

The Dirt: January Gardening Resources & Tips

1 message

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Gardening Resources & Tips from the MMGA

January 2026 New Dreams, Auld Aquaintance



What can we say about January that hasn't been said before? It's a new year, which means new seed catalogs and ambitious dreams about the gorgeous gardens ahead. This year, you will absolutely get the grape vines pruned, add another raised bed, try that new squash, master those botanical names, and weed better than ever. We are with you in that early excitement and share some ideas for future garden success. Happy New Year to all, and may old acquaintances meet again under a warm sun, ready to embark on making winter dreams come true!

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

- Featured Garden: MGs share their care of two historical gardens at the Wellesley Historical Society.
- Featured How-To: Choose seeds with confidence and increase your fun!
- Monthly Tip: January offers a time to see the old as new.

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Featured Monthly Garden

Wellesley Historical Society Gardens

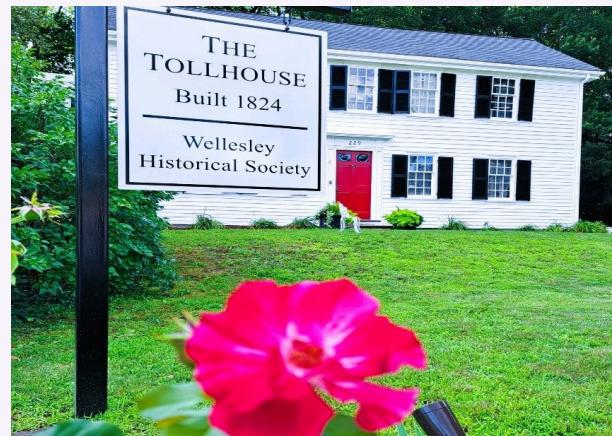
323 Washington Street

Author Pat Conry has been a flower gardener since childhood and loves the garden year round– its seasonal colors and textures, the birds and bees it attracts, the process of figuring out what and where. Over the last 20 years, her garden has evolved into a combination of sun and shade perennials, colorful annuals including dahlias and canna lilies, and flowering shrubs and trees that almost take care of themselves. In 2021, Pat completed the Master Gardener Certification Program. In 2025, she and gardening friends Teresa Ettinger (WHS Landscape Director) and Helga Bussema (CMG 2026) launched a plan to care for the Wellesley Historical Society Gardens. These gardens (Toll House, Main House) were approved as a MMGA project garden.

Tollhouse Garden

[229 Washington Street, Wellesley](#)

In 1975, the Dadmun-McNamara House (aka The Tollhouse) was purchased and moved to its current location, to make way for the expansion of the Worcester Turnpike, now Route 9. This house is now home to The Tollhouse Shop, which is full of vintage items donated by residents and sold for the benefit of the Wellesley Historical Society.



Since 1975, the Tollhouse Garden has been evolving. The Wellesley Garden Club initially began placing plants and shrubs as they became available. Evelyn Adams, a renowned and beloved local gardener, donated woodland plantings from her own gardens, and numbers of perennials - geraniums, Virginia blue bells, trout lily, Solomon seal, May apple plus a variety of early bulbs, that still survive in shaded areas. Many of her other plants now reside in Garden in the Woods in Framingham.

The Hunnewell family, Wellesley's town founders, have long been passionate about horticulture and donated plants from their greenhouse as a slice of town history. In addition, they donated plants they sourced from faraway parts of the world and propagated here in Wellesley (rhododendron and Hatfield yew for example).



Over the last 30+ years, with the Wellesley Garden Club's collaboration, the garden continued to evolve. Historical landscape architects were hired, and club members brought shovels full of plants from their own beds.

The site itself has also evolved over time. Removal of trees has changed exposure, and the varying levels of interest and materials has created what can best be described today as an English country garden.

In the spring of 2024, the Wellesley Historical Society invested significant funds to open the property to enhance exposure, and installed new shrubs and perennials to further beautify the site.

The Tollhouse Garden now serves as a meeting place for ongoing Wellesley Historical Society tours, and town residents and visitors enjoy its beauty including the frequent visits from pollinators.



