

NORTH COAST YARD & GARDEN

HORTICULTURAL NEWS AND INFORMATION FOR THE OHIO GARDENER

BY ROGER S. BOLGER
Roger@RogerBolger.com



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IN MY GARDEN

It is nice to sit inside and dream of spring. Temperatures hovering near zero and whistling winter winds raise the fuel bill but indoors it is warm and dry. Cold weather raises the fuel bill for wildlife, too, but instead of burning gas or electricity, animals burn calories.

At this time of year, natural food supplies begin to run out. Even in a normal winter, food becomes scarce by late February. The mild start to the winter may actually have made food scarcer. Seeds and berries that might have been covered with snow were exposed and eaten in early winter, eliminating a resource that would normally appear in late winter as snow begins to melt. Hibernating animals may have stayed active longer, using up extra food to maintain their normal metabolisms. Caches of food stored by squirrels, birds and other critters may have begun to rot in the mild conditions late last year.

Lack of food means lack of fuel to keep animals warm and alive. Supplemental food from gardeners is an important resource for the suburban wildlife population, since there are more creatures but fewer natural resources per acre than would exist in wilderness. The animals turn the food into fertilizer for your plants, and perhaps will find and eat a few hibernating harmful insects. Feeding wildlife also brings life and activity to the winter garden.



An American red squirrel
(*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*)
enjoys cracked corn.

A variety of foods in several locations will attract a greater diversity of creatures. Scatter a basic bird seed mix on the patio for squirrels and ground feeding birds like juncos, mourning doves, white-throated sparrows and finches. Include small bits of apple, raisins or currants for stay-at-home robins. Rabbits also enjoy this seed, as evidenced by their tracks in fresh snow, or even seeing a rabbit in the predawn hours.

Wire mesh feeders filled with a nut mix attract woodpeckers, nuthatches, blue jays, chickadees and titmice. Nyjer seed draws finches, while oil sunflower and safflower seed appeals to cardinals. Suet is high in calories and is relished by many birds.

Water is very helpful in winter. It requires a tremendous amount of calories to melt snow, so a source of liquid water will be your strongest wildlife attractor.

Somehow the indoors is more comfortable knowing the winter garden provides succor to neighborhood animals.

FEATURED TREE OR SHRUB

COLORFUL CONIFERS

The backbone of any North Coast garden or landscape is the evergreens in the landscape. Deciduous plants are bare of leaves for half their lives – November through April, six months out of every year. Needled or broad-leaved evergreens are the main performers at this time of year, and provide structure and stability to the landscape year-round.

Landscaping with evergreens doesn't have to be a monochrome experience. A number of trees and shrubs have lots of color to offer, both seasonally and throughout the year.



Weeping Blue Atlas Cedar
(*Cedrus atlantica* 'Glauca Pendula')
Photo: Oregon State University

Blue conifers make the landscape seem larger because the blue coloration mimics the atmospheric haze of objects seen at a distance. Most people are familiar with blue Colorado spruce (*Picea pungens* 'Glauca'). The long needles of blue Korean pine (*Pinus koraiensis* 'Glauca') offer a softer look in a large conifer. For a specimen tree with a graceful arching form, reminiscent of water splashing over rocks, look for weeping atlas cedar (*Cedrus atlantica* 'Glauca Pendula'). Give this tree a sheltered location with plenty of space to

spread (at least fifteen feet), and train its main branches when it is young, and in a few years it will reward you with a majestic focal point that garden visitors will envy. Blue star juniper (*Juniperus squamata* 'Blue Star') is an excellent choice for a small blue shrub that will max out at three feet tall and wide. 'Blue Rug' and 'Blue Chip' creeping juniper (*Juniperus horizontalis*) form wide mats over six feet across but less than one foot high.

Golden yellow evergreens go a long way to brighten up a dormant landscape. Gold mugo pine (*Pinus mugo* 'Aurea') forms a mound of green needles up to six feet tall and wide, but winter cold blanches the outer needles to a sunny yellow. Gold Coin Scotch pine (*Pinus sylvestris* 'Gold Coin') will grow to thirty feet tall and almost as wide, and is similarly green in summer but transforms into a brilliant golden orange when the chill winds blow.

Hinoki Falsecypress (*Chamaecyparis obtusa*) has arborvitae-like foliage in fan-shaped sprays, and grows into pleasingly layered forms as if it always wanted to be a bonsai specimen. This upright evergreen grows slowly to fifteen or more feet tall and about five feet wide. There are numerous gold-tipped forms, including 'Fernspray Gold', 'Gold Fern' and 'Crippsii'. The eastern arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis*) 'Rheingold' offers similar color in a more regular, conical form up to four feet high and wide.

