

Tom's Garden

Blog February 2021

February

February comes from the Latin word *februa*, which means "to cleanse." The month was named after the Roman Februalia, which was a month-long festival of purification and atonement.

Groundhog Day Folklore

Groundhog Day always falls on February 2. This marks the midpoint between the winter solstice and spring equinox.

Farmers needed to determine when to plant their crops, so they tried various methods to predict an early spring or a lingering winter. Sunshine on February 2nd was said to indicate the return and persistence of winter. If it was cloudy and dark, warmth and rain would thaw out the fields and have them ready for planting.

For centuries, farmers in France and England looked to a bear; in Germany, they kept their eye on the badger. German immigrants to Pennsylvania brought the tradition with them. Finding no badgers there, they adopted the groundhog to fit the lore. Pennsylvania's Punxsutawney Phil has announced spring's arrival since 1887. Afterwards other groundhogs have carried on the tradition. This tradition continues, often with a wink and a smile.

Source: The Old Farmer's Almanac

February Gardening Tips

This is the month to look over seed catalogs and plan your garden. Shop early for seeds, especially this year with more people gardening than ever and shortages already showing up.

Start onions from seed this month. They will be ready for setting out in April. Onions from seed are firmer and longer-lasting than those from sets and there is a much larger variety of seeds.

Start parsley indoors now. The parsley you may have overwintered will soon bolt and go to seed (biennial).

Hellebore (Helleborus)

Despite common names of "winter rose" "Christmas rose" and "Lenten rose," hellebores are not related to the rose family. Many species are poisonous.

Hellebores originated in Europe and Asia. The greatest concentration occurs in the Balkans (S.E. Europe). Some come from western China and the border between Turkey and Syria.

Hellebores are grown here in USDA zone 5 to 8 for decoration. They are valued for their winter and early spring flowering period. The plants are frost resistant and many are evergreen. They also have shade tolerance. Most species have green or greenish-purple flowers. The so-called Christmas rose (*H. niger*) is a cottage garden favorite.

It has pure white flowers. The most popular hellebores for garden use are *H. orientalis* (Lenten rose). They flower in early spring, around the time of lent. They are good for bringing early color to shady areas under shrubs and trees.



Hybridizing has created many more colors from slate grey, deep purple, rich reds and pinks to yellow. Double-flowered plants have also been created through hybridizing. Semi-double flowers have one or two extra rows of petals; doubles have more.



The “blooms” are actually sepals that protect the true flower. Hellebores usually last from February through April. They are tolerant of a wide range of growing conditions but perform best when in partial shade in rich, moist, well-drained soil. Hellebores are easy to grow and will continue to bloom every year once established.

When planting from nursery containers, don't plant too deeply, the crown of the

plant should be just slightly buried. Plant hellebores with companions such as snowdrops, crocus, daffodils, phlox, trillium, and bleeding heart.

February Birth Flower

This month is associated with St Valentine's Day and red roses. However, the flower of the month is Violet. The flower symbolizes faithfulness, humility and chastity. Gifting violets in the Victorian era conveyed the message 'I'll always be true'. The flower is found in colors of blue, mauve, yellow, cream and white. An old English name for this plant is “heartease.”

Backyard Birds

In winter, many of us enjoy feeding the birds that don't fly south for the winter with various types of feeders. The very colorful northern cardinal comes to mind along with black-capped chickadees and tufted titmouse. Why not plant seed-producing, insect attracting native plants to your property for year-round enjoyment?

Trees and shrubs are important plants of a bird-friendly garden. These plants provide food and shelter to many bird species. Native plants host insect larvae that feed on their leaves. Birds that eat only seeds and fruit will feed these caterpillars to their young. A single sparrow or oriole will catch thousands of caterpillars each day. Keeping your feeders filled year-round will attract these kinds of birds and as an added bonus, you will get to see young birds coming to

your feeders. Feeding hummingbirds, orioles and other fruit eating birds is a true joy in the summertime. These birds migrate south in late summer or fall.

Visit www.audubon.org/native-plants
This site will give you a list of native plants for your area by entering your zip code and email address.

Worm Castings? Really?

You are probably aware that worm castings are an excellent and natural fertilizer for plants. Worm castings also help container plants by introducing micronutrients into your potting soil.

Containers need more than just the usual NPK or 'Miracle-Gro'. As I always say; "feed the soil, not the plants." Did you know that worm castings are highly effective at killing and preventing harmful insects? Worm castings are the manure from earthworms. Gardeners Black Gold! Some benefits of worm castings are:

- *Worm castings contain more than 60 micronutrients and trace minerals, feeding both your plants and beneficial organisms in the soil.
- *Worm castings suppress pathogens, bacteria and harmful fungi in the soil, protecting plants from disease and rot.
- *The use of worm castings improves drainage and boosts moisture retention.
- *Worm castings enable plant roots to handle soils with low or high pH values.*
- Chitinase in worm castings kills and repels insects like whiteflies, aphids, mealy bugs,

mites, scale and thrips.

The dried worm castings are available at many local nurseries and garden centers; and, of course, online.

Pegasus Farms in Hartville operates a vermicompost operation and produces and sells worm castings.

That is where I purchase castings for my gardening needs.

Pegasus Farms: A non-profit therapeutic equestrian center. www.pegasusfarm.org

Advice from a Tree

Stand tall and proud

Go out on a limb

Remember your roots

Drink plenty of water

Be content with your natural beauty

Enjoy the view

Sansevieria trifasciata===snake plant, or Mother-in-law tongue

This is one of the easiest houseplants to grow. It is almost indestructible. The plants need little light, moisture, or fertilizer to keep its elegant posture in the home. A number of cultivars are available, and all look great.

The sharp leaves must have reminded someone of a mother-in-law's sharp tongue and the name stuck. Sad and unfair, but occasionally true. The other common name, snake plant, based on its long leaves is a little kinder to members of someone's family.