

## The Dirt: December Gardening Resources & Tips

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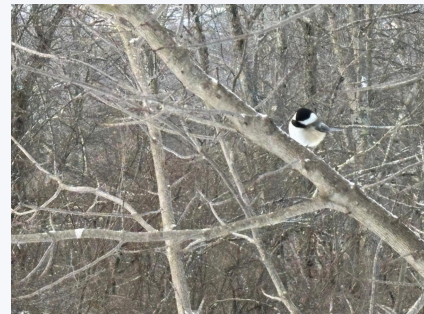


### Gardening Resources & Tips from the MMGA

#### December 2025 Rest, Reflect, Renew



Black-capped Chickadees, Massachusetts's state bird, can go into nocturnal hypothermia as a way to conserve energy during the winter. We, too, might consider the benefits of slowing down and conserving, allowing December to be more restful than it often is. We know that January will be full of seed catalogs and new ideas for next year's gardens, so why not let December be a time to rest and renew? If the tiny chickadee can do so nightly, revived enough to sing so sweetly for another day, perhaps we should follow their lead? Begin here, with a lovely rendition of "**I heard a bird sing in the dark of December**"...



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

- Featured Garden: Read why Tower Hill Botanic Garden is legendary!
- Featured How-To: Use this detailed guide to host a winter-sowing session.
- Monthly Tip: Brighten up December with favorite winter plants.
- Monthly Native Plant: Shrubby cinquefoil takes on tough conditions.

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

Massachusetts Master  
Gardener Association Presents

# Spring Gardening Know-How

## Topics Include

- Preparing Your Garden for Spring
- Stop and Smell the Lilacs
- Raspberries for the Home Garden
- Starting Vegetables and Flowers from Seeds

Join us ONLINE this February  
4, 11, 18 & 25 2026 7-8:30 PM

Registration closes February 1, 2026

To learn more and sign up, click to visit  
our website. Questions? Email us at  
[knowhow@massmastergardeners.org](mailto:knowhow@massmastergardeners.org)

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## ***Featured Monthly Garden***

***New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill***

**11 French Drive**

**PO Box 598**

**Boylston, Mass. 01505-0598**

**[www.nebg.org](http://www.nebg.org)**

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*Author Kathleen Devericks is an LMG, certified in 2019, a member of the last class to have been certified through attendance at New England Botanic*



*Garden. Having spent 38 years in the property casualty insurance industry in both claim and sales positions, gardening was her solace after a long day at work. Kathleen and her family moved to Boylston in 1999, and while the movers were unloading the van, she headed over to see what “this Tower Hill place was all about.” And the love affair began then...*

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New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill is the home of the Worcester County Horticultural Society (WCHS), formed in 1842. It is the third-oldest active horticultural society in the US, behind Massachusetts Horticultural Society and Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. In the early years of WCHS, like-minded gardeners gathered in downtown Worcester at agricultural shows and rented venues to share their plant knowledge and plant materials. Eventually, the Society built Horticultural Hall at 30 Elm Street in Worcester. But, there was always a desire to find a property where plants could be viewed and studied in situ; and in 1983, the search began in earnest for a property. In 1986, the dairy farm of the Carter family in Boylston was purchased and the rest is history.



The Garden is currently comprised of nearly 200 acres and includes formal, cottage, vegetable, wooded and naturalistic garden spaces including a wildlife refuge pond; an heirloom apple orchard, home to 119 heirloom varieties; and two conservatories. The newest additions include The Ramble, a garden for children of all ages; and the Climate Garden, a hands-on, youth-

oriented garden where visitors discover plants and practices for more sustainable gardening. In the Visitors Center, there is a Café and Garden Shop—we always need to eat and shop!

In 2024/25 the Garden hosted over 230,00 guests, which included those visiting the grounds and engaging in educational activities and events. The Garden supports the values of Inclusion, Equity, Diversity and Accessibility and supports a garden where all are welcomed.

The horticultural staff is comprised of 15 full-time staff who are assisted by seasonal staff and volunteers. There are opportunities to work side by side with them, learning and sharing expertise, and discussing all our favorite, and occasional “problem” plants.



The Garden hosts a full calendar of events year-round. Two upcoming favorites are: Night Lights, occurring late November until early January, the event which welcomes winter and the holiday season in a dazzling display of over 500,000 lights; and The Orchid Exhibition, occurring from mid-February to mid-March where both conservatories are filled with over 2000 orchids—the perfect antidote to the winter doldrums. Additionally, there are large-scale sculpture installations each summer season to inspire guests.

