

March 2024

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# Root Concerns

Notes from the underground

## Liking Lichens in the Winter Wonderland



Although the leaves fell from the trees as usual last fall (2023), the woodlands have continued to bloom. Lichens have taken over the trees. The unusual warm, wet weather for most of 2023 and continuing into 2024 seems to have energized lichen growth.

Swamp lands like the Great Shaker Swamp in New Lebanon, N.Y have taken on a ghostly appearance. The red maple and elm trees are coated in shades of green and gray with lichen's exuberant growth.

Although winter weather usually brings on a season of dormancy this winter

appears to be a season of expansive growth for lichen. You can see the weekly color change in trees along our highways.

It is happening in wetlands, woodlands and on wooden garden sheds.



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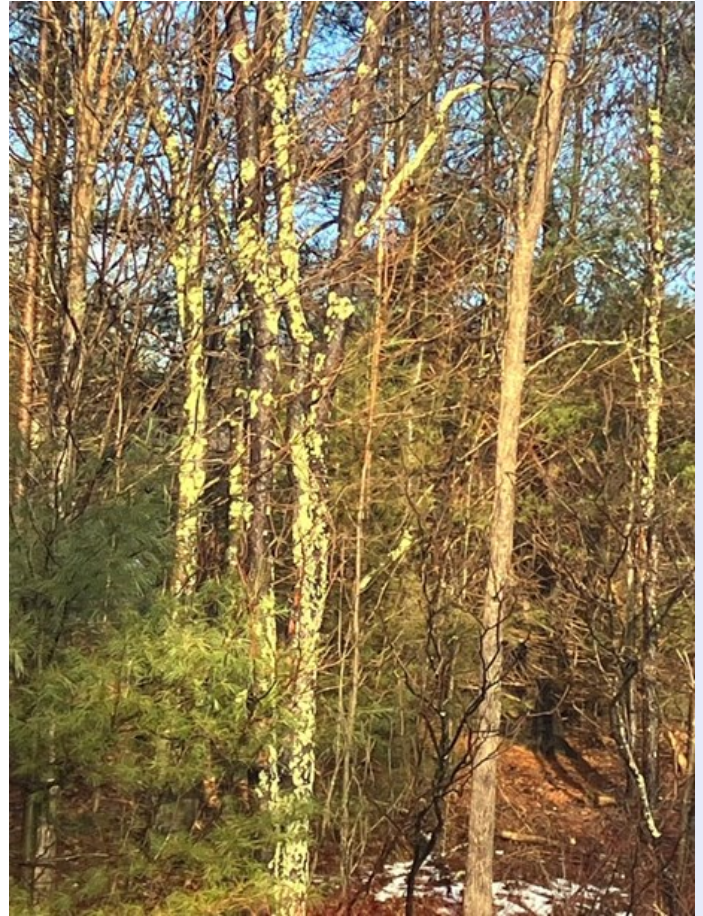
Cornell Cooperative Extension  
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Lichens are a complex life form that is a symbiotic partnership of two separate organisms, a fungus and an alga. The dominant partner is the fungus, which gives the lichen the majority of its characteristics, from its thallus shape to its fruiting bodies. The alga can be either a green alga or a blue-green alga, otherwise known as cyanobacteria. Many lichens will have both types of algae. In this cooperative living arrangement, the algae and bacteria photosynthesize providing nutrients for the fungus. The fungus provides a home for the algae while collecting and holding moisture for the algae growth.

Lichen change the appearance of trees but do no harm to the structure or growth of the tree. Lichen take on many shapes and colors determined by the combination of fungi, algae and bacteria in the community. The common shape of lichen in this area is the gray, green crusty attachment on trees. In other environments it can be very different. A rare lichen called Old Man's Beard can get up to several feet in length hanging from trees. That is a fruticose lichen.

The crustose lichen are found forming a crust over a surface. They can be found growing on boulders, in the soil, on a garden shed or on roof shingles. They come in many colors; yellow, orange, red as well as grays and greens. The gray, green, blue lichen pictured on the previous page is on a shadbush growing in a backyard in Stephentown, New York.



The lichen communal relationship is unusual in many ways. The fungal partner provides a home for the algae to live safe from predators and protected from dehydration. The photosynthetic algae provide food for both. The algal partner can live outside of the lichen community in streams, ponds, wet soil and on the deck boards and vinyl siding of your home. The fungal partner has become dependent on the algae for its food and cannot live off decaying organisms like other fungi.

