
The Dirt: March Gardening Resources & Tips

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Gardening Resources & Tips from the MMGA

March 2025
Spring!



Dickens wrote about “those March days when the sun shines hot and the wind blows cold: when it is summer in the light, and winter in the shade” (*Great Expectations*). Gardeners know exactly what he means. We know it’s cold, we know it’s early, but we also know that in 20 days, it will be spring! So when we scrape the ground and find it frozen, we stubbornly start spring inside. How many

windowsills have tomato seedlings? How many browse any open garden center for early bulbs...seedlings...soil? March simply demands color and new life, and you might say gardeners feel a certain *noblesse oblige* to get spring going as early as we can!

In this month's issue of *The Dirt*:

- Featured Garden: Heritage Museums & Gardens = 100 acres of history and beauty!

- Featured How-To: Plan now for stunning and hardy fall color.
- Monthly Tip: Start spring indoors via bright colors and favorite aromas.
- Monthly Native Plant: Little bluestem has a big impact on any garden!

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Enjoy gardening photos and tips? Want to know what MMGA is up to? Maybe you just want to cheer up your feed!

Check out our new Instagram account!

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Join us ONLINE for a
Summer Gardening Know-How Series
Wednesdays, 7:00-8:30 PM
May 14, 21, 28 & June 4, 2025

After we've shaken off winter, now is the time to hit the ground running to prepare for summer's big show. And what a show you'll have with this year's Spring Gardening Know-How series! With our experienced Master Gardener presenters, you'll learn how to produce your own juicy blueberries and how to make use of every inch of your space with container gardening. You'll also learn to navigate the world of hydrangeas—the flower that says “summer's here” to so many people in New England. Finally, you'll learn how to become a steward for our New England ecosystem with native plants.

WHO SHOULD ATTEND: Whether you are a novice gardener or looking to refine your skills, our Summer Know-How series is designed to grow your expertise.

LECTURES INCLUDE:

May is the perfect time for gardeners of all levels to continue learning with these 4 new topics:

- **New England Native Flora**
- **Blueberries in Your Home Garden**
- **Container Gardening**
- **Hydrangea Ps and Qs**

Virtual sessions include live Q&A time with speakers and handouts to read in advance or revisit in the future.

Learn More & Register

QUESTIONS?

Email us at [**KnowHow@MassMasterGardeners.org**](mailto:KnowHow@MassMasterGardeners.org)

Featured Monthly Garden

Heritage Museums & Gardens

67 Grove Street

Sandwich, MA 02563

1-508-888-3300

<https://heritagemuseumsandgardens.org/>

Co-author Debbie Wells, PMG, has been a Project Manager at Heritage Museums and Garden. She is also a Project Manager at Adams Farm, whose produce is donated the Norwood Food Pantry. Working with the Pine Hills Garden Club, Plymouth Sustainability and Plymouth Pollinators, Debbie is starting native plant gardens to increase lost pollinator habitats. Debbie also participates in the Junior Gardeners program which educates third graders about the unique plant communities in Massachusetts Coastal Pine Barrens, one of only three Coastal Pine Barrens left in the world.

Co-author Iris Clearwater, Volunteer Coordinator and Gardener at Heritage Museums and Gardens in Sandwich, MA since 2016, loves nurturing communities of people, plants, and life. Her past work experience includes running a native plant nursery, several years as a field biologist working with both plants and wildlife, and Stewardship Coordinator for habitat restoration projects in San Francisco. At Heritage, she has grown the volunteer program

exponentially, grows thousands of seeds into plants every spring, and plants beautiful gardens that nurture spirit and pollinators.



Heritage stands as a testament to the power of nature and the passion of those who tend it. Home to an internationally significant rhododendron collection, a comprehensive hydrangea display, over 500 daylily varieties, and a wealth of other breathtaking gardens, this 100-acre destination offers an ever-changing showcase of botanical splendor.

For the past ten years, the Massachusetts Master Gardeners have been a vital part of the beauty and vitality of Heritage Museums & Gardens in Sandwich, MA. With expertise, enthusiasm, and a deep love for horticulture, our volunteers have worked alongside Heritage's Senior Gardeners to enhance an already stunning landscape.

