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## The Dirt: October Gardening Resources & Tips

1 message

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### Gardening Resources & Tips from the MMGA

#### October 2025 To Autumn...



October is a quintessential New England month. The fields are filled with goldenrod and asters, home gardens are bright with chrysanthemums, and beloved farm stands spill over with pumpkins, gourds, and apples. As the days grow shorter, gardeners finish putting their beds to rest, not quite ready for that winter's nap but slowing down as the seasons change. Warm days, cool nights, hot cider, and an issue of *The Dirt* – sounds just about right!



#### ***In this month's issue of the Dirt...***

- Long awaited: The MMGA Certification Program Application is now live!
- Featured Garden: The Quincy Homestead, history & beauty since 1634.
- Featured How-To: Learn to make leaf mold and improve your garden soil.
- Monthly Plant: Consider sheep laurel, an under-appreciated native shrub.



# Master Gardener Certification Program

**The application for the 2026 Master Gardener  
Certification Program is now available!**

**[Apply here!](#)**

**Deadlines:** Applications will be accepted from 10/1/2025 - 10/8/2025.

**Learn more:** Visit the MMGA Information Sessions for an overview of our program. Click [here](#).

**Financial Aid:** If accepted into the Master Gardener Certification Program, a limited amount of needs-based financial assistance may be available. Click [here](#) for more information.

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They can subscribe online by clicking [HERE](#).**

Massachusetts Master  
Gardener Association Presents

# Winter Gardening Know-How

## Topics Include

- Winter Pruning: Why, When, and How to Prune your Shrubs
- What's Wrong with My House Plant?
- Humans and Their Use of Plants
- Inviting Wildlife into Your Garden

Join us **ONLINE**

Nov 5, 12, 19 & Dec 3 2025 7-8:30 PM

Registration closes November 2, 2025

To learn more and sign up, click to visit  
our website. Questions? Email us at  
**KnowHow@MassMasterGardeners.org**

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## ***Featured Monthly Garden***

**Dorothy Quincy Homestead**

34 Butler Road  
Quincy, MA 02169

(617) 742-3190

<https://nscdama.org/properties/dorothy-quincy-homestead/>

*Author Rebecca Dinsmore is a retired music teacher who continues her music interests in early keyboard music playing an historic English Spinet in the*





*Quincy Homestead. Rebecca began working at the Quincy Homestead in 2000 and is currently the Project Manager for the site. Rebecca was in the Master Garden class of 2011 and is now a Lifetime Master Gardener.*

The Quincy Homestead (GH) is a property with a history beginning in the early days of the Commonwealth with Edmund Quincy arriving from England in 1634. His family of four generations of Edmunds lived and gardened on the site, acquiring 1,000 plus acres and giving and selling off portions until 1904 when the state and the National Society of Colonial Dames entered into an agreement to keep 1.7 acres as an historic site. As of today, many visitors come to enjoy the grounds and view the historic home.



The city of Quincy has been celebrating its 400th anniversary with many events, some of which include the historic homes. For example, a large group of visitors came to the Quincy Homestead on August 28th to witness the 250th wedding anniversary of Dorothy Quincy (who spent her childhood in the homestead) and John Hancock in a mock wedding ceremony

The wedding took place outdoors in the formal garden, which is planted with hundreds of boxwood in geometric patterned parterres, with many pollinator friendly flowers including six-foot tall Joe Pie Weed which swayed over the heads of the bride and groom and guests. The garden also has lovely old roses, the garden's showpieces in May and June. For more on the 400th Anniversary celebrations, visit the Discover Quincy [website](#).





In addition to the formal garden, there is an extensive herb garden designed by the founding ladies of the National Society of Colonial Dames and the New England Unit of the Herb Society as far back as the 1930s. One plant that always draws comment is *Vitex Agnus-castus*, also known as Chasteberry. It resembles a Lilac bush blooming in August.

The grounds, planted and tended by the DCR, have a selection of interesting trees. One of several linden trees has been added to the **Legacy Tree record**. There are two magnificent beech trees that have sadly been found to be infected with Beech Leaf disease. They are being treated by an arborist with hopes for a recovery in the future. Over the years, quite a few trees have been removed because of age, disease, and weather problems, changing the shaded canopy of the property. I have hopes of planting trees to make up for the loss.



