The Dirt: February Gardening Resources & Tips

1 message

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Gardening Resources & Tips from the MMGA

February 2026
Love Your Winter Gardens!

February is often about love expressed with roses and chocolates, but if you want to impress a gardener, show them stems and seed pods! Come winter, we want to look outside and still see a garden, even if it is less about color or smell and more a study on structure, contrast, and if we are thinking interdependently, shelter. A winter garden lets one take in the shape of things and can guide spring planting. If you haven't already, take photos in February, when plants reveal their interesting forms, then explore how to make it more beautiful and functional for humans and critters alike. Planting for winter interest makes Jack Frost a beloved friend!

In this month's issue of The Dirt…

- Featured Garden: Check out thriving native gardens at Mass Audubon Blue Hills Trailside Native Plant and Rain Gardens.

- Featured How-To: No soil? No problem. Grow Hydroponically!
- Monthly Tip: The planting season has started, really.

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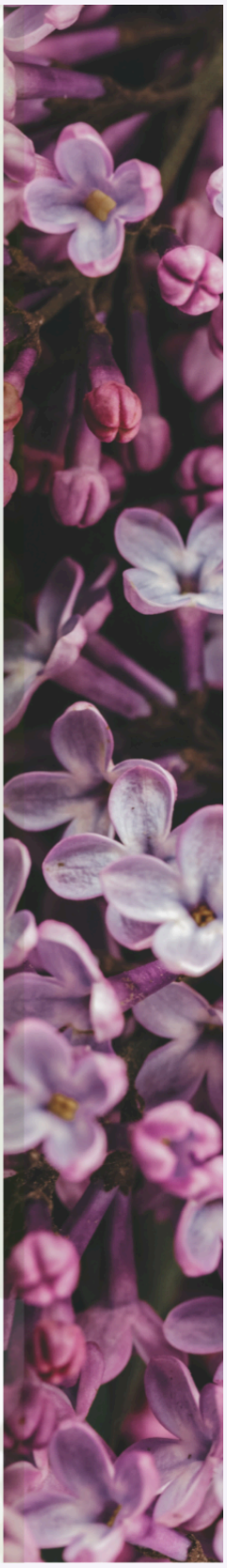
Massachusetts Master Gardener Association Presents

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

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Welcome, Class of 2026!

The Massachusetts Master Gardener Association welcomed 93 new students this year! We held our orientation on January 10th, and it was impressive to see so much experience, talent, and enthusiasm in one group. Students come from all of our regions (north, south, central, and Boston/metro west), have diverse professional backgrounds, and share a dynamic mix of gardening interests. There are now 17 pods of students led by **supportive Class Assistants** and Class Leader Ken Gillon, and everyone looks forward to a year of learning and growth.

Featured Monthly Garden

Mass Audubon Blue Hills
Trailside Native Plant and Rain Gardens
1904 Canton Ave Milton, MA 02186. 617-333-0690
bluehills@massaudubon.org

Author Becky Simonds is a PMG, 2014. Growing up in NJ, her mother had a flower garden and her father grew vegetables. Her love for nature grew from experiences in nature, and gardening became one of them. Her professional work was in education and non-profit work, and spending free time in nature was an easy choice. In 1997, she and her husband moved to a property in Milton with lawns flanked by garden beds and a wooded hillside. In 2012, she joined the Milton Garden Club which spurred her to join MMGA. Through the Garden Club she became involved in reclaiming the gardens at Trailside. In 2017, the Native Plant and Rain Gardens became approved MMGA gardening sites and Becky began her Garden Project Co-Manager position at Trailside.

Gardening for The Greater Good: Trailside Native Plant and Rain Gardens

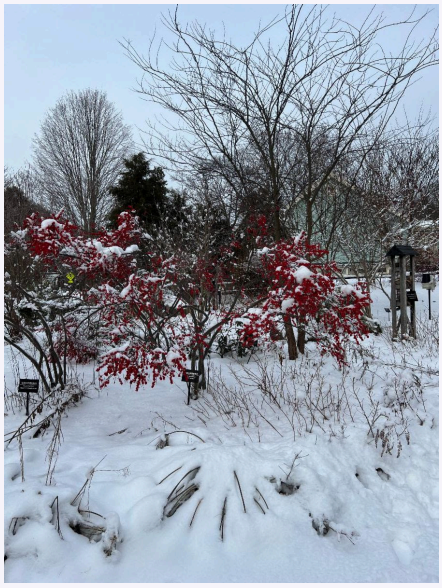
The Mass Audubon Blue Hills Trailside Native Plant and Rain Gardens, on Route 138 in Milton at the foot of Great Blue Hill, represent an exercise in ecological restoration and public education. Managed through a robust partnership between the Milton Garden Club (MGC), the Massachusetts Master Gardener Association (MMGA), and Mass Audubon in collaboration with the DCR, this site has transitioned from a neglected landscape into flourishing gardens and a "living laboratory" for native horticulture.