The Orangerie, the warmer of the Garden's two conservatories, was constructed in 1999 and is a hybrid of 18th century orangerie and modern conservatories. It displays plants notable for their flowers, foliage and scent. Each of the four corners of the Orangerie contains plants which are planted directly in the ground— two beauties to make sure you see are the Giant Dutchman's pipe (*Aristolochia gigantea*) and Jade vine (*Strongylodon macrobotrys*).

The Limonaia (Lemon House) opened in 2010 and is home to NEBG's Camelia collection (many of which were donated by the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum) and Citrus trees.



The two conservatories house, on average, 400 plants, including those from all continents except Antarctica.

Located between the two conservatoires is the Winter Garden. A pair of Paperbark Maples anchor one edge and Stewartias, the other end, both displaying their stunning bark. Castor and Pollux, two sculptures of Eastern Box turtles, shoot water into Domitian's pool in the center. And outside the Orangerie is The Nadeau Garden of Inspiration, 22 par terre beds chock full of ideas for your next garden restoration.

Woodlands, wetlands and meadows surround the Garden's core property. At the northern end, visitors can hike the Summit Trail, which reaches an elevation of 641.5 feet and offers sweeping views of both Wachusett Mountain and Reservoir. When the Reservoir was being built, the supervisors would use this point to view progress of the work. The spot was colloquially known as Tower Hill, the farm took the name, and WCHS retained it.





What opportunities are there for MG's and Interns? There are 2-hour gardening shifts, 4-5 days a week in each of the garden areas. Volunteers weed, plant, deadhead, offer ideas and engage in conversation with those who share your passion for plants.

Want to teach people about plants and New England Botanic Garden? Train to be a docent and conduct tours in a variety of locations on the property. Or, as a Garden

Explainer, assist guests and answer their questions as they tour the property. The outdoor spaces are filled with the voices of children as they engage with nature. Our Outreach team supports several of the Garden's youth programs (the Exploration series) where you can help children get excited about all nature has to offer. Thus far this year, 429 volunteers (MMGA and non-MMGA) recorded more than 4300 hours—almost 500 of those from 16 MGs.

Join us at New England Botanic Garden and involve yourself with their mission "to create experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world."



Introducing the All-New

## Grow Your Gardening IQ

Are you looking to take your gardening to the next level? Join us to learn essential principles for your home garden, all taught by experienced master gardeners from our speakers bureau. *There's always room to grow!*

You'll learn about: botany, plant diseases, vegetable growing, pruning basics, invasive plants, pollinator habitats... and a whole lot more!

**10 2-hour online sessions**  
**Thursdays 6:30-8:30 PM**  
**January 8- March 12, 2026**

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### ***Featured How-To***

#### ***How-to Host a Winter Seed Sowing Session***

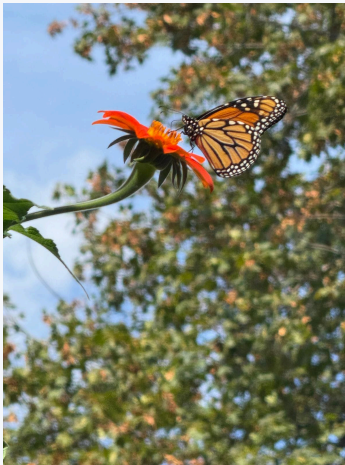
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*Author Nancy Kressin is a Principal Master Gardener (class of 2021) who has been gardening for 40+ years. Her West Roxbury cottage-style garden has twice won first place in the Mayor of Boston's Garden Contest, and is inspired by gardens in England. It includes ornamentals, North American natives (many grown from seed), and plants grown in the UK but rarely grown in the*



*U.S. Nancy is a retired health services researcher and Professor Emerita at the Boston University Chobanian and Avedesian School of Medicine.*

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Are you searching for economical ways to grow native plants, strategies to encourage pollinator pathways in your community, support your neighbors' efforts to feed butterflies and other pollinators, or get your students, friends or garden club enthusiastic about growing pollinator plants from seed? If so, winter seed sowing is for you! This super-easy approach requires just a few supplies and an outdoor space to place your seed containers. Winter sowing does not need a greenhouse, grow lights, or warming mats, making it super-simple to do, and easy to teach adults or children.