Main House Garden [323 Washington Street, Wellesley](https://www.wellesleyhistoricalsociety.org/main-house-garden)

These gardens surround the house and border the entire property, and are filled with sun and shade plantings in historically soft tones of dusty rose, pale yellow, and apricot, enhanced by whites and greens, as well as shapes and textures.



The gardens have been layered to bloom and change seasonally. They contain varieties of rhododendrons, hollies, hydrangeas and boxwoods, complemented by foxglove, roses, heuchera, ferns, hosta, astilbe, brunnera, lady's mantle, iris, lillies, obedient plants, coreopsis and hyssop.



Town garden clubs have donated a pink-blooming dogwood that stands at the front corner nearest the post office, a silver birch sited along the back drive near the church, front porch container urns, and a butterfly garden that is scheduled to be installed in Spring 2026. Going forward, changes and enhancements are anticipated as this garden matures.

Massachusetts Master Gardeners 2025

May found us at the Tollhouse for our first efforts toward bringing this garden back into shape. Over the summer and into the fall, we pruned the roses, rhododendrons, oak leaf and mophead hydrangeas, peonies and bleeding hearts, and we pulled out masses of May apple, lily of the valley and those charming orange day lillies....and yes

WEEDS. We edged the gardens, and re-sited beebalm, salvia, catmint, Foxglove, and astilbe, and we kept the milkweed happy and the lavender blooming! In finishing, we tossed a handful of perennial seeds and can't wait to see what comes up.

As the season changed and fall arrived, September found us up the street at the newly planted Main House Garden. Here we lightly deadheaded and weeded, and enjoyed the beauty of this location. Next season we look to become a key resource as this garden expands and evolves.



Massachusetts Master
Gardener Association Presents

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- Stop and Smell the Lilacs
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To learn more and sign up, click to visit
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knowhow@massmastergardeners.org

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Featured How-To
Seed Selection - Throw Darts or Choose Purposefully?

Author Gretel Anspach is a Trustee of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, a Lifetime Master Gardener with the Massachusetts Master Gardener Association, and a recently-retired systems engineer for Raytheon. She won the MMGA Lifetime Achievement Award in 2016. Gretel established and maintains a 20,000 square foot food production garden that has provided fresh produce to the Marlboro and Maynard Food Pantries for the last ten years. Her primary interest and focus is always in the science behind horticulture.



Our mailboxes are filling up with beautiful seed catalogs, promising cultivars more beautiful, productive and robust than ever before. How are we to choose? It's ok to just leaf through until you see something you can't resist, or fling the catalog into the air and order something from whatever page falls open. Throwing darts works too. All valid approaches.

I tend to overthink things, and my aim with darts is notoriously bad. If you're like me, I suggest a different approach. The first step is to decide what you're trying to accomplish with these plants.

Flowers all summer long or just until you leave for the Cape? Most productive beans or weirdest looking ones? Supporting wildlife, and if so, which wildlife? And so forth.

One of the questions to consider first is whether you want to be able to save seeds from cultivars and have them breed true. If so, restrict your selections to open pollinated plants, since hybrids won't breed true. Open pollinated plants are either marked with OP, heirloom, or nothing; hybrids say hybrid, F1 or F2.

Based on what your other goals are, here are some sources that come in handy to decide what to get...

The best!

All-America Selections runs a program which allows growers to recommend a particular cultivar be trialed against similar cultivars. If accepted, those cultivars are grown together in trial gardens across the country (including at the Elm Bank Garden run by Mass Horticultural



Society in Wellesley). If the trialed variety outperforms the other cultivars everywhere, it's given an AAS designation. I've grown Asian Delight bok choy for years based on the AAS tag and it's a real performer.

Other recommendations are more subjective but still worth considering. Cornell University's **Vegetable Varieties for Gardeners** allows people to submit their review of vegetables they grew that year including overall rating, taste, yield and ease/reliability, along with a text review which is often the most helpful. I haven't found an equally useful review site for ornamentals, but **gardenia.net** describes a large range of cultivars and suggests alternatives.

The most useful for the environment

Gardeners are increasingly interested in supporting pollinators in our environment. It turns out that some of our local pollinators aren't in trouble; the population of some like *Bombus impatiens* (a bumblebee) is actually increasing. Consider taking advantage of Dr. Robert Gegeear's work on locally endangered pollinators and plant the flowers that specifically support them. You can find the list [here](#).