The evolution of these gardens began in 2011, born from the Milton Garden Club applying for a grant and a desire to transform a park gateway garden dominated by an 8-to-10-foot monoculture of *Artemisia vulgaris* (Mugwort). Through the grant from the Garden Club of America's "Partners 4 Plants" (P4P), a program that pairs local GCA Clubs with state and federal land managers (150 acres or more) to monitor rare, endangered, medicinal or invasive plants, the creation of the Native Plant Garden commenced. In collaboration with professionals from the DCR, the Trailside Museum and the

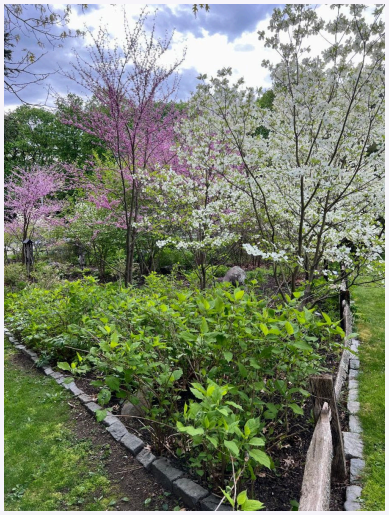
Arnold Arboretum, the Milton Garden Club reclaimed the site. Under the design leadership of MGC member Carol Stocker, former *Boston Globe* Garden Columnist, the garden was envisioned not merely as a collection of plants, but as a functional ecosystem.

In 2014, the project expanded to include a rain garden which serves a dual purpose: mitigating storm runoff from the museum's roof and demonstrating the efficacy of "wet feet" perennials in managed landscapes. Native plants adapted to fluctuating moisture can absorb runoff, improve filtration, and reduce the impact of stormwater on landscapes. The footprint has grown, with MMGA volunteers and others reclaiming gardens in the outdoor animal exhibit areas in 2024-5, filling them with natives and local students swapping out a garden along the museum's foundation with a new native plant garden in 2025 as a service project. All new gardens contain many plant volunteers sourced from the Native Plant and Rain Gardens as well as plants purchased from reliable sources.

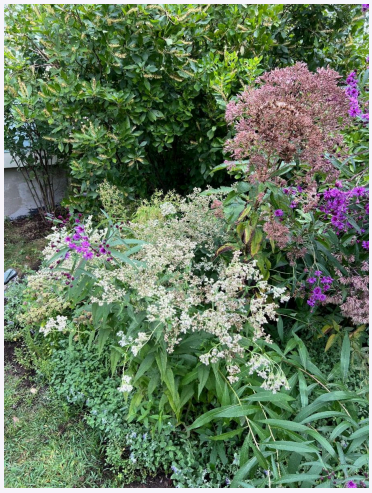
The gardens include more than 65 native plants and 28 shrubs and trees that have co-evolved with nature, providing for biodiversity and sustainable gardening. The plant palette was selected to provide four-season interest while supporting native wildlife.



In winter, the striking red berries of winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*) sustain birds when resources are scarce. Spring brings white bracts of flowering dogwoods (*Cornus spp.*) lining the borders, followed by the ethereal blue stars of Amsonia (*hubrichtii*) on slender stems with fine, feathery foliage— later turning brilliant chartreuse and orange in autumn. Summer announces itself with trumpet honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*) climbing split-rail fences, drawing hummingbirds to tubular scarlet blooms, while summersweet *(Clethra alnifolia*) releases its intoxicating spicy fragrance from dense white spires, a true pollinator magnet. Annabelle hydrangeas (*Hydrangea arborescens*) cascade in creamy waves beneath trees, and a fragrant sumac (*Rhus aromatica*) thicket provides dense cover and berries for birds.



Other reliable performers include Viburnums maple leaf (*V. acerifolium*), 'Emerald Luster' and Arrowwood (*V. dentatum*), Eastern redbuds (*Ceris canadensis*), Purple and American Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis* and *H. virginiana*), Joe Pye Weed (*Eutrochium purpureum*), Virginia sweetspire (*Itea virginica*), red columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*), 'David' phlox, Heliopsis spp., inkberry *(Ilex glabra*), low- and highbush blueberries (*Vaccinium spp.*), Canada goldenrod (*Solidago canadensis*) varieties, wild geranium (*Geranium maculatum*), roundleaf groundsel (*Packera obovata*), giant Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum biflorum*), wild strawberry (*Fragaria virginiana*), trout lily (*Erythronium americanum*), mayapple (*Podophyllum peltatum*), and red-twig dogwood (*Cornus sericea*).