This article provides a toolkit for folks who want to host winter sowing workshops. Details are provided regarding the supplies you need, the process for organizing a winter sowing session, how to monitor and care for winter sowing containers until seeds sprout, and when and how to transplant the seedlings. Follow [this link](#) for handouts detailing all this information.

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**Timing:** Winter sowing is a great winter activity which can be done anytime after the winter solstice (December 21 this year). As some seeds need to be cold for a specified period before they will sprout (this is called “cold stratification”), holding a session in January or February allows for plenty of time for cold stratification for the perennial species listed below. Annual seeds can be sown at the same time, as they will sprout when the light and temperature conditions are correct for them, later in the season.



**Find a space to conduct the session.** These sessions may make a mess, given that dirt is involved. Any request for space should acknowledge this fact up front. Water needs to be available to moisten the soil. Jugs need to be assembled on tables and chairs around the tables are needed. Vinyl tablecloths or floor tarps could be used. Based on the space available, decide how many people can attend and determine if multiple sessions could be held. Consider having a sign-up system and potentially having separate sessions for adults and families/children.

**Enlist partners and volunteers.** As participants will likely need guidance and help with seed sowing, consider enlisting 1-5 volunteers to help with each session. Consider partnering with your local library, community center, garden club or other community organization to find volunteers and spread the word.

Adding a storytime with a book about seeds growing, or a related art activity could enhance the experience for children. (Here's a [helpful handout](#)).



### So, what supplies do you need?

**Containers to sow seeds.** We recommend using one gallon clean milk or water jugs (only the opaque ones, as the seeds need light). Although other containers can be used, they must have drainage at the bottom, provide a depth of about 3” of soil for the roots, and a clear top with small openings for water.

- **Tools to prepare the jugs** (sharp kitchen scissors work well): 4-6 holes need to be punched into the bottom of the jugs for drainage, and the jugs need to be cut in half, leaving a hinge near the handle.
- **Tape to seal the jugs** to keep moisture in and animals out (duct tape or painter's tape)
- **A way to label the jugs:** grease pencils are durable markers for writing on the outside of jugs; popsicle sticks can also be used with permanent markers.

**Potting soil** in which to sow the seeds. Choose a potting soil or potting soil mix, with or without fertilizer. We DO NOT recommend seed starting mixes (not enough nutrients for seedlings), those labelled 'moisture control' (too wet), indoor potting mixes, potting soil labeled 'weed free' (they include ingredients that prevent germination), garden soil or top soil. A 2 cubic foot bag of potting soil fills about 30 of the gallon milk jugs. Each jug requires about 6 cups of soil.

- **A sturdy container** to hold potting soil (such as a large trash can or trug)
- **Trowel** or other scooping tool to distribute soil.
- **Watering can** to moisten soil.

**Seeds.** Decide what seeds to provide. Try this short list of native perennial seeds that will likely bloom the first year, since quicker gratification will reinforce the use of this practice for both kids and adults. See hand out for more details on seed choices! Note: ANY seeds can be winter sown except those of tropical plants. But, seeds have different needs for “cold stratification” (length of exposure to temperatures at 33-40°F cold which helps them germinate). The seeds listed here require 30-60 days exposure to cold so *all these seeds should be sown by mid- February.*



- Blue vervain (*Verbena hastata*) (cold stratification requirement: 30 days)
- Black eyed susans (*Rudbeckia hirta*) (30 days)
- Anise hyssop (*Agastache Foeniculum*) (30 days)
- Butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) (30 days)
- Wild Petunia (*Ruellia humilis*) (60 days)
- Great Blue Lobelia (*Lobelia siphilitica*) (60 days)



- Zinnias “State Fair” are colorful and tall, and butterflies and pollinators are attracted to them. These seeds can be sown in winter and will sprout once the soil becomes warm enough. We include these non-native annuals on the list because they are easy to grow, germinate easily, and monarch butterflies are attracted to the bright colors and pollen in summer.