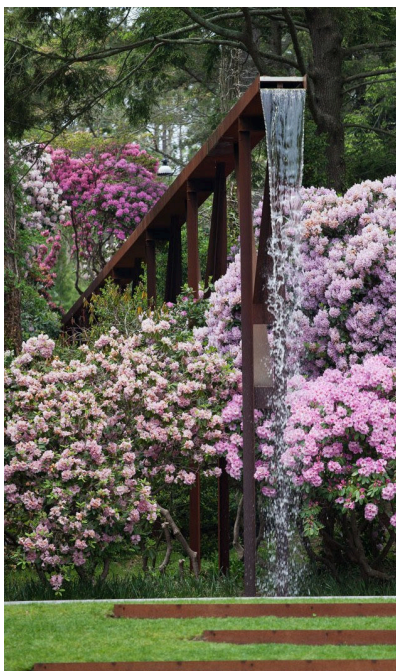
Heritage's roots run deep—literally. Former owner Charles Dexter dedicated over two decades to breeding and planting rhododendrons across the grounds. Today, his legacy blooms each May in a dazzling display of color and fragrance.



Master Gardeners have played a key role in expanding Heritage's gardens, from the stunning hydrangea display to the North American Hydrangea Test Garden, where the latest advancements in hydrangea cultivation take shape. Our volunteers have the privilege of working alongside Mal Condon, Heritage's esteemed Curator of Hydrangeas—fondly known as the "hydrangea whisperer." Each

December, we gather with the Cape Cod Hydrangea Society under his guidance to prune hydrangea paniculatas, honing our skills while contributing to these beloved gardens.

Beyond hydrangeas, our work extends to every corner of Heritage, like preparing the flume fountain and lily pond area for special events and nurturing varied garden spaces like the McGraw Family Garden of the Senses, the Arbor Bowl, Carousel Garden, and the McInnes Garden – a vibrant haven specially designed with pollinators in mind.



This year marks an especially exciting time to be involved, as Heritage embarks on the construction of the Barbey Family Welcome Center. Master Gardeners have been instrumental in preparing the grounds for a new pathway, clearing invasives, and planting thousands of native plants, annuals, ferns, hydrangeas, rhododendrons, and more to ensure a stunning landscape for future visitors.

Maintaining these extraordinary gardens takes dedication, and every helping hand makes a difference. From transplanting seedlings in the greenhouse to mulching, edging, planting, and weeding across the expansive grounds, there's always something to do—and always something to learn. The camaraderie among volunteers makes even the most challenging tasks easy and fun!

Stop by and admire the beauty of Heritage, where you'll find the unmistakable touch of Massachusetts Master Gardeners at every turn. If you love gardening and want to make an impact in a truly special place, we'd love you to join us.



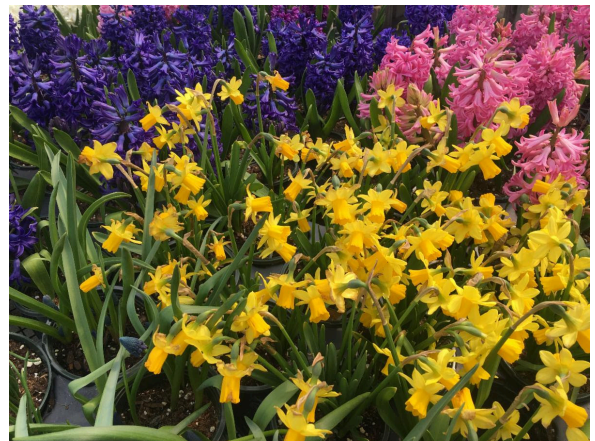
Monthly Tip **March is all about Spring!**

The Vernal Equinox arrives on Thursday, March 20, 2025 at 5:01am; it marks the beginning of spring in the Northern Hemisphere. There are nearly equal hours of daylight and darkness on that date. The amount of sunlight/daytime increases from that date until the Summer Solstice, on Friday, June 20, 2025, marking the longest day of sunlight/daytime.

