growing space. Rock gardens should be placed in full sun as many of the plants you will use are sun lovers. You can use an existing outcropping and add more rocks to repeat the pattern. Make sure some of the rocks you use are large as they are the shapers and keystones of your rock garden.

Combine and space your rock garden plants with their ultimate size in mind. Avoid plants which will quickly outgrow their space or interfere with more slow-growing plants. Take advantage of contrasts in color, foliage and texture. Consider using dwarf conifers to anchor the design and to add a vertical element. (Some cultivars of pines, spruce and false cypress grow very slowly.) Move plants around as you create the effect you have in mind. Many rock garden plants grow slowly and can take several growing seasons to establish. Finally, choose plants with varying heights and include some spreaders and creepers. Good creeper choices include Thyme, Baby's Breath and Irish Moss. Spreading plants might include Aubretia, Ice Plant, Lewisia and Cerastium.

Before you start your rock garden, take a moment to go on the Internet and visit the world's highest botanic garden (8,200'), The Betty Ford Alpine Gardens: www.bfalpinegardens.org. The web site is full of information and wonderful photos show you their existing rock gardens.

Often-Asked Questions

Last summer was so hot. In case the rain isn't dependable this summer, how can I make my garden more drought-tolerant?

The long-range forecast for this area is for drier summers. Choosing and placing appropriate plants in your garden will help you cope with longer dry spells... but everything starts with good soil. Use native plants where you can; they've already adapted to the climate. In general, established perennial flowers require less water than annuals. Many gardeners keep an eye on weather reports and water deeply just before the temperatures soar.

Daytime watering evaporates in the heat so always water well before noon. Most perennials thrive on 1" of water a week so a good rain gauge is a gardener's best friend. Water deeply and less often... you want a self-sufficient flower border. If you water everyday your plants will expect it and will not send their roots deep into the ground. Some gardeners divide their gardens into grids and deep-water a grid a day. Move container plants to more shaded areas for the duration of a drought; in all probability, they will still require watering once a day but they won't have to work quite as hard to keep growing!

Acer Gardens Information Sheet on drought tolerant plants is available on the web site.

After that unusual warm spell in early December some of my rhododendrons actually produced some buds! What should I do to them?

The best thing is to leave them alone; don't cut them off. In all likelihood, they will remain dormant throughout the winter. Spring will bring new growth and they will probably continue their interrupted growth cycle. You may not have as much bloom as you're used to but the chances are good that the plant will be at full bloom next year.

What's the best way to get snow off my bushes and ornamental trees?

Although it is always tempting to try to remove snow covering from evergreens and bushes you may actually do more harm than good by swinging those brooms and rakes! Plants are amazingly resilient and, as the snow melts, most plants will snap back fairly quickly. Give them a little time to readjust and, if you do see damage later in the season, carefully cut out the problem limbs.

We have lots of evergreens around the house but when I look out my windows in the winter I don't see any color. How can I change that?

Red Twig Dogwood brightens many a winter landscape with its bright red branches and should be placed where it can easily be seen from a window. The bush will tolerate partial shade but its red bark is brightest when planted in full sun. They prefer moist areas and thrive in low spots or along streams and ponds. Their widely-spreading root system makes them ideal for banks or slopes. For maximum color, prune out 1/3 of the older branches every 3 years ... the new branches will give the brightest color.

Yellow Twig Dogwood grows well in full sun to partial shade. Like its cousin, Red Twig, it prefers soil that is consistently moist and rich in organic material. Dig in compost when you plant and water regularly as the plant establishes. This bush looks best planted in masses against the wall of a building. Thinning out 25% of the stems each year will help keep stem color at its best.

I was given a lovely African Violet this Christmas but how do I care for it?

African Violets like a rich soil (special mixes are sold) and bright light but not sunlight...an east window is perfect. Don't fertilize too often (again, special mixtures are available. Use luke-warm water when watering and water from the bottom. They propagate easily from leaf cuttings, which are usually taken in the spring. Put plastic wrap over a jar filled with water and secure with a rubber band. Poke a hole in the middle of the plastic wrap and insert the stem cutting. Roots will develop in a short time and the leaf can then be planted.

I'd like a hanging fern in the house this winter? Do I have choices? Easy care?

Absolutely. To make life easier for yourself, let the ferns stay near a shower every once in awhile so they can enjoy the humidity!

Boston Fern (Nephrolepis)

Depending on the cultivar, the Boston Fern has light green foliage with long, delicate fronds and a high light tolerance. Ideal for hanging baskets; rotate the fern periodically. Give them as much humidity as possible.

Rabbit's Foot (Davallia)

This fern is an excellent choice for hanging baskets as the furry rhizomes ... which resemble a rabbit's foot ... hang over the edge. Re-pot in the spring and feed every 2-3 weeks from the beginning of spring to the end of fall.

I feed the birds all winter. Will they stay around to eat bad bugs and insects?