The Dirt December 2025  
Winter Sowing Workshop Preparation Handout

Supply List

<input type="checkbox"/> Milk or water jugs
<input type="checkbox"/> Containers to cut/punch holes in jugs
<input type="checkbox"/> Shovel or garden trowel
<input type="checkbox"/> Garden pencils and/or popcicle sticks for labels
<input type="checkbox"/> Potting soil or a coffee filter bag (10-20 jugs)
<input type="checkbox"/> Trowels or sponges to distribute potting soil
<input type="checkbox"/> Watering cans to monitor soil
<input type="checkbox"/> Water to monitor soil
<input type="checkbox"/> Sharp can or trowel to hold potting soil
<input type="checkbox"/> Seeds (suggestion: about 20/jug)
<input type="checkbox"/> Small containers to distribute seeds (small envelopes or plastic shot glasses)
<input type="checkbox"/> Vinyl labels/labels
<input type="checkbox"/> Signs for the floor
<input type="checkbox"/> Instructions for jug monitoring/seeding care

Planning

<input type="checkbox"/> Secure a space
<input type="checkbox"/> Advertise the event
<input type="checkbox"/> Create sign-up system

Instructions for care and planting out

Please jug outdoors, any light situation will work in winter but when temperatures rise, move them to where they will get morning sun and afternoon shade. Be sure to put them in a place where they will get rain and snow, and where they can drain.

Make sure the containers don't dry out. If little beads of water are on the inside of the jug, the soil moisture is OK. If needed, water gently through the top opening of the jug.

Open the jugs in spring after the seeds sprout and the danger of frost is past. When seedlings are about 2" tall, they are ready to be transplanted out, either into larger pots or into the soil. We suggest protecting them (until they are larger) from rabbits with a hardware cloth cage or mesh trash can.

**Small containers** to distribute seeds before they go into the jugs (estimate 20 seeds /container). Multi-colored disposable shot glasses could be pre-filled with seeds and set out for the folks planting seeds into containers.

**Decide on the timing of the session.** Take into account the cold stratification needs of the seeds and the last frost date (est. April 20 for Boston).

**Provide instructions** for monitoring the jugs and planting out the seedlings (See the helpful handout for written instructions ).

*Thanks to Michelle Trucksis, SPMG, who shared her expertise, and to the Facebook group "Winter Sowers-The Original".*

## Monthly Native Plant

### Shrubby cinquefoil (*Dasiphora fruticosa*)

Shrubby cinquefoil (*Dasiphora fruticosa*), also known as potentilla or bush cinquefoil, is a resilient, long-blooming shrub prized for its adaptability and ecological value. Native across the Northern Hemisphere including New England, it thrives in harsh conditions, tolerating drought, salt exposure, and poor soils. Its durability makes it an excellent choice for slope stabilization and low-maintenance urban or coastal landscapes.



From spring through fall, shrubby cinquefoil produces abundant saucer-shaped blooms in shades of yellow, white, pink, or orange. These nectar- and pollen-rich flowers attract a wide range of pollinators, including native bees, butterflies, and flies. The plant is especially important in New England, where the endangered Clayton's copper butterfly relies exclusively on *Dasiphora fruticosa* as its larval

host. Shrubby cinquefoil also serves as a host plant for specialist bees and 18 species of butterflies and moths.

Growing 1 to 4 feet tall depending on variety, this compact, finely textured shrub performs best in full sun and well-drained soils. Once established, it offers excellent drought tolerance and winter hardiness. There are several cultivars available at area nurseries including 'Goldfinger' (yellow), 'Abbotswood' (white with pink blush), and 'Pink Beauty' (light pink).

With its beauty, toughness, and ecological benefits, shrubby cinquefoil is a versatile and valuable addition to New England gardens committed to supporting pollinators and resilient landscapes.



## ***Monthly Tip***

### ***Plants for the Darkest Days of the Year***

As we approach the darkest days of the year— the Winter Solstice is Sunday, December 21 at 10:03 am— we tend to think of ways to brighten our homes. The holidays are close at hand as well and there are so many plants available to give or to keep for your own homes.

**Here are a few tips for those plentiful, winter indoor plants.**

**Amaryllis (Amaryllis belladonna).** Amaryllis can be grown pre-potted or given as a bulb to be planted later. Amaryllis need bright sunlight and water to produce large flowers on tube-like stems. It takes about 6-10 weeks from planting to bloom. Planted bulbs can be brought into bloom next year by cutting back the faded flowers and letting the foliage grow. They then can be placed in a very sunny window or brought outside for the summer. Bring the plants inside in late August or early September, place them in a dark area like a cellar, and do not water for about 8 weeks. Place the potted plant in a sunny window, re-pot if the bulb is too snug in the pot, water and add a little balanced fertilizer. The bulbs should re-bloom in about 6-10 weeks— and they can last for years!