The Rain Garden hosts wetland-tolerant species like New York ironweed (V*ernonia noveboracensis*), mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum muticum*), milkweed and butterfly weed (*Asclepias spp.*), green-and-gold (*Chrysogonum virginianum*), blue flag iris (*Iris versicolor*), pink turtlehead (*Chelone lyonii*), and compact 'Little Joe' Joe Pye weed (*Eupatorium asteraceae* Little Joe). All plants bear interpretive signage with a QR code linking to detailed species profiles and garden history.

Many natives have medicinal significance, rooted in Indigenous tradition: boneset (*Eupatorium perfoliatum*) for fevers, influenza; feverfew for inflammation; blue vervain (*Verbena hastata*) for nervous system support; purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) for immune enhancement; bee balm (*Monarda spp.*) for digestive teas and antiseptics; Joe Pye weed for fevers; chokeberry (*Aronia spp.*) as an antioxidant powerhouse; and Culver's root (*Veronicastrum virginicum*) for digestion.

These gardens embody transformational ecology and sustainable practices prevail—we use no synthetic herbicides or pesticides, only organic composted bark mulch, homemade compost, and leaf mulch for weed suppression and soil health. Minimal fall cleanup preserves seedheads for food, pithy stems for overwintering insects, and leaf litter for fireflies and other detritivores. This past

spring, Mass Audubon Day volunteers installed native groundcovers like bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*), wineleaf cinquefoil (*Potentilla tridentata*), wild blue violets, and self-heal (*Prunella vulgaris*) as lawn alternatives, demonstrating low-maintenance, biodiversity-boosting options.

Native plants are foundational to robust food webs. Solitary nesting bees are 98% of the bee population benefitting greatly from pollen-rich blooms and nesting habitat. Two bee condos containing drilled logs enhance local populations, as these fuzzy-bodied pollinators transport more pollen than social bees.

The Trailside gardens offer inspiration and proof-of-concept. They remind us that intentional, native-focused design combats biodiversity loss, plot by plot. Visit these evolving spaces to observe, volunteer, or gather ideas for your own landscapes— true stewardship begins with working alongside nature.

Featured How-To
Home-grown Hydroponics

Author Jean Theurkauf, PMG, a retired web developer, completed the Master Gardening Training Course in 2018. She has volunteered at various MMGA Project Gardens over the years and is currently managing teams of gardeners at three outreach garden programs at medium security prisons in Massachusetts. When she is not gardening, or programming, she runs a fiber studio (Thread Gardens) in Lowell.

What is ‘Hydroponics’? It is basically the practice of growing plants without soil. Plants have few requirements: water, oxygen, light and nutrients. If these minimal needs are met, we can grow plants. Soil is not required! By growing plants in a nutrient solution, we can maximize our use of space.

It's very easy to get started with hydroponic growing. There are several prefab hydroponic setups on the market that take all of the guess work out of growing, but these systems can be expensive and inflexible. When evaluating prefab systems, be suspicious of marketing claims and manufactured images, and read the online reviews.

In truth, hydroponic growing systems can be easily built from equipment that’s available in big box stores and Amazon. This article outlines a couple of these smaller, inexpensive DIY approaches that can easily be implemented by home gardeners.

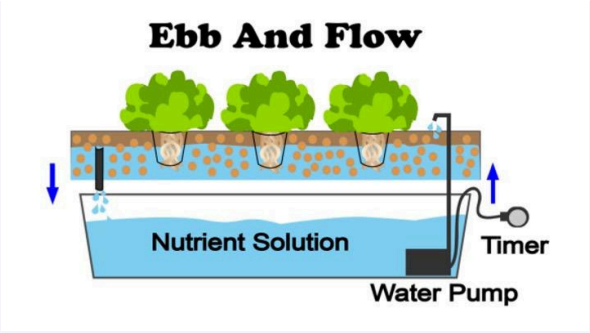
Light requirements for hydroponic growing are the same as for traditional soil-based growing. *LED grow lights* and *timers* are easily obtained at the big box stores.

All the systems will require some kind of *reservoir* to hold the *nutrient solution*. Keep in mind that the small systems can only handle small plants. If you want to grow things other than leafy greens and some annual flowers, you’ll need to obtain larger buckets to use for reservoirs.