Native plants preferred by imperiled bee and butterfly species in New England. List created by Dr. Robert J Gegeear, UMASS Dartmouth (rgegear@umassd.edu; gegeearlab.weebly.com).

Pollen Sources			BLOOM TIME									'At risk' species		
LATIN NAME	COMMON NAME	PLANT TYPE	SUN	SOIL	Early	Mid	Late	BUMBLEBEES			BUTTERFLIES	OTHER BEES		
					M	A	M	J	J	A				
<i>Hypericum ascyron</i>	Great St. John's-wort	Herb. perenn.	Full-Part	Med									NA	
<i>Hypericum majus</i>	Greater St. John's-wort	Herb. perenn.	Full-Part	Med, Wet									NA	
<i>Hypericum punctatum</i>	Spotted St. John's-wort	Herb. perenn.	Full-Part	Med, Dry									NA	
<i>Hypericum prolificum</i>	Shrubby St. John's-wort	Shrub	Full-Part	Med, Dry									NA	
<i>Rosa blanda</i>	Smooth rose	Shrub	Full-Part	Med, Dry									NA	
<i>Rosa carolina</i>	Carolina rose	Shrub	Full-Part	Wet, Med, Dry									NA	
<i>Rosa nitida</i>	Shining rose	Shrub	Full-Part	Wet, Med									NA	
<i>Rosa palustris</i>	Swamp rose	Shrub	Full-Part	Med									NA	
<i>Rosa virginiana</i>	Virginia rose	Shrub	Full-Part	Med									NA	
<i>Rubus odoratus</i>	Flowering raspberry	Shrub	Full-Part	Med									NA	
<i>Salix discolor</i>	Pussy willow (male)	Shrub	Full	Med									NA	
<i>Salix humilis</i>	Prairie willow (male)	Shrub	Full-Part	Med, Dry									NA	
<i>Salix lucida</i>	Shining willow (male)	Shrub	Full-Part	Med, wet									NA	
<i>Salix occidentalis</i>	Dwarf prairie willow (male)	Shrub	Full-Part	Med, Dry									NA	
<i>Salix petiolaris</i>	Meadow willow (male)	Shrub/sm tree	Full-Part	Med									NA	
<i>Salix bebbiana</i>	Bebb willow (male)	Shrub	Full-Part	Dry, Med, Wet									NA	
<i>Spiraea alba</i>	White meadowsweet	Shrub	Full-Part	Wet, Med									NA	
<i>Spiraea tomentosa</i>	Steeplebush	Shrub	Full-Part	Wet									NA	
Nectar sources					BLOOM TIME									
LATIN NAME	COMMON NAME	PLANT TYPE	SUN	SOIL	Early	Mid	Late	BUMBLEBEES			BUTTERFLIES	OTHER BEES		
					M	A	M	J	J	A				
BY: Weebly					Hairy woodmint	Herb. perenn.	Part-Shade	Med, Dry						

And then there's the rest of the food web. Research conducted by Dr. Doug Tallamy indicates that (1) it takes 6000-9000 caterpillars to rear one clutch of 5 chickadees, (2) most of those caterpillars come off native plants, and (3) 14% of plants are responsible for supporting about 90% of insect life. Other research suggests that the number is closer to 5% than 14%. Growing some of those keystone plants is a nice thing to do for the environment. And you can find that list [here](#).

Finally, the best way to deal with “bad bugs” in your garden is to attract the “good bugs” that feed on them. Many of these beneficial insects drink nectar as adults, so including plants that are attractive to them increases your chances of introducing lacewings, hoverflies etc. to your garden. Even the ones who are carnivorous at all life stages, like ladybugs, seem to have plant preferences. There is a list of plants to consider for that [here](#).

The toughest

None of this selection process does any good if your plants immediately succumb to whatever diseases are rampaging the neighborhood this year. Many growers try to breed disease resistance into their cultivars, with varying degrees of success. While there are cultural practices that can help with disease progression, like drip irrigation rather than overhead and increasing air flow, starting with disease resistant plants can help a lot. Here’s a source for [disease resistant vegetable cultivars](#) and one for [disease resistant ornamentals](#). Note that since the diseases evolve every year, it’s worth checking these lists every year to find the most disease resistant.