Cut a few branches of forsythia (*Forsythia ssp.*), redbud (*Cercis canadensis*), dogwood (*Cornus florida*), lilac (*Syringa ssp.*), pussy willow (*Salix discolor*) or viburnum (*Viburnum ssp.*) to bring spring indoors. Look for branches that have large plump buds. Use a tall container, fill it three quarters of the way to the top with water. This is to hydrate the branches and to add weight to the container as the stems can be long (3 feet or more). Place the container in a cool room, 55-65 degrees Fahrenheit, and out of direct sunlight. Misting the branches helps to prevent the buds from drying out before they bloom. Soon, you'll have early blooms right in your own home.



To prolong early nursery or supermarket purchases of flowering bulbs and other spring blooms, like the miniature daffodil, aka “tete-a-tete”, fragrant hyacinths, heather, or primrose, keep the plants in cooler areas of the house and out of direct sunlight. Why? Because these are early spring plants that need cooler temperatures and damp, not wet, soil conditions to be at their best.



An added benefit of bringing a bit of spring indoors is that you can add the forced daffodils, hyacinths, primrose, and heather to the garden if you maintain the plants after blooming. Simply cut off the spent blooms and let the foliage live on. Check to make sure there are holes in the bottom of the pots for good drainage. If they sit in water, in the house or outside, the roots will rot. If you have a covered, protected area come April, the plants can be placed outside, but make sure they still receive water and the foliage looks good. If you have brought some branches in the house, you might see small roots appearing from the sides of the stems. If that happens, you may pot up the rooted stems for new shrubs.

Another way to bring spring indoors is to start small containers or baskets of grass. Simply pick a container or basket, making sure that it will be able to hold potting soil and water without leaking. Fill the container/basket to nearly the top with potting soil and spread grass seed thickly over the entire top of the potting soil; do not cover with more potting soil to let the seeds be exposed to the sunlight. Then water. Keep the soil moist but not soggy and wet. Unlike the spring plants and forced branches, the container of grass can take the warmer temperatures and direct sunlight. In a couple of weeks, you will have a fresh crop of new spring green grass in a container.

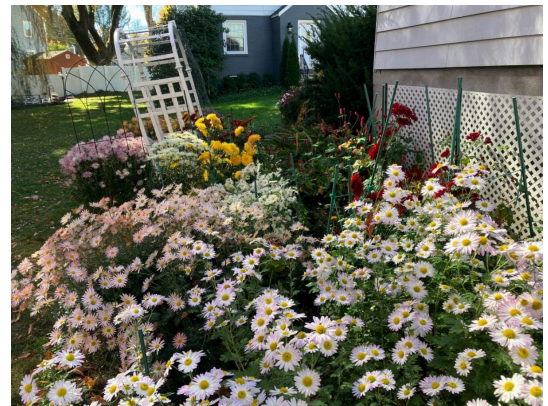


Whether forcing branches, purchasing a pot of flowers or growing that lovely spring green grass in a cup, spring, that glorious time of growth and freshness is found in the month of March.

Featured Monthly How-To **Winter-hardy Chrysanthemums**

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. His grow light shelves are now filled with delphinium, hollyhock, and snapdragon.

On any October day, I have the pleasure of strolling through my garden and seeing it filled with dazzling color which often lasts into November. The flowers that give me this show are hardy chrysanthemums. I discovered these beauties a few years ago, and since then they've become some of my favorite flowers. I always liked the popular 'Sheffield', but I came to understand that it is only one among many chrysanthemum cultivars that are winter-hardy in the northeast, and soon an entirely new world was beckoning to me.



History

In 1753, Linnaeus derived the name "Chrysanthemum" from the Greek *chrysos* (gold) and *antheon* (flower) to highlight its golden hues. Native to Asia, it was used as a flowering herb in China around the 15th century BCE, and then arrived in Japan around the 8th century AD where it has been one of the most revered flowers in Japanese culture. Eventually, collectors and botanists brought it to Europe in the 17th century, and to the US in the late 18th.