Boxwoods have been an ongoing issue for our Master Gardener projects over the years. There are hundreds of boxwood plants of varying ages and species. Pruning them is a very big job. We have had to replace a border of 140 plants after a fungal problem killed them, possibly brought on by incorrectly shearing them in the midst of a summer season of particularly humid days. There was also one parterre of *Buxus sempervirens* planted in 1994 that failed for years and failed again after being replanted with *Buxus microphylla* 'Baby Gem.' Finally with expert advice from a Master Gardener, we ripped out all 110 plants, dug up the soil and rocks, and filled in the trenches with new soil and compost. The new plants, *Buxus japonica* 'Green Velvet,' have done very well in the area that was so difficult. It was a huge job that took several weeks of hard work from all the MGs who were dedicated to ensuring success.







**Join MMGA for a free community event**

Come learn from WGBH and WCAI  
Radio's The Garden Lady  
Wednesday October 22  
7-8:30 PM zoom  
[Click to learn more and register](#)

## ***Featured How-To Marvelous Leaf Mold***

*Author Rick Charnes attended the Master Gardener program in 2016 and it changed his life. Before that, his academic training was in sociology and his vocation was in computer programming, but gardening and exploring different flowers are now his passion. He maintains an extensive garden of tall delphinium, species penstemon, hardy chrysanthemum, and many flowers often grown from seed.*

I always look forward to fall, not just for the beautiful colors but for what the leaves will do for my garden. For the last several years, I've been a participant in the glorious alchemical process of making leaf mold, or mould, as the Brits call it. It seems to be more of a thing in the UK, but American gardeners are slowly catching on. Leaf mold is the crumbly, fresh-smelling substance that is produced after your autumn leaves have been decomposing for a year or more. It's not a nutritive fertilizer in the way compost is, but more of a soil conditioner that increases the water retention and tilth of your soil.



It's good to understand the difference between compost and leaf mold. Compost has a good balance of carboniferous and nitrogenous substances; carbon from your plant stems and leaves; nitrogen from kitchen waste and grass clippings. When you get that C/N balance right, your decomposing bacteria are happy and go to work on your pile. The bacteria metabolize the material quickly and can decompose a good-sized pile in a few months. Bacteria need nitrogen for quick protein and nucleic acid synthesis, and they get that aplenty in a good compost pile.



In a leaf pile, however, it's primarily fungi rather than bacteria that do the work. Leaves contain little nitrogen but a lot of carbon, and since fungi are very tolerant of nitrogen-poor environments, it's a good deal for everybody. Fungi excel at breaking down the cellulose, lignin, and tannins contained in a pile of pure leaves. Their filamentous hyphae can physically penetrate and decompose leaf litter better than most bacteria can.

So, excited to be part of that process, every late October and November when the leaves start falling in my yard, I get out my reusable yard waste bags and start raking. I have several maple trees that over the course of a month drop a lot of leaves. Though you can use almost any kind of leaves for leaf mold, it's best to not mix oak with other leaves as oak leaves with their high lignin content take longer to break down than softer leaves like maple.



After a good hour of raking when all my bags are full, I get out my leaf mulcher and start shredding. Some people simply run over the leaves with a lawn mower, but if you have a lot, it's much more efficient to use a corded electric leaf shredder-mulcher with a strong 26-gallon canvas cloth bag sitting underneath the machine to catch the shredded leaves.

Unlike a compost pile where the bacteria need air, you usually don't need to turn a leaf mold pile as it would disturb the growing mycelial network.

Though it's not critical, try to rake your leaves soon after they fall, since freshly fallen leaves are still slightly moist and supple and contain small amounts of soluble nutrients like potassium. My leaf-gathering period often lasts from late October to late November. During that time, once or twice a week you'll find me raking, shredding, piling, and moistening. At some point in late November, you will see that your pile is as tall as you want it (though it'll shrink over the next few weeks) and you will have used all the leaves you had.



Get a compost thermometer with a long stem and insert it in the pile. Place a cover over the cage as you don't want rain and snow coming in and making the pile too wet. Now sit back and let the magic happen.



You will be amazed at how quickly heat is generated. Though I've read that leaf mold typically doesn't get as hot as compost, mine usually manages to hit 140° by early November. Eventually the pile will cool down, and then the fungi go dormant over winter. By the following October, when the first new leaves start falling, you should have a fine, earthy, crumbly leaf mold from the previous year's harvest, and you can then spread it on

the soil just before you start preparing your new pile.

A yearly application of leaf mold is one of the smartest things you can do to build up your soil. One of the underappreciated aspects of leaf mold—and it's why the Brits insist on calling it *mold*—is that much of the fungal spores and hyphae from the pile remain alive and active in the soil after being spread, and over years they build up in your soil. The hyphae are the long, white threadlike filaments that grow through the soil, weaving together mineral particles and bits of organic matter, forming tiny aggregates and making the soil softer, better aerated, and more water retentive. Compost enriches the soil but properly decomposed leaf mold structures it.