It's very important that the reservoir system has some means of blocking light, otherwise you will grow algae as well as plants. Either cover the reservoir with opaque paper or paint it.

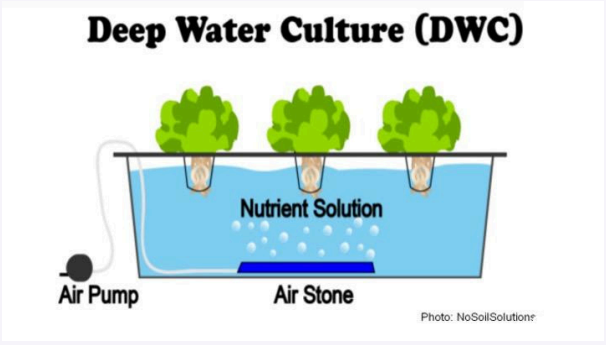
In addition to lights and nutrient buckets, each of the systems described below requires some kind of media to support the plants and allow their roots to grow. *Compressed cocoa coir* or *rockwool* (melted and extruded basalt rock, often used in insulation) can be used to start seeds or root cuttings and will support early root growth. Note that rockwool can’t be composted.

The **Ebb and Flow Technique** (also known as Flood and Drain) is the most complicated of the three systems covered in this article.



In this arrangement, seedlings in rock wool or coir are set in a tray with drainage holes drilled into the bottom. The tray is filled with coarse material such as *hydroton* (lightweight expanded clay aggregate), and sits over a bin filled with nutrient solution. Hydroton, available online and at hydroponic growing stores, holds moisture, but has very large pore spaces, so roots have access to water and oxygen.

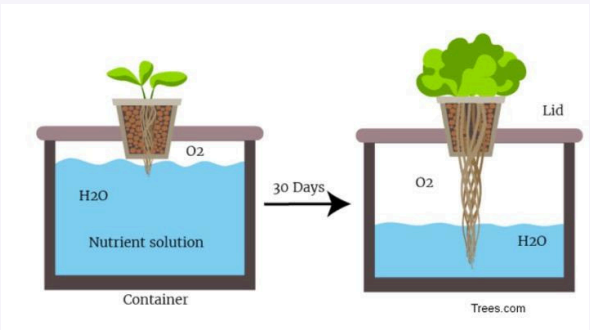
The nutrient solution is stored in a reservoir and is pumped up into the tray by an *aquarium pump* on a *timer* to flood it periodically (every 15 minutes or so). The solution is only pumped long enough to partially fill the tray holding the plants and hydroton. Once the pump stops, the nutrient solution drains slowly back to the reservoir, bathing roots as it drains. The clay pebbles hold moisture until the next pump cycle.



An even easier setup is the **Deep-Water Culture (DWC)** method.

The coir or rockwool with the sprouted seeds or rooted cuttings are set in *netpots* which are slotted baskets. The baskets suspend the plants in the nutrient solution; the slots allow the roots through the confines of the basket. The netpots are suspended directly in the nutrient solution which is oxygenated with an *airstone* and *airpump* (available in aquarium supply stores).

A DWC system can easily be set up with a five-gallon bucket for the nutrient solution, a styrofoam raft or lid with holes drilled to hold the pots. Cover the top of the netpots with stones or tinfoil to block the light.



However, the simplest and easiest way to get started in hydroponic gardening is with a passive system, known as the **Kratky System**.

There is no need for an air stone and pump. The plants in their netpots are suspended in the nutrient solution as with the Deep-Water Culture system. However, instead of oxygenating the water with an air pump, as the plants grow

and take up water through the roots, the water level drops. This gap provides oxygen to the roots.

At this very small scale, leafy greens can easily be grown in mason jars. If you want to grow fruiting plants or anything that will take more time and will have a large root system, you will probably want to get a Deep Water Culture system set up.

Here are the steps to setting up a simple **Mason Jar Kratky System**, suitable for lettuces, basil and other small herbs and flowers.

Materials:

- Mason Jar (32 ounce, wide neck)
- Heavy paper or tin foil to wrap the jar
- Seeds (start with basil or lettuce)
- Light source (grow lights or bright window)
- Net Pot (3 inch) *
- Rockwool cubes or compressed coir *
- Nutrients *

*Available on Amazon or in Hydroponic supply stores

Steps:

1. Soak a rockwool cube in water to saturate it. Sow seeds in the rockwool cubes and put the cubes into the netpot.
2. Set the netpot into the mouth of the mason jar filled with water just up to the bottom of the netpot and cover with cling wrap. This will keep the rockwool moist.
3. Cover with heavy paper to keep the light out, otherwise you will also grow a nice healthy crop of algae.
4. Set the jars in a nice warm space till the seeds germinate. Once they germinate, remove the cling wrap and place under grow lights or in a bright sunny window.
5. Continue to grow the seedlings until the first true leaves emerge, making sure the rockwool stays moist. Replace the water with nutrient solution (following the instructions for the product), filling the jar to just above the bottom of the net pot.As the seedlings grow, the nutrient solution will draw down, affording the roots oxygen.