When we garden, we grow plants that attract bugs and insects. Hungry birds are our first line of defense ... organic pest control! Nearly all birds eat insects. Ground feeders, like robins, are particularly fond of worms and caterpillars. In this area we see different birds at different times. Birds migrating through in the spring feed on the insects on spring-blooming trees. Summer residents are fond of the bugs that reproduce during the warmer months. Other birds staying through the fall and winter eat insect eggs and larvae. Growing a wide variety of plants will entice an assortment of birds to stop by for a snack.

I love to look at hummingbirds and butterflies but I'm a little short on space. Are there any perennials which will attract both at the same time?

Yes, there are a number of plants that will help you. Buddleia is a bush that will attract them all summer long and there are many cultivars (and sizes) available. You can also rely on Bee Balm (Monarda), Catmint (Nepeta), Dianthus, Daylilies and Lupines.

Planning for Summer Bulbs

Many summer bulbs produce flowers that bloom for long periods of time and help extend the season. Now is the time to take a moment to plan how and where you can use them in your garden to their best advantage.

Summer bulbs need warm weather and, most important, warm soil. Once the soil has dried out and then warmed up to around 60 F, or even a little higher, it's time to get summer bulbs into the ground. Gladiolus, Caladiums and Begonias can start blooming as early as mid-summer. Canna Lilies, Agapanthus, Dahlias and Elephant Ears start their bloom period in late summer, extending the season into fall. Most respond to fertilizing; all come in many colors, except blue.

Acer Gardens will have an extended and exciting selection of these plants available, pre-planted in pots for your convenience. Just take them out of the pot and place them in the garden or in containers, sit back and enjoy their beauty! Now is the time to take a moment to plan how and where you can use these adaptable beauties in your garden! Consider:

Dahlias

Dahlias come in many flower sizes, heights and shapes with a wide range of colors. Fertilize in July. Dahlias make excellent cut flowers; the more you cut the more the plants will grow and bloom.

Cannas

Cannas bloom from early summer to the first frost in colors ranging from cream to red. Most Reach 3-6'. Apply fertilizer in the spring and repeat every 6 weeks until early fall.

Crocsmia

Blooms last all summer and the plant itself will multiply for many years. The yellow, orange and red varieties attract hummingbirds and the blooms continue throughout the fall. They are not heavy feeders and do not need fertilizer. Several varieties, like 'Lucifer', are winter hardy and can remain in the garden over the winter.

In this zone, all summer bulbs need to be dug up after a killing frost. Swoosh off the dirt, let them dry a few days and pack them in large cardboard boxes lined with peat moss or the cedar mix sold in pet stores as gerbil cage lining. Seal the box with ordinary package tape, label the box and store it in a cool, dry place for the winter ... usually the cellar. Next spring, start the cycle all over again!

Getting Ready for Spring

In late March (or whenever the snow melts):

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. As tempting as it is to get out in the garden and get going, let the weather be your guide. Our last three springs have been cold and wet and some damage can be done by removing protective coverings too quickly.

Remove winter mulch from flower beds slowly. Bulbs coming up now will not be bothered by a late frost.

Cut down any perennials you left standing in the fall ... remember that not everything leafs out at the same time! (Cut back Gaura, Lavender, Perovskia and Montauk Daisies later in the season when you start to see bud-break.) Watch for frost-heaved plants and push them gently but firmly back into the ground.

As perennials begin to emerge, assess their location. Sun and shade patterns change over time and it may be necessary to move some plants to a better spot. Remove any winter-damaged foliage from your perennials in early Spring and check to be sure that some plants (like Brunnera) have not formed a mat that some bulbs cannot break through.

As the soil becomes friable, keep dividing, planting and transplanting. Here in CT, we can divide or move perennials until the middle of May (Rudbeckia, Black-Eyed Susan and Leucanthemum seem to need division to thrive.) Peonies and Iris should be divided only in the fall. When you acquire a new plant, get it into the ground as quickly as possible and remember to determine the plant's "best side." Positioning is everything! Experienced gardeners realize that allowing a plant to show its own "natural" shape will give you the best look and the best results ... arguing with a plant is a waste of time!

Weed! It's amazing, but weeds can and do grow in and survive Connecticut winters all the time.

Photograph your bulbs as they begin to bloom and keep them as a permanent record. The photos will be helpful next fall as you plan where to plant new bulbs. (Don't forget to deadhead the daffodils but let the stems and leaves turn brown before you cut them down completely. Don't braid the leaves ... it keeps the energy from going back into the bulb.) Photographing your garden as the season progresses is the best record of all your hard work.

Available spring products at the nursery will include pelletized lime, pre-emergent fertilizer, lawn and garden fertilizer, Milorganite, organic lawn and garden products, grass seed, straw and control products for deer, insects, rabbits, voles, weeds, bugs and diseases.

The nursery's Supergrow Fertilizer is available in two formulas: 18-6-18 is designed for steady feeding throughout the season and is the exact mix used on our nursery plants. 17-5-10 is pelleted for slow release and designed for container use. Custom blended and screened topsoil is also available along with bagged cedar mulch.

The **Spring Garden Chores** Information Sheet is available on the web site (www.AcerGardens.com.)