Photos by Janna Beckerman

(Left) Common hollyhock is very susceptible to rust. Other members of the mallow family are less susceptible, such as checkerblooms (Sidalcea).



Having gone through this whole process, you should also consider that you might not want to buy seeds. (Travesty!) Seeds are the cheapest way to produce a lot of plants, and the ones that you can sow directly in the garden are definitely worth it (marigolds, squash, etc.) But many of the plants we grow require a longer season than that, so if you want to start impatiens or peppers from seeds, you need to start them inside in February or March respectively, and not set them out till late May or early June. That means tending these delicate little creatures as they grow larger and larger, taking up more and more space and time. Absent a greenhouse, plan on giving up your garage or dining room for a couple of months or else skip the seeds and buy seedlings!

Monthly Tip

Looking Out, Looking Forward

January is a time to reflect, to take stock of all the great things that have happened in the garden and to see how things can be improved.

Maybe you would like to look out your window and see more wildlife. Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*) with its bright red berries, the lovely twisted and turned branches of a high bush blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*), possibly the branches of the spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*) with oval red berries, or the upright branches of the American beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*) with rounded clusters of purple berries...these all contribute form and a little bit of color during the darkest days of winter.



They also feed the birds—catbirds, bluebirds, cedar waxwings, mockingbirds, cardinals, juncos, chickadees, tufted titmouse, white-breasted nuthatch and bluejays will visit the yards with a few well-placed shrubs. If you are putting out a bird feeder, remember that birds need cover for their safety, a grouping of evergreen shrubs or trees will help. The native dogwood (*Benthamidia*) with clusters of red, oval berries or the blackish berries of the serviceberry (*Amelanchier arborea*—downy serviceberry or *Amelanchier canadensis*—shadblow serviceberry) or even the bright red clusters of the American holly (*Ilex opaca*) all add to winter interest.



Make sure to leave flower stalks of purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) or mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum muticum*) or one of the many tall sedums, like (*Hylosteum spectabile* ‘Autumn Joy’). They will add winter interest, feed the birds, and provide places for overwintering pollinators.

Inside the house, make sure not to over-water house plants and plants brought inside to overwinter. Most plants, during the shorter daylight hours of winter, require less water. Over-watering at this time of year can lead to soft, elongated new growth and become the perfect vegetation for spider mites, aphids, and white fly. If you have a flying insect problem, try

using yellow sticky traps. No pesticides are involved, just an adhesive like a tree resin. The color is also key; the bright yellow attracts them. They get stuck and no more insects.

Take a few moments on a chilly, possibly snowy, January day and think of what you would like. Gather the seed and plant catalogues and, hopefully, some gift certificates to favorite plant companies from the holidays and start making lists. Have a notebook dedicated to 2026 filled with your goals and what you would like to plant where. Try to be as detailed as possible. Which companies were your favorites? Which companies had the best selections of plants/seeds? Would you like to grow specific plants and specific colors of flowers? Growing from seed would work better for you, as generally, there are more choices. If you don't have the room to start plants from seed, young plants, bare root or plugs are a better option. Check that the delivery date coincides with your availability to plant or pot on the small plants you are receiving. If not, request a change in delivery time. Take advantage of all that the plant and seed companies have to offer.

Remember in January you have options and time. Time to contemplate and plan your year and options from all sorts of native plant suppliers. May 2026 be a wonderful green and growing year for you!



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: Patricia Conry, CMG
- Featured How-To: Gretel Anspach, LMG
- Monthly Tip: Kathi Gariepy, LMG

Photos (in order of appearance)

- TollHouse Garden and Main House Garden (6 pics), by Patricia Conroy, PMG, and Wellesley Historical Society
- Seed Catalogs, by Vermont Public Radio
- Trial Flower Garden, by All American Selections
- Plant Chart, by Grow Native Massachusetts
- Rust, Hollyhock, by Perdue Extension, Perdue University
- Serrano pepper seedlings, by Lynne Larson, PMG
- Dogwoods, by Our Land Organics
- Frosted Sedum and Mountain Mint, by Kathi Gariepy, LMG
- Apple Orchard, by Lynne Larson, PMG

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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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