Eventually, after a few years of adding leaf mold, soil becomes rich in mycelium and begins to have what biologists call a “fungal-dominant profile.” This is extremely desirable in perennial flower gardens as the vast networks of hyphae essentially become an extension of the plants' root systems and allow for a slower, deeper nutrient cycling that our flowers love.

I'd be very glad to hear about your leaf mold adventures.

## ***Monthly Native Plant***

### **Sheep laurel (*Kalmia angustifolia*)**



Sheep laurel (*Kalmia angustifolia*) is one of those underappreciated native shrubs that deserves a spot in ornamental gardens. Hardy and evergreen, it offers year-round interest, supports local wildlife, and helps homeowners expand their native plant palette.



A close relative of the better-known mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*), sheep laurel produces clusters of lovely rose-pink, saucer-shaped flowers in late June. Though smaller than its cousin, it has just as much charm. This low, spreading shrub typically grows about three feet tall and forms colonies through rhizomes, making it ideal for naturalized plantings.

Native to the dry, acidic, sandy or rocky soils of the northeastern U.S., sheep laurel thrives in full sun to part shade. It tolerates poor soils and, once established, is drought resistant, qualities that make it a resilient choice for challenging sites.

Beyond its beauty, sheep laurel provides valuable ecological benefits. Its nectar feeds a variety of native bees, butterflies, and other insects, and it serves as a host plant for the Kalmia miner bee (*Andrena kalmiae*). The flowers have spring-loaded stamens that dust visiting insects with pollen, a fascinating adaptation that ensures pollination.



One caution: all parts of the plant, and honey from it, are toxic to humans, sheep, and domestic cattle, which is why the plant is also called lambkill. While that's a concern in grazing areas, the same trait makes it somewhat deer resistant in gardens. Although not a preferred food, sheep laurel may be browsed by deer when populations are high or resources are scarce.



For gardeners working with dry, acidic soils, sheep laurel is an excellent choice. It pairs beautifully with other natives such as lowbush blueberry, bearberry, bayberry, and little bluestem, adding both ecological value and ornamental appeal.

## ***Seasonal MMGA Learning Resources***

**Ask us your questions in person!** Trained volunteers staff Ask-a-Master-Gardener (AAMG) tables at dozens of events throughout the growing season.

- The AAMGA is coming to a community near you, so check our [AAMG Calendar](#) for dates and times.
- Belong to a local organization that would like to host an AAMG? Contact

[Outreach@MassMasterGardeners.org](mailto:Outreach@MassMasterGardeners.org)

**Why guess? Test! Get your soil pH tested - for free!**

- Visit a soil testing clinic near you: [Soil Testing Calendar](#).





- To request an MMGA Soil Testing event for your organization's event, contact [SoilTesting@MassMasterGardeners.org](mailto:SoilTesting@MassMasterGardeners.org)

## ***Year-round MMGA Learning Resources***

**Have a plant problem?** Email our volunteers your questions...and they'll get back to you. Please include your name, phone number, and as much detail as possible, including photos.

- Massachusetts Horticultural Society at [MHSHelpline@MassMasterGardeners.org](mailto:MHSHelpline@MassMasterGardeners.org)
- New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill [Hortline@NEBG.org](mailto:Hortline@NEBG.org)

**Speaker's Bureau:** If you're a member of a garden club or other organization, check out our lecture topics here. If you need information on how to schedule a talk for your group, contact our Speakers Bureau Manager at [Speakers@MassMasterGardeners.org](mailto:Speakers@MassMasterGardeners.org).

## ***Credits***

### **Featured Articles & Columns**

- Featured Garden: Rebecca Dinsmore, LMG
- Featured How-To: Rick Charnes, CMG
- Monthly Native Plant: Hadley Berkowitz, PMG

### **Photos (in order of appearance)**

- Gourds, by Lynne Larson, PMG
- Dorothy Quincy Homestead (8 pics), by Rebecca Dinsmore, LMG
- Leaf mold ( first 6 pics), by Rick Charnes
- Leaf mold (last pic), by Royal Horticultural Society (RHS)
- Sheep laurel (first pic), by Native Gardens of Blue Hill
- Sheep laurel (second pic), by Native Plant Trust
- Sheel laurel (third pic), by University of Connecticut
- Pumpkins, by Lynne Larson, PMG

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- Circulation: Nancy Kedersha, PMG, and Chip deVillafranca, CMG



## Who We Are

The Massachusetts Master Gardener Association is an independent non-profit organization whose mission is to share research-based horticultural knowledge and experience with the public. We meet that goal through Master Gardener Certification, outreach, education, volunteering, and public gardening programs for the advancement of best practices in sustainable, regenerative horticulture.



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