Amaryllis bulbs dipped in wax will bloom but will not re-bloom due to lack of root development.





**Cyclamen (*Cyclamen persicum*)**. This indoor cyclamen (zone 9-11) prefers bright light and cool temperatures. They are grown from a corm and need to be watered from below so they will not rot. They are a long-lived plant and can live for decades with proper care.

**Holiday Cactus. Christmas Cactus (*Schlumbergera x buckleyi*) and Thanksgiving Cactus (*Schlumbergera truncata*)** are house plants that bloom in the winter months. The Christmas cactus has rounded scalloped leaves and blooms late December through early February and has an inconsistent bloom cycle from year to year. It is not sold as often as the Thanksgiving cactus which has pointed projections on its leaves and has a consistent bloom cycle from year to year. Thanksgiving cactus blooms from mid-November to mid-December. They like a sunny, cool location; water when the top of the soil is dry.

There is also an Easter cactus (*Hatiora gaertneri*) or (*Epiphylopsis gaertneri*) which blooms in April.

**Lemon Cypress (*Hesperocyparis macrocarpa*), formerly (*Cupressus macrocarpa*)**, is sold at the holidays as a decorative evergreen tree (zone 7-10). The tree gives off a lemon scent when touched. Lemon Cypress needs bright light and consistent moisture. As

with most house plants, never let Lemon Cypress sit in standing water. They can live as a house plant for years, provided they are potted up into larger pots every two years and given sufficient moisture and sunlight. Turning the plant every few months will keep the tree bushy on all sides.



**Paperwhite Narcissus (*Narcissus papyraceus*)**. Paperwhites are usually purchased as bulbs and can be placed in a vessel of your choosing. They need only be placed in a container and held in place with a few pebbles and water added to start the growing process. It takes between 3-6 weeks for the bulbs to bloom. These bulbs are not reliable to be forced into bloom again and can be composted after bloom.

**Poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*)**. It is part of the spurge family and likes bright light with consistent moisture; this is due to the medium in which they are planted— which tends to dry out quickly— and the temperatures inside the home. The poinsettia originated in Mexico, and is a shrub; the red “flowers” are bracts that turn red in response to increased hours of darkness. The flowers are the small yellow parts in the center of the red bracts. Poinsettias do not like cold temperatures and wind. Take care to cover the plants when bringing them from the store to the car and the car to the house. In the house, place them away from drafts.



**Rosemary (*Salvia rosmarinus*)** formerly called *Rosmarinus officinalis*, Rosemary is a woody sub-shrub grown reliably outdoors in zones 8-10; some varieties grow in zone 7. This fragrant herb, usually seen clipped into a tree-shape during the holidays, can last for years. Rosemary needs sunlight, consistent watering and cool temperatures. Do not let the soil dry out completely but conversely do not let it sit in standing water. Potted rosemary plants can be placed outside in a sunny location, once hardened off, in the spring. If you notice the leaves turning red during the hardening off period, place it in a shady location for a few days. Return the rosemary plant to the house by early October or before the first true frost is due.

There are many other plants to brighten up the darkest days of the year; pick up one or two to add to the greening of the winter months.

## ***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: Kathleen Devericks. LMG
- Featured How-To: Nancy Kressin, PMG
- Monthly Native Plant: Hadley Berkowitz, PMG
- Monthly Tip: Kathi Griepy, LMG

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

- Chickadee, by Lynne Larson, PMG
- Tower Hill, First four by Tower Hill; last photo Kathleen Devericks, LMG
- Winter Sowing, all photos by Nancy Kressin, PMG
- Shubby cinquefoil: First photo, Univ. of North Carolina; Second photo Oregon State Univ.
- Amaryllis, Univ. of Nebraska Lincoln
- Lemon cypress Grump Tree, Trader Joe's
- Rosemary, by Gardener's Path
- Paperwhites, by Lynne Larson. PMG

### ***Editorial Staff***

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  - Copywriters: Madeline Chamberlain, SPMG, and Carolyn Alessi, CMG
  - Circulation: Nancy Kedersha, PMG, and Chip deVillafranca, CMG
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## ***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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