

Gardening Notes for February

February may still be in the midst of winter, but some plants are beginning to awaken! On warmer days, make it a point to walk through your garden, enjoying its beauty and giving thought to exciting new spring improvements. For major design renovations it is time to finalize those designs since March becomes busy with outdoor gardening activities. Early this month is also the time to complete the ordering of seeds, since many of the more popular varieties will soon, or already are sold out. Also, do not forget to visit Public Gardens to gain an appreciation for various winter interest plants. Reread your journals from last year, and focus on how to improve those parts of the garden that performed poorly as well as how to repeat last years' success stories!

Things to do:

Garden

- Sharpen pruners and handsaws since February is the month to start serious pruning. If you own a bypass pruner which can be easily disassembled (as pictured at right), take the pruner apart to sharpen since the side of the blade traveling past the anvil lacks a bevel and needs to be laid flat on a sharpening stone, much like a chisel. Ideally, use a diamond stone as pictured at right, which are available at most hardware stores. It consists of diamond dust embedded in plastic and will remain flat and not develop a saddle or depression with use.
- After running the flat portion of the blade over the stone for several minutes, give several passes along the beveled edge over an Arkansas Stone, just as you would when sharpening a kitchen knife. Add lithium grease to the central bolt and points of contact, reassemble and the pruners are set to go for winter pruning!
- If you own a saw with a tri-edge blade that is dull, they are notoriously difficult to sharpen and it is probably best to simply purchase several new replacement blades to last you through the next year or two to come.
- Regular pruning saws are best taken to a sharpening shop for a tune-up!
- Clean and sharpen the edge of garden spades, axes and other implements that



work best with a sharp edge. A grinding wheel works best for sharpening these tools.

- Make certain wheelbarrows are well greased, tires inflated and other tools are in good shape for the season to come.
- Start to prune fruit trees, including apple, pear and quince as well as grapevines. For budded or grafted fruit trees, including Pawpaws (*Asimina*), make certain to remove root suckers as close to the point of growth as possible, since they are actually the understock and are not the fruit variety that is desired.
- Examine small trees such as Dogwoods (*Cornus* sp.) for crossing and rubbing branches as they are now easily seen and February into March is a great time to remove the weaker of the two crossing members. Cut the branch just above the swelling where the branch meets the trunk, otherwise called the branch collar, which is seen at the tip of the arrow at above. The collar aids in the healing process and should not be removed.
- Begin to prune multi-stemmed shrubs, such as Forsythia, Lilac, Deutzia and Weigela. These plants flower best on younger stems necessitating the removal of one to several of the oldest canes in order to promote new growth from the base. For Lilac, if the plant only has one or two large trunks and is not suckering, it is most likely grafted onto privet understock. In these cases, it is safer not to prune the plant back harshly, since it will not sucker and produce new canes from the base.
- For newly planted shade trees or smaller flowering trees that have codominant leaders, one of the leaders should be removed before they grow too large. For the Chinese Dogwood (*Cornus kousa*) at right, the arrow is pointing to two such codominant stems. Codominant leaders occur when a branch assumes the role of the central leader and competes with the central leader for upright growth. As the two stems gain in girth over time, the trunks push against each other with the stem with the weakest union eventually splitting. The result is a large wound that is usually too large to heal before internal decay sets in. Typically, there is no branch collar for the stems which ensures quick healing, so removing the weaker of the two stems as early as possible is the best route to take. In this case, the stem on the left should be removed.



- Should it snow this month, try to remove the snow from shrubs and hedges to reduce the potential for limb breakage due to the weight.

- After removing the snow from shrubs or hedges, prune any winter damaged branches.

- Bring branches of Forsythia, Quince, Witch Hazel, Winter Jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*) as seen at right or Stachyurus (*Stachyurus praecox*) pictured at the end, into the house for forcing or to simply enjoy the flowers and fragrance should they already be in bloom.



- Winter Jasmine is great to work up on fences and blooms whenever the temperatures climb above freezing. The image above right is at Frelinghuysen Arboretum after an early March snow! The flowers have fun detail when studied closely, as seen at right. It also looks great



- planted on top of a wall and worked over and down the wall. Even when not in bloom, the green stems add winter interest!

- Continue to check on the bulbs that you have brought into the garage or placed in a protected spot outside for forcing. The early blooming Crocus and Snowdrops should be showing the tips of new growth and will be ready for you to bring inside and enjoy.



- It is also wise to check where those early flowering bulbs have been planted outside as well. During the warmer days

many early risers, such as Snowdrops (*Galanthus* spp.) and Winter Aconites (*Eranthis hyemalis*), as pictured above are now appearing or are beginning to

bloom! Cut back any surrounding herbaceous plant material that may detract from the flower display.

- Cut back Lenten Rose (*Helleborus x hybridus*) and Christmas Rose (*Helleborus nigra*) foliage, such that the foliage does not distract from the floral display. The foliage normally splays open and lays on the ground, exposing the central flower buds (as seen above for *Helleborus x hybridus*). Make sure to watch for the emerging flower buds near the base to prevent accidentally pruning them off!
- Where Hellebores are used in large masses, it is often beneficial to leave the previous year's foliage as a mulch. The foliage will matt down on the ground and in large masses does not prove distracting to the floral display (in my opinion!).



- For some Hellebore hybrids, along with *H. atrorubens* and *H. niger*, you may wish to protect some early blooms with evergreen boughs should extremely cold weather appear. It is a good use for leftover Christmas tree branches as seen at right. Be careful to use only small branches that will not crush the blooms.