Lichens occur in nearly all habitats, from the Arctic to deserts, grasslands, and temperate and tropical forests. They have been used as medicines, a food source for wildlife, fabric dyes and textiles. Since their food source comes directly from the air around them, chemical analysis the organic composition is a method for measuring levels of air pollution.

## Seeing Red In Spring



In the gray month of February, seeing color is a breath of fresh air. Grass is getting greener, many of the birds have their bright spring colors showing. Sunshine still seems new and especially bright. Moss is fun to see this time of year, but that too is green. The emerging flowers of skunk cabbage come up as beacons of red.

Those bright red flowers stand out against the brown leaves and black mud. Skunk Cabbage actually melts the snow and ice in order to emerge early in the spring. Why would they emerge before there are insects about to pollinate it? The flower attracts them with a putrid smell, and makes those leaves warm and cozy compared to the outside temperature. The smell attracts carrion-feeding flies and gnats. Bees, beetles, and other insects are attracted to warmth of the flowers. The color revives us, and the insect world.

Skunk Cabbage is one of the first signs of spring. Warmer weather and the end of the dark winter cometh soon. There's even a Skunk Cabbage Appreciation Society on Facebook! This video was made by a local retired botanist, Steve Young, of a three year old patch of Skunk Cabbage throughout one year. It's a short, minute long video, but it shows how different the plant looks in July, for instance, when it resembles hosta.

<https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiI58mQ2quEAxW4jYkEHUlvDY4QwqsBegQIDRAG&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3D89rkEptfHeY&usg=AOvVaw3lPk0J4-Pq385HlWX4dGfk&opi=89978449>



Next time you go for a walk in the woods, if you pass a wet area, take a look. You just might have the pleasure of seeing a stunningly red flower in February.



# When Does Spring Begin?

It all depends on who you ask. According to the common calendar, Spring is on or about March 21st. The determining factor? It's a balancing act: 12 hours of daylight; 12 hours of dark.

Swedish meteorologists beg to differ. They define the beginning of spring as "the first occasion on which the average daytime temperature exceeds zero degrees Celsius (or 32 degrees F) for seven consecutive days." That means the arrival of spring varies according to latitude and elevation.

Some argue that the season isn't defined by fixed dates. The phenological or ecological definition of spring focuses on biological indicators; the blossoming of a range of plant species, the activities of animals, or the special smell of soil that has reached the temperature for micro flora to flourish. It therefore varies according to the climate and according to the specific weather of a particular year.

In recent decades seasonal creep has been observed, which means that many phenological signs of spring are occurring earlier in many areas by a couple of days per decade.

But just how fast does spring spread? According to the scientists, Spring moves north, west, and uphill at predictable rates. Daily that's 15 miles north, one degree west and 30 meters uphill. (30 meters equals 98.42 feet.)

In some countries or cultures they like to "jump start" the season. The East Asian spring begins on February 4 and ends on May 5th. Celtic tradition uses a different calculator. They base their reasoning on daylight and the strength of the noon sun. Which means spring begins in Ireland on St. Brigid's Day (Feb 1) and ends on May 1.

But whenever we welcome the season of rebirth, renewal, and regrowth in our backyards most gardeners agree: It's about time.



## What to do in MARCH!

\* As the days get longer, you can begin to divide, re-pot and fertilize your houseplants. Prune scraggly coleus, geraniums, oregano, and wandering jew to stimulate rejuvenation. Plant removed tips to start new plants.

\* Pot up tuberous begonias, caladiums, gloxinias, dahlias, and cannas now for a longer season of bloom.

\* Check gardening supplies: potting soil, seed starter packs, fertilizer, bird netting, row covering, etc. Check pesticides for expiration dates and replace as necessary. Consult your town's waste department for proper disposal.



\* Think seeds! Read on the seed package the number of growth weeks required and count back from the last two weeks in May to decide when to start different seeds. Now is a good time to start petunias, snapdragons, blue salvia, sweet William, stock, nicotinia, hollyhock, onion, celery, cauliflower, broccoli, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, beets, turnip, eggplant and kale.



\* Late in the month peas, radishes, lettuce and spinach can be sown outdoors.

\* When the ice melts or during thaws, check to see if your winter protection for roses was adequate. Make sure they are not heaving out of the ground. If they are, replace as much soil as possible around the roots and bud union.