The story of its importation to the west is a complicated one, in that most of these early introductions were of the non-hardy forms. European collectors gathering specimens from Asia were primarily interested the larger and showier flowers being bred by Asian gardeners that were suitable for showing in competitions. These cultivars were

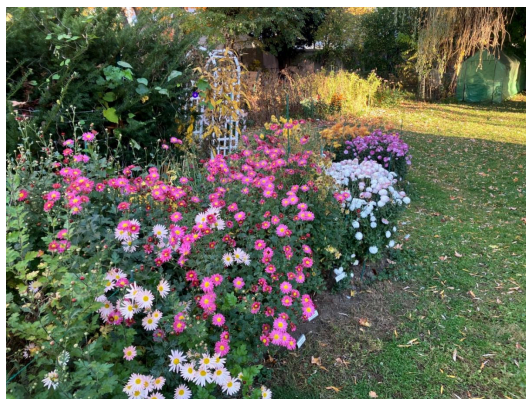
only half-hardy and didn't spend energy on growing larger, matted roots to take them through the winter; instead, the plants could focus on producing these much-desired oversized flowers. With some exceptions, therefore, the chrysanthemums available through the 19th century into the 1920s in both Europe and the US were not winter hardy.

In the early 1930s, breeders on both sides of the Atlantic began to understand the need for winter-hardy versions of the flower they loved, and in this new chrysanthemum era, our very own New England played a significant role. In 1905, a staff botanist at the Arnold Arboretum took an expedition to Korea and came back with a cold-hardy Korean



chrysanthemum species. This species later fell into the hands of Alex Cummings, breeder and proprietor of Bristol Nurseries in Bristol, CT. Cummings developed dozens of new, winter-hardy chrysanthemums that were released to the American public in the 1930s.

For a walk back into botanical time, click [here](#) to see the 1936 catalog of Bristol Nurseries with its announcement of these wonderful new “Korean hybrids.”



Coincidentally, at the same time across the ocean, a breeder named Amos Perry had been working in the UK with a different, cold-hardy Korean species. From that he bred his own suite of winter-hardy chrysanthemums that he called the Rubellums, which then spread through Europe. A new type of chrysanthemum had finally arrived in the west, but it was only getting started. Ninety years later, we now

have hundreds of beautiful cultivars from which to choose.

Chrysanthemums come in many floral forms and colors. Some have daisy-like flowers, others look like dahlias or have interesting “spoon and quill” petals, and still others have a full and voluptuous shape ready for a corsage. There are pompoms, “spider” forms, and more. It’s a delight to stand in front of a bed of chrysanthemums and drink in the swirling and diverse palette of white, cream, amber, yellow, gold, orange, shades of pink and red, purple, and peach.

How to Grow

Mums are best planted in April or May as this will give the plant time to create the vigorous root structure necessary for getting through the winter. You can purchase full-size plants at garden centers for many of the most common cultivars such as ‘Sheffield’, ‘Clara Curtis’, or ‘Red October’, but the widest selection is available through online retailers. You can order plants online at any time of the year from these companies and they will be shipped to arrive at the correct time for planting in your zone. I usually receive mine in mid-April.

Additionally, if you have a friend with a plant you envy, or your own favorite, you can do your own propagation through root division, basal cuttings, or stem cuttings. Easiest and probably most reliable in our region is root division, which can be performed in spring as soon as the first shoots appear. Divisions establish quickly and are a good way to ensure winter-hardiness. Basal cuttings can also be taken with the first growth (2” - 4”) in spring, dipped in rooting hormone, put in a potting mix, and after roots have formed, set out in the garden by late spring or early summer.

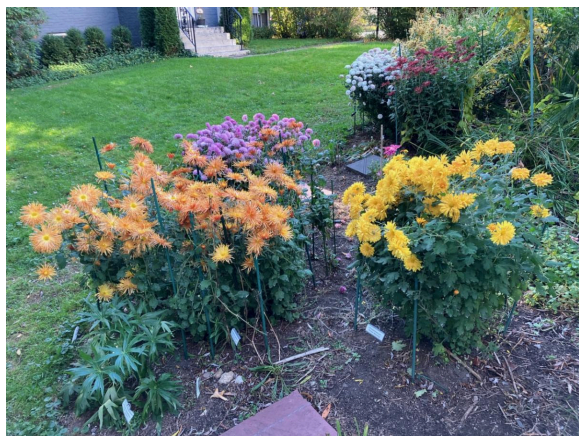


Stem cuttings can work but it’s a bit iffy whether roots will develop in time for produce winter-hardiness. Always take your cutting in the early morning when the stems are turgid.