Sawara falsecypress (*Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Filifera') has sagging stringy branches and forms mounds up to six feet high and wide. 'Mops' is a pleasant gold color, and the name perfectly describes its appearance when young, like the head of a string mop. 'Filifera Aurea' and 'Filifera Sungold' are other excellent options. For a low-spreading yellow evergreen, try

Juniperus horizontalis 'Mother Lode', which spreads two to three feet wide but grows only a few inches tall.



A mixture of evergreens and deciduous plants makes an interesting balance of plants in a well designed landscape. Varying the colors, sizes and textures of those evergreens provides interest in the winter when the garden can seem barren.

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

STARTING SEEDS INDOORS

Growing your own plants from seed is an economical and enjoyable way to obtain plants for your spring gardens. Seed packets are inexpensive, and many more varieties are available as seeds than as started plants. Raising plants from seed gives you the opportunity to learn and understand those plants better, and gives you the satisfaction of knowing that you produced those plants entirely by yourself.

Most of the equipment required is simple. Start with a sterile seed starting soil mix with plenty of milled sphagnum moss in it.

The sphagnum moss has natural properties that discourage *Pythium*, a common fungus that kills seedlings. A shallow tray with "six-pack" inserts, peat pots, or paper cups with drain holes provides the containers for the soil. Be sure to use plant markers, Popsicle sticks, or some other method of labeling your pots or you will easily forget what was planted.

The most important element in seed starting is light. Seeds will not germinate without exposure to light, so be sure to plant the seeds no deeper than the seed packet instructs. A bright windowsill provides plenty of light for starting seeds, but many people use artificial lights to get the seeds going. Fluorescent light fixtures work well, and ideally you should have some way of raising the plants or lowering the lights so they remain about two inches from the soil or tops of the plants. As the seedlings grow, the light will need to be moved regularly to keep from overheating the young plants. Incandescent bulbs give off more heat, so keep them at least eighteen inches above the top leaves.

A timer is generally not necessary for a light fixture for seedlings. The light can be kept on twenty-four hours a day to provide maximum energy to the young seedlings. By the time the plants reach the stage where they need darkness to trigger blooming, they will have been outdoors for weeks. The extra hours also help make up for the weakness of artificial light compared to sunlight.

Keep the soil damp but not wet as you wait for the seedlings to emerge. It is best to add water to the tray and let the soil soak it up instead of pouring water over the top of the soil. Otherwise the force of the water may uncover the seeds or force them too deep into the soil. Be sure to pour out any

water that remains in the tray after about twenty minutes.

Once the seedlings come up, they will grow quickly. The goal is to get plants that have completely filled their containers just at the time they are ready to be transplanted to the garden. If seeds are started too soon, they will grow too large for their pots and require potting on into larger containers. If they are started too late they will be smaller than they could be and blooming or harvest will be delayed. Since each plant is transplanted at a different time of spring, and each seed takes a different amount of time to sprout and grow, this can be a challenge to figure out. I have compiled a calendar for the North Coast region that gives approximate calendar dates for starting seeds and transplanting them based on Cleveland, Ohio average last frost dates. It is available free on my website at this address:

www.RogerBolger.com/Seed_Calendar.pdf

Growing your own plants from seed is very rewarding and easy enough for anyone to be successful. Start small with one or two types of plants, and soon you will be hooked on the experience of starting your garden from scratch and the tremendous selection of seed varieties that are available.

GARDEN CALENDAR

- Make sure garden equipment is ready for spring tasks.

- Make final plans for spring gardens.
- Reapply anti-desiccant to evergreens when weather allows.
- Enjoy watching birds for the Great Backyard Bird Count. Count the birds you see for at least 15 minutes February 16th through the 19th and report your findings to help scientists understand wild birds. See the site www.birdsource.org/gbbc for details.
- Visit a garden center, gardening class or seminar to forget winter weather.
- Get all your seed starting supplies set up to begin growing seed.
- Start broccoli, cabbage and parsley seed indoors.
- Inspect houseplants for problems and signs of over watering.
- Check newly planted trees for frost cracks or sunscald injury, especially on the southwest side. Wrap the trunks of vulnerable trees like maples and lindens to protect them from injury.
- Do not worry about bulbs that have sent up leaves. Even if the foliage browns on the tips, the flower bud is still deep underground and is unharmed.
- Your Valentine's Day roses may develop drooping heads due to air bubbles in the stem. If this happens, float the flower and stem in warm water. Trim the stem on an angle below the water surface and gently straighten the flower head. Leave it in the water for half an hour before moving it back into its vase.



ROGER S. BOLGER HAS OVER TEN YEARS OF PROFESSIONAL HORTICULTURAL EXPERIENCE AND HAS GARDENED ALL HIS LIFE IN NORTHEAST OHIO. HE HAS GIVEN DOZENS OF GARDENING TALKS AND SPECIALIZES IN WOODY PLANTS, PERENNIALS, TURF, ENTOMOLOGY, INTEGRATED PEST MANAGEMENT, ORGANIC GARDENING, PONDS AND BACKYARD WILDLIFE.

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