\* Prune blueberries, raspberries, and apple trees while they are still dormant. Ornamentals can be pruned but do not prune spring blooming plants such as forsythia, cherries and magnolias. On most trees, it is fine to remove diseased, broken or old branches and crossed limbs to open the tree to allow more sunlight and air circulation.

\* Check the soil pH around blueberries—they like it acidic. Contact your local office of Cornell Cooperative Extension for assistance with soil testing. While you can use ground sulfur to lower the pH, if necessary, only a soil test will indicate the need and the amount to apply!



# Green Shots: The Gardening World in Pictures



Remember summer? These photos, taken by Richard Demick on August 18, 2023 of the Master Gardener Demonstration Garden at the Robert C. Parker School, epitomize those long, sunny, warm days. I'm anxious to enjoy that time of year again!



Welcoming herb garden



Prairie garden soars to new heights





Vegetable Garden in full bloom



Fragrance garden smells of the season



The new native plant garden



# The Old Saw On Pruning

I like the old horticultural chestnut, “prune when the saw is sharp,” but is it accurate? Not really. While it may be fine to prune out dead wood and a stray branch just about any time of the year, the even older wisdom found in Ecclesiastes of “to every thing there is a season” is more apropos when it comes to taking sharp instruments to plants.

Let’s start this cutting edge discussion in late winter. Pruning plants without leaves makes both the work and the clean-up easier. Apple trees, most vines, hawthorns, mountain ash and cotoneaster shrubs can be pruned when dormant. It is not a good time to prune trees which tend to “bleed,” or exude copious amounts of sap, however. These include birch, elm, walnut and maple (think of how sugar maple responds to a “tap.”) These trees are best pruned in summer.



<https://extension.unh.edu/resource/pruning-trees-shrubs>

Very early spring, right before bud break, is a good time to prune shrubs which bloom later, in summer, on shoots produced in the current year. These include Rose-of-Sharon, spiraea, summersweet clethra and potentilla. It is also a good time to prune many types of roses, such as the hybrid teas. In this case, you can prune out any dead and winter-injured wood when you see the new pink shoot buds swelling. Junipers and arborvitae can also be pruned now, but remember that these have a limited number of dormant adventitious buds on their older branches, and severe pruning may ruin them. Yews are different. While it may take several years for the yew to recover, and requires a gardener of stout heart to do the deed, severe pruning, called “hat-racking,” can be used to re-shape an out-of-bounds plant entirely by pruning back into old wood.



<https://forestrynews.blogs.govdelivery.com/2023/09/17/young-tree-training-pruning-workshops/>

the desirable lilac and be left with just the rootstock, which might be something as vulgar as a privet.

How about an old lilac, overgrown and full of unproductive, large wood? Very early spring is the time to brandish the saw here, too. The entire plant can be cut back severely, to within inches of the ground. It would, of course, be wise to expect any flowers from a plant so leveled, as you will be extremely disappointed, but the lilac will re-bound and be the better for it. But there is one caveat here. If the lilac has been grafted, make sure you cut above the grafted area, leaving some of the scion wood. If you cut too low, you’ll remove all of

High spring, when plants are growing like gangbusters, is not a good time to prune. Yet by early summer, when growth slows, you can get your loppers busy once again. Spring bloomers like forsythia, beautybush, mock orange and lilacs should be pruned after their flowering acts have finished. Dogwood, ornamental cherry, honeylocust, willow and many other trees can also be treated to some major surgery if need be.



Early summer, one of the loveliest times in upstate New York, is also one of the busiest for a gardener. After pruning deciduous trees and shrubs, know that it is also a good time to prune the new “candles” of growth on pines, spruces and firs by one half to encourage compactness. These can be pinched by hand, cut with pruners or sliced with a scythe, as some Christmas tree growers do. Similar pruning (but not with the scythe) can be done on broadleaved evergreens, such as rhododendron, azalea, and mountain laurel.

A new notable exception to this early summer timetable is for oaks, which are locally under threat of a disease called oak wilt. This fungal plague is spread by beetles attracted to pruning wounds, so it is now recommended to avoid pruning oaks in April, May and June when the beetles are active. For those who might think things never change in the world of horticulture, the arrival of oak wilt (as well as the spotted lanternfly, viburnum leaf beetle, and a host of other evildoers) proves the faultiness of that theory. Scaly evergreens, such as junipers, can also stand some light shaping at this time.