In any case, if you’ve given your newly-planted chrysanthemums the right environment, they will spread and grow large, so I often plant them 2 ½ - 3’ apart. I have a few plants that have spread to 4’ - 5’ and they are magnificent. If you plant them 18 inches apart, as labels sometimes suggest, they will mingle into each other which is also a look you may like. There is also a mix of floral forms and heights. Most of mine are 3-4’ but some stand no more than 2’ tall. Again, note the description on the label or in the catalog.

In June, cut back the taller stems a few inches (aka the “Chelsea Chop”) to create a more branched habit and increase the flower display. I do this two or

three times in late May and June, and July 4 is the latest. It really does improve the display in the fall.



One wonderful aspect of these hardy chrysanthemums is the variety of bloom times among the different cultivars. There are early, mid, and late fall bloomers. Look at the online collections and note the descriptions of time of bloom. I most appreciate my late-fall bloomers that effortlessly produce full color after the latest-blooming aster has gone to sleep. I have one plant with red-orange flowers that incredibly doesn't

come into full bloom until the last few days of October. Others peak in late September and early October, so with the right mix of cultivars your floral feast can last from late September until mid-November.

These beautiful flowers have turned my garden into a glorious display of color in the fall. Watch a video of my hardy chrysanthemum garden [here](#) and see for yourself! .

Monthly Native Plant

Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*)

Ornamental grasses are among the most resilient native plants, requiring minimal maintenance once established. Their deep root systems allow them to withstand drought while adding year-round color, texture, and movement to gardens.



Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) is a stunning native grass prized for its blue-green foliage and four-season interest. Highly drought-tolerant, it thrives in prairies, fields, and open woodlands across the U.S., with the exception of two states. This hardy bunchgrass adapts to a range of soil conditions, including acidic and alkaline soils, though it prefers dry, sandy soils. For best results, plant it in full sun to maintain its upright growth habit.

As a warm-season grass, little bluestem emerges in mid to late spring, producing delicate flowers by mid to late summer. In fall, its showy seed heads



become translucent, and its foliage transforms into shades of reddish-bronze, creating a striking autumn display.

Beyond its ornamental appeal, little bluestem plays a crucial role in supporting wildlife. It serves as a larval host for several butterfly and moth species, including the dusted skipper (*Atrytonopsis hianna*). Numerous insects rely on the plant for food, while its seeds provide nourishment for songbirds. The dense clumps offer shelter for many beneficial insects, including female bumblebees that nest at its base.



Little bluestem is also highly resistant to deer-browsing and faces few pest problems. Its popularity has led to the development of several cultivars, such as 'Standing Ovation,' (see picture above) known for its strong upright form, and 'Prairie Blues,' which features more vibrant color and a compact growth habit.

With its adaptability, ecological benefits, and striking beauty, little bluestem is an outstanding choice for any garden or landscape.

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](#) 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**
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 MMGA Garden: Debbie Wells, PMG and Iris Clearwater
- Featured Monthly How-To: Rick Charnes, CMG
- Monthly Native Shrub, by Hadley Berkowitz, PMG
- Monthly Gardening Tip, by Kathi Garipey, LMG

Photos (in order of appearance)

- Spring bulbs, by Lynne Larson, PMG
- Heritage Museum & Gardens (five photos), by Iris Clearwater
- Forsythia branches, by the Iowa Gardener
- Spring bulbs, by Lynne Larson, PMG
- Grass in baskets, by WoolyMossRoots
- Chrysanthemum in yard (pics 1,4,5), by Rick Charnes, CMG
- Japanese chrysanthemum display, by Growing with Plants
- Korean chrysanthemums in Central Park, by Central Park NY
- Mum propagation, by Flores Temporis
- Little bluestem (1st pic), by Northern Neck Native Plants
- Little bluestem (2nd pic), by Native American Seed

- Little bluestem (3rd pic, collage), National Audubon Society
- Native bloodroot at Drumlin Farm, 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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