- If there are groundcovers like Pachysandra (*Pachysandra terminalis*) or Myrtle (*Vinca minor*) around the base of trees or shrubs, check the base of the woody plants frequently for any mice girdling. Mice are prone to eating bark under cover of the groundcovers, especially as we get further into winter. You may wish to trim the groundcover back from the stems where possible. I have seen a mature Ginkgo Tree (*Ginkgo biloba*) killed from girdling mice who gained protection from



Pachysandra terminalis.

- As a substitute for the Japanese Pachysandra (*Pachysandra terminalis*) mentioned prior, consider substituting our native Pachysandra (*Pachysandra procumbens*) pictured above right in December. It too has evergreen, though less noticeable foliage and very attractive flowers for pollinators come April!



- Assuming there are no major snow accumulations near months end, some of the herbaceous plant material can begin to be cut back to the ground, especially those plants matted down from snow load. Consider cutting the material into short lengths and leaving it in place as a mulch as seen above. To help make the bed look ‘maintained’, spread shredded bark mulch around the border of the bed. Once the plant material begins to grow, only the shredded bark near the edge will be visible, providing an appearance most people consider to be an ‘acceptable’ treatment of the herbaceous beds!
- Do not remove any temporary winter mulch on Perennial beds, such as the boughs from the Christmas tree, unless it is obscuring those early blooming bulbs and the temperatures are agreeable. Late February and early March can still be bitterly cold.

- If your Hellebores are in bloom as seen at right, the flowers can be cut and floated in a bowl of water for a fun and very different floral arrangement!



- Continue to apply anti-desiccant sprays to recently planted Rhododendrons, Hollies, Camellias or other evergreens that are in exposed locations on days with above freezing temperatures.
- Check any containers of dormant plants that have been brought into a lightly heated garage, such as species of *Agave* or *Billbergia* (a Bromeliad). Although they need minimal amounts of water during winter, the soil should not become bone dry either. It is also beneficial to add a ‘High-Lo’ thermometer, which in this case provides you with the lowest temperatures that the room has reached. In general, temperatures should not dip below 42°F.

- Check on stored tubers and corms, such as Canna, Elephant Ears or Dahlia. Discard any that are showing signs of decay.
- If you planted Grape Hyacinths (*Muscari amaricanum*) in the fall of 2023 or earlier, the slender grassy foliage will have appeared this past November and will persist through winter, as seen at right in December. Do not mistake it for a weedy grass as you start to clean your garden for the spring! The Hoop Daffodils (*Narcissus bulbocodium* 'Mary Poppins' is seen at right) will produce slender, grass-like foliage in fall too.
- Watch for deer predation and set up fencing if needed.
- When temperatures rise into the upper 40's and the ground is free of frost, get a head start on edging those bed-lines or spreading mulch. Every day that you can complete a springtime chore will relieve some of the burden of the April panic to get everything done.



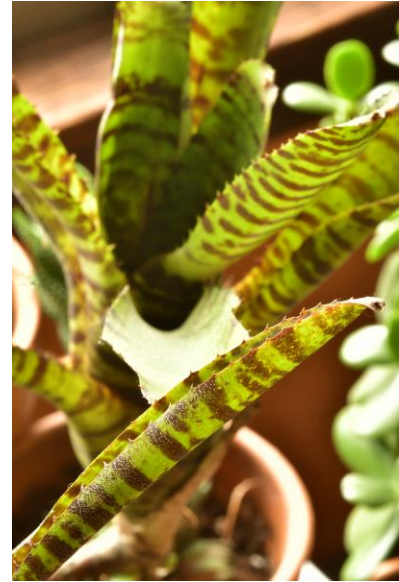
Vegetables

- Clean-up the light racks and if you are lucky enough, the greenhouse! Check on the heat mats and grow lights to make certain everything works and is clean. Check to make certain there is sufficient potting soil, labels, fresh markers for labelling and clean pots for seed and transplants.
- Near the end of the month, start to sow seeds indoors for cool season crops such as Broccoli, Cabbage and Leeks and for warm season crops or ornamentals, such as Begonias, Eggplants and Hot Peppers.
- Finish ordering seed for spring. Go through your stored seed and discard packages that are over 2 years old. Or, you can place some of the older seeds on a moist paper towel and place in a warm spot (like on top of the refrigerator) to evaluate the percentage of germination. If only few seeds germinate, discard the package.
- Organize them by sowing time in an old shoebox or recipe box to make life easier come the hectic months of March, April and May!

Houseplants

- Keeping a log of when the plants have been watered has proven to be incredibly helpful to me, since I always forget when the plants were last watered or the Air Plants (*Tillandsia*) soaked!
- With the days becoming longer near month's end, begin watering every 2-3 vs 3-4 weeks. Refrain from overwatering that encourages fungus gnats & root decay.

- Continue to turn your plants so that they grow more evenly. For plants like the Bromeliad *Neoregelia*, I have noticed the leaves that are closest to the window tend to curl inward on themselves, much as if the plant is overly dry. When the plant is turned, those leaves slowly uncurl while the leaves now close to the window begin to curl. The image at right shows a curled leaf in the foreground and the normal foliage in the background, all on the same plant! I suspect the leaves are curling in response to the warmer and dryer air near the window, since the heat duct is immediately below. Placing small trays of water near the plant does help raise the humidity as well. When the plant is brought outside for the summer, all the leaves resume normal growth.



- If your houseplants have been in a container for several years and have become pot bound, the end of February is a good time to start up-potting plants into a larger container. Make certain the pot is only 1-3" larger in diameter and has a drainage hole at the base. If the plant is placed in too large a container, it often results in the plant becoming overwatered since there are no roots in the new soil to absorb the water.
- With the sun getting stronger and their window perch getting warmer, check as well for an increase in insect populations as they too enjoy the stronger sun!



Bruce Crawford
Manager of Horticulture, Morris County Parks Commission