Late summer brings changes. While we think of pruning as limiting and removing growth, it also stimulates growth. That makes late summer a dangerous time to prune, since new growth produced in August often doesn't harden off properly in time for winter, and results in more winter injury showing up the following spring. I learned this is especially true with broadleaved evergreens by doing something regretful. I gleefully pruned a mountain laurel one waning summer day, then witnessed it throwing lots of new green shoots in early fall. By the next May, it was covered in shriveled, brown spikes. Failed experiments are wonderful teachers, but I'm not sure the mountain laurel was happy about it.

Fall is also a good time to leave the loppers in the shed for at least two reasons. First, wounds made on plants this time of years are slow to “heal,” leaving the plant very susceptible to reason number two: fungi. Many fungi are especially active in autumn, including those which cause



<https://today.oregonstate.edu/news/give-overgrown-trees-makeover-new-osu-pruning-video-series>

canker-type diseases as well as others which invade interior tissues and cause decay. Bark offers a plant a wonderfully effective protective barrier to many evils, so the least we humans should know is when not to start chopping into it. Another fall no-no is pruning roses. Roses in our climate often die back quite a bit during winter. Pruning in fall reduces the rose's size, so once winter claims even more of the plant, there may be very little left alive in the spring. So plant bulbs, rake leaves, winterize your mower and clean your gutters, and leave the secateurs alone.



# Witch Hazel For You?

Designing a garden by committee is not an easy task, somewhere between negotiating world peace and agreeing on a school mascot. But the committee I was chairing last week all agreed on one thing: witchhazel. Like golden retrievers, daffodils and Dolly Parton, witchhazels have a certain *je ne sais quoi* which instills fondness. Given their tough character, ability to adapt to many sites and problem-free nature, their appeal is not surprising amongst those who know them.

Some witch hazels bloom in late fall; others bloom in what optimists call early spring. The former is represented by our native common witch hazel, *Hamamelis virginiana*. I have of these, purchased bare-root years ago and planted at the edge of our woods, which mimics a place they would grow naturally. Rather open in habit and perhaps eight feet tall, they would be larger and fatter in full sun. The blossoms consist of four twisted, strap-like petals, bright yellow, dotted along the stems. Since the flowers begin when there are still yellowing leaves on the plant, it takes a keen eye to see this quirky blooming habit. Nursery folks, in their ever vigilant crusade to improve plants, have selected varieties of common witch hazel which drop their leaves early, thereby showing off the flowers to better advantage.



<https://extension.unh.edu/blog/2018/11/looking-witch-hazel>

Common witch hazel is found locally where it hasn't been destroyed by development or exotic invasives, and could be the poster seedling for underappreciated native plants. I have a fond memory of driving up the Taconic Parkway one autumn, marveling at the roadside specimens found around every bend. We gardeners call this "55 M.P.H. Plant I.D." Not such a safe thing to do on such a curvy road, but is neglecting our local flora any less dangerous?

In contrast to the fall blooming common witch hazel, other members of the *Hamamelis* tribe bloom extra early. One winter I took a group of Master Gardeners down to the conservatories of New York Botanical Garden in February on a cabin-fever relief (releaf?) trip. While we were enchanted with the exotics inside, everyone became ecstatic over a very large witch hazel in bloom outside on the grounds. It was the Chinese version, *H. mollis*, displaying yellow flowers with red-brown centers and of good fragrance. Posing for a group photo in front of it, the shrub became the highlight of the day. Our witch hazel virgins all vowed to get one.

My hybrid 'Luna' witch hazel is also flowering now. Its diminutive, rounded, deep-red flowers with tiny yellow arms are clustered heavily along each stem. The fragrance is a heady floral sweetness, like the inside of a good florist's shop. There is nothing else like 'Luna' in February. It is worth a dozen June bloomers, when it is easy to put on a show.