Hellebores

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. Blooming at a time when flowers are few and far between, Hellebores should be planted where you see them from the house. Sometimes called Lenten Rose, Hellebores are long-blooming, low-maintenance, deer and vole resistant and tolerant of dry shade although they will thank you for providing evenly moist soil. Shelter them from cold winds and grow them around deciduous shrubs and trees which will provide some welcome shade in the summer months.

The range of colors available in Hellebores is outstanding and it's hard to choose! They rarely need division and are happiest left to establish clumps. Give them a light application of a balanced fertilizer in early spring and water well during extended dry periods. Once established, they are drought-tolerant.

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. You'll be glad you did!

Native plants that Play Well with Perennials

Many native plants will do well when added to 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!) Any tendency to invasiveness can be easily controlled by pulling up self-seedlings. The advantage in adding some natives to a garden filled with perennials is twofold: Their shapes tend to be a little looser and the flowers more open so they fill space and, at the same time, often bloom longer than neighboring perennials. A little careful planning can help you change the look of your perennial garden to a more "open" feel.

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. Many bloom late in the season and can help you extend bloom time in your beds.

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

Aquilegia Canadensis	Eastern Wild Columbine	Sun/partial shade
Aruncus dioicus	Goatsbeard	Sun/partial shade
Aster novae-angliae	New England Aster	Sun
Boltonia asteroides	Boltonia	Sun
Cimicifuga racemosa	Black Snakeroot	Sun/partial shade
Echinacea purpurea	Purple Coneflower	Sun
Eupatorium fistulosum	Joe-Pye Weed	Sun
Hibiscus moscheutos	Marsh Mallow	Sun
Lobelia cardinalis	Cardinal Flower	Sun/partial shade
Monarda didyma	Bee Balm	Sun/partial shade
Oenothera fruticosa	Sundrops	Sun
Phlox maculata	Wild Sweet William	Sun/partial shade
Tiarella cordifolia	Foamflower	Shade
Vernonia altissima	Tall Ironweed	Sun
Veronicastrum virginicum	Culver's Root	Sun

Tried and True Perennials for Long Blooming Periods

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 and may even bring repeat bloom. Some individual cultivars may need a little pruning or cutting back. 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:

Achillea	Yarrow	June - August
Coreopsis	Tickseed	June to first frost
Echinacea	Cone Flower	June – August
Geranium Rozanne	Cranesbill	May – August
Kalimeris	Japanese Aster	June - September
Nepeta	Catmint	June - September
Perovskia	Russian Sage	July – September
Phlox paniculata	Garden Phlox	July – September
Potentilla	Cinquefoil	June – August
Rudbeckia	Black-eyed Susan	July – September
Scabiosa	Pincushion Flower	May – September
Sidalcea	Miniature Hollyhock	July – September

Cool-Season Vegetables

Every year, more and more gardeners discover the pleasure of growing some of the vegetables they eat. A successful vegetable garden needs 6-8 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 (compost or manure) will give your vegetables a boost and help drainage. Vegetables can also 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; new dwarf varieties and bush forms of plants allow space-saving techniques. Adding natural insect repellents to herb and vegetable gardens (basil, nasturtiums and marigolds) will help you grow vegetables successfully. Pre-grown vegetables 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 and 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. 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 space.

Winter is the perfect time to decide what you want to grow in the vegetable garden ... and how. Container vegetable gardens are increasingly popular. As the sun begins to lose power towards the end of the growing season, containers can be moved around the garden to take advantage of more daylight hours. Many vegetable plants can be planted in with perennials!

Many vegetables can be planted as soon as you can work the soil. Known as "cool season vegetables", they include Swiss Chard, Spinach, Kale, Leeks, Onions, Cilantro, Peas, Cabbage, Broccoli and Cauliflower. 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.

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

A Beginners Vegetable Patio Garden

Looking for an easy way to grow a few vegetables? Short on space? Never really grown any vegetables before? Not to worry ... containers and pots are waiting to rescue you and make your life easier but you will have to pay attention to watering.

The first thing is to choose the right container, usually the bigger the better. (Small containers dry out too quickly, especially porous clay pots.) Some plants (carrots, cucumbers, eggplants, leeks, peppers, spinach, parsley and rosemary) have deep roots, 8-9" long. Some have really deep roots (10-12"), including beets, broccoli, potatoes, summer squash and dill.

Some plants have special needs:

Tomatoes need a support system.

Carrots need a lot of room.

Zucchini and cucumbers grow full, large and fast. The bush varieties do better in pots.

Potatoes take about 120 days so, in this climate, pick early maturing cultivars.

The best soil option for growing veggies in pots is to use a planting mix made for planters. Regular fertilization is a must. Mix in slow-release fertilizer at the start; as your veggies grow you can move to a liquid fertilizer.

Good watering is key to growing vegetables in pots. A self-watering planter is ideal.

Combining plants into very large pots will save space ... be sure the plants have the same nutritional needs, especially for water.

Read the plant tags before you plant!

Enjoy your future dinners!

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).

Re-Opening Day

Acer Gardens expects to open, weather permitting, on March 27. We look forward to seeing you back at the nursery as we start a new gardening season! See you soon!

Acer Gardens
Linda Z. Lynch
Editor & Writer