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Urban Ag & Horticulture Program
Milwaukee County
Cooperative Extension
9501 W Watertown Plank Rd, Bldg A
Wauwatosa, WI 53226-3552

Sharon Morrisey
Consumer Horticulture Agent
(414)256-4660
sharon.morrisey@ces.uwex.edu

Master Gardener Prog. (414)256-4661
Betsy Vokac – Program Assistant
Nancy Lehrer – Volunteer Coordinator

Hort Help Line (414)256-4664
Suzy Orth – Horticulturist



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Garden Calendar for February, 2016

Sharon Morrisey, Consumer Horticulture Agent
Milwaukee County UW-Extension

The excitement is building up to Ground Hog's Day on February 2nd. This time-honored tradition takes place exactly halfway between the winter solstice on December 21st and the vernal equinox on March 20th a period of 12 weeks. Astronomically, it is 6 weeks until spring whether or not the ground hog sees his shadow. Meteorologically, it is usually more like 10 weeks until spring in southeastern Wisconsin. It is even longer the farther north you go.

The other time-honored holiday in February is Valentine's Day. At least this one involves flowers so gardeners can do something with flowers. See the entry for the third week of the month to learn how to care for fresh cut flowers to help them last as long as possible.

As you start planning your gardening for this year, you might want to consult the UW-Extension gardening publications on a wide variety of subjects which are available for printing or ordering from the UW-Extension publications website at <http://learningstore.uwex.edu/>

If you are interested in specific topics, use the search feature on the UW-Extension Horticulture website at <http://hort.uwex.edu/>.

First Week

- Use sand or cat litter rather than salt to melt ice along sidewalks and driveways to prevent soil and plant damage. Do not use granular fertilizer because excessive amounts of it, too, can damage plants. It also pollutes lakes and rivers as it runs off paved surfaces and frozen ground. For this reason never fertilize on frozen ground or over the snow.

- If you need more space to garden, contact your county's UW-Extension office about rental garden locations. In Milwaukee County, call (414) 256-4605.

- Study the seed catalogs and the internet for desirable plant varieties to grow in your garden this year. If doing mail order, do it soon before the seed for that special eggplant you want is sold out.

- Plan to get your children into the garden this year. Start with projects indoors like a pan of grass for their Easter baskets or oats for the cat. Start a sweet potato or an avocado pit. If you have supplemental lighting, plant a tub of lettuces and garlic cloves and herbs.

- With two weeks left until Valentine's Day, it's time to start forcing those spring flowering bulbs you've been chilling. The little bulbs like crocus, hyacinth, and scilla should have received 8 weeks of cold. Larger bulbs require 12 – 14 weeks.

- Keep feeding the birds until spring bloom since they have come to depend upon you for food. Even greater success at attracting birds to your property can be assured by providing a fresh source of water at all

times. This must be kept free of ice and available until spring thaw. Stake up a discarded Christmas tree near a feeder to provide some protective cover but far enough away so that dogs and cats can't hide there to ambush your feathered friends at the feeder.

Second Week

- Remove built-up dust and grime from the leaves of houseplants with a shower. Plants with large leaves can be wiped clean by hand with a cloth or a pair of clean, soft gloves. Use one hand on the upper surface and one below. Water works just fine to clean and shine leaves. Some but not all leaf polish products contain oils which will clog leaf pores.

- Prepare for starting seeds indoors by gathering supplies and equipment. The three most crucial elements for successful seed starting are using sterile media, supplemental light and bottom heat of about 70 degrees. Be sure fluorescent fixtures and bulbs are compatible since the newer low-wattage tubes will overheat in old fixtures.

Third Week

- Start seeds for the very first vegetable crop now - onions. Keep the foliage cutback to about 4" until time to transplant outdoors in April. Use what you clip off in salads or soup to add some zip.

- Cloves of garlic can be planted in pots indoors to sprout for zesty seasoning.

- Sow seeds indoors for impatiens, begonias, petunias, nemesia, dusty miller, and snapdragons.

- Fresh cut Valentine's bouquets should be placed in warm water with floral preservative after having the stem ends re-cut. Wash vases with soap and water

every time you replace the water. Remove any foliage that is below water level to prevent rot and clogging of stems. Place vase in a cool location (down to 35 degrees) for at least one hour or overnight so that they can re-hydrate before bringing into room temperature.

- Drooping roses can be revived by completely submerging them in warm water and re-cutting the stem ends while under water. Leave them in the water to re-hydrate for a half hour before returning them to the vase.

- Start garden woodworking projects like coldframes, trellises, arbors and benches. A makeshift but functional coldframe can be set up using a few bales of straw on which an old wooden storm window is propped. Slide back the window to vent heat on sunny days being certain to close it again just before sundown.

Fourth Week

- Being the end of the dormant season, now and throughout the month of March is the best time to prune most woody landscape plants and fruit trees. You can delay pruning birch, maple, black walnut, and elm since these tend to "bleed" when sap starts to move again due to snow melt and thawing soil. The dripping sap does not harm the trees but it is unsightly.

-You can also delay pruning of spring flowering plants like forsythia, lilac, flowering almond, pussywillow, quince, cherry, Corneliancherry dogwood and crabapple until after bloom if you can't bear to lose the flowerbuds you prune off.

- Otherwise, prune anyway and bring in the cut branches from these early spring flowerers to force flower buds open to enjoy indoors.

- Seed of larkspur, nigella, and poppies can be sown directly onto bare ground to germinate as soon as the snow melts away.