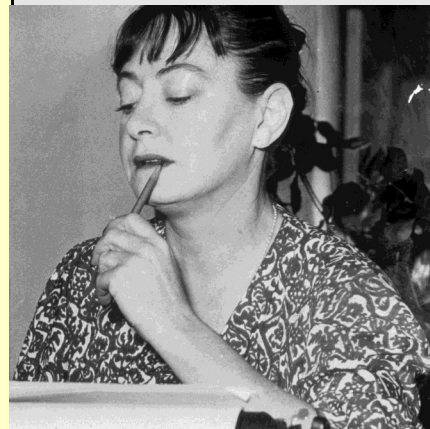
The showiest witch hazels are the "intermedia" hybrids, crosses between the Japanese and Chinese species, sporting the largest flowers in yellow, orange, and red. I'll never forget coming across a grove of 'Arnold Promise,' with its one inch, bright yellow flowers in all-out glory on a snowy March day. 'Diane,' has vivid crimson flowers and was bred in Belgium. 'Jelena' has large coppery-orange flowers and reportedly glows from a distance. The deliciously named 'Strawberries and Cream' has petals of rosy pink and pale yellow. 'Jelena,' a coppery-orange, 'Moonlight,' a pale sulphur-yellow, and 'New Red,' coloring red, orange, and brown, all sound intriguing. There are at least fifty named hybrid varieties.

Text by David Chinery



***“Every year, back spring comes, with nasty little birds yapping their fool heads off, and the ground all mucked up with arbutus.”***

Dorothy Parker (poet, critic, wit, 1893-1967)



## Gardening Questions?

## Call The Master Gardeners!

Webpace.utexas.edu



In Albany County: Call (518) 765-3514 weekdays from 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM and ask to speak to a Master Gardener. You can also email your questions by visiting their website at [www.ccealbany.com](http://www.ccealbany.com)

In Schenectady County: Call (518) 372-1622 weekdays from 9:00 AM to Noon, follow the prompt to speak to a Master Gardener and press #1. You can also email your questions by visiting their website at <http://counties.cce.cornell.edu/schenectady/>

In Rensselaer County: Call (518) 272-4210 Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9:00 AM to Noon and ask to speak to a Master Gardener. You can also email your questions to [Dhc3@cornell.edu](mailto:Dhc3@cornell.edu)

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# Gardening Webinars

***Happy Spring! Our popular “Lunch In The Garden” webinars on Zoom are back on March and April Wednesdays at Noon***

## **“The Deer Ate My Daylilies! Dealing With Deer In Your Landscape”**

***Wednesday, March 20 at NOON.*** Deer browsing can make gardening a challenge! Join Ben Larsen, owner of Habitat Garden Design in Troy, for a discussion of how to deal with our local deer.

## **“Bare-Root Basics: A Great Way To Plant Trees and Shrubs”**

***Wednesday, March 27 at NOON.*** Bare-root trees and shrubs often establish more successfully, are less expensive to purchase and easier to plant! Will Stellar of Robinson Nurseries will show explain bare-root stock and where you can purchase a wide variety of bare-root trees and shrubs this spring.

## **“Alternatives To Traditional Lawns”**

***Wednesday, April 3 at NOON.*** Losing your lawn is a popular idea, but what can replace it? David Chinery, Extension Educator with Cornell Cooperative Extension of Rensselaer County, will discuss alternatives such as a no-mow lawn, reduced mowing, bee lawns and groundcovers.

## **“Attracting and Raising Butterflies”**

***Wednesday, April 10 at NOON.*** Learn what butterflies need to thrive, what plants can provide food and shelter, how to construct butterfly housing and more from Master Gardener Teresa Murphy.

## **“Shore Gardening Primer”**

***Wednesday, April 17 at NOON.*** Considering a native plant landscape along your lakeshore? Join Master Gardener Lorraine Ferguson to learn how native plants contribute to the health of your shoreline and water. Lorraine will share ideas of what plants to consider in your lakeshore design to create beauty and benefit.

## **“Aging With The Garden: Green Thumbs Never Die”**

***Wednesday, April 24 at NOON.*** Garden safely with less effort long into your senior years! We’ll explore the many benefits of gardening for seniors and overcoming senior’s physical limitations. Recommendations will be made for structures, accessibility, clothing, tools, and plant selections. We’ll also discuss will be tips for seniors on planting, weeding, watering, and harvesting. Master Gardeners Marie Hankle-Wieboldt and Bob Wieboldt will lead the discussion.

Save the dates! You can get our Zoom invitation by visiting the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Rensselaer County website at <https://rensselaer.cce.cornell.edu/>, emailing [dhc3@cornell.edu](mailto:dhc3@cornell.edu) or calling (518) 272-4210. If you don’t already have the Zoom app, go to



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