The nutrient solution can be topped up to no more than one-half the height of the jar until final harvest or until the roots give out. Enjoy your bounty!

Monthly Tip
Starting the Season in Snow

February offers many opportunities.

With snow covering the land, the topography of the land is evident. The forms of the trees and shrubs stand out. The black and white, the light and dark, gives a person a different way of looking at the landscape. Take advantage of this different, sparse way of observation to improve your gardens.

It is also the time for starting certain seeds.

Some seeds need cold stratification, the horticultural process of exposing seeds to a period of cold— typically lower than 35 degrees Fahrenheit— and moist conditions that break their natural dormancy. This allows them to germinate properly in the spring. This often breaks down tough seed coats, allowing moisture and gases to enter. Why is this cold period necessary in some seeds? It stops seeds from germinating in the autumn. In the autumn the seedling would have no chance of surviving the freezing temperatures; the period of cold stratification ensures they germinate in the spring and have a growing season to establish a strong root system and a healthy plant.

This period of cold stratification can be achieved in a few ways.

- Seeds can be sprinkled on the soil in the area they should grow, come early spring.
- Poppies, however, are often thrown on the, hopefully, last snow of the season and will germinate. This gives a random scattering of plants, some close together some further apart.
- The seeds can be mixed with damp sand or potting mix in lightly covered pots and placed in a refrigerator for a few weeks. This process could be extended depending on the plant or tree seeds involved.

- Seeds can be sown in pots and placed outside. Chicken wire or other material covering the pots helps to prevent animals from digging or eating seedlings once germinated. This could also be done in gallon milk jugs or

sealable plastic bags. When doing the jugs or bags there must be drainage; this can be achieved by poking holes in the containers. Special attention must be given to the seedlings when they emerge. They need moisture and ventilation until it's time to take them out of the bags/jugs and plant them in the garden. As with any seedling, make sure you safeguard them against critters that like to eat tender new growth.

A few seeds that need a winter stratification to germinate are- Milkweed (*Asclepias*), Lupine (*Lupinus*), Poppies (*Papavera*), Columbine (*Aquilegia*), Foxglove (*Digitalis*), Larkspur (*Consolida ajacis*) formerly (*Delphinium ajacis*) annual, Delphinium (*Delphinium elatum*) perennial, Black-eyed-Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*), Coneflower (*Echinacea*). See what you get below!

As we are in the depths of winter, here is a reminder about pruning. Most trees and shrubs should be pruned when they are actively growing; this helps the tree to heal. There are some trees that need to be pruned when they are dormant. Fruit trees, like apples and pears, should be pruned in mid-winter to promote healthy spring growth. Other trees that have the sap running in the spring, like maples— think maple syrup— birch and walnuts should be pruned in midwinter before the sap starts to run.

Any trees that have damage, especially ones that have branches dangling that could pose a threat to people or houses, need to be pruned immediately, no

matter the time of year.

Trees that are touching or close to power lines that are damaged should not be touched. They present a danger. Do not attempt to remove the branches if still attached to trees that are in or near the utility lines. If the branches have downed the power line, stay at least 30 feet away from the downed line. Call the local electric utility provider as soon as you notice damage or 911.

February 1 is only 48 days from the Vernal Equinox and only 20 days from February 28. Spring will soon be here!

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**

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**

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

Credits

Featured Articles & Columns

- Featured Garden: Becky Simonds, PMG
- Featured How-To: Jean Theurkauf, PMG
- Monthly Tip: Kathi Gariepy, LMG

Photos (in order of appearance)

- Echinacea in snow, by Iowa State University
- Class of 2026, Ken Gillon, SPMG
- Blue Hills Trailside Gardens (all pics), by Becky Simonds, PMG
- Hydroponics (first pic), by Univ. of Minnesota
- Hydroponics, sketches, by Jean Theurkauf
- Hydroponics, mason jars, by Kratsky Method of Hydroponics
- Apples trees in winter at Drumlin Farm, by Lynne Larson, PMG
- Seeds in snow, by Garden Culture Magazine
- Winter sowing, by Nancy Kressin, LMG
- Flower collage, by Lynne Larson, PMG
- Winter trail, by Mass Audubon, Broad Meadow Brook

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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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