

The January Gardener – Planning Ahead
By Teresa Gaffner, Master Gardener

Happy New Year to everyone, welcome to 2024! We passed the Winter Solstice on December 21, 2023, and now the days are getting longer. Be forewarned though, January is often the coldest month in east Tennessee.

Right now is the best time for planning your spring and summer gardens. You could start by making a garden layout, mapping a garden design is a good way to see how many seedlings you will need and the best areas to plant them in. With this system you can schedule planting and harvesting times and know how to prepare each garden bed. When looking through seed catalogues for the best choices for your garden, remember what worked best and what didn't in last year's flower and vegetable beds. Be sure to pick out some new varieties to try. There is a lot of good information about garden planning to be found in this link from the University of Georgia: <https://extension.uga.edu/publications/detail.html?number=B577&title=home-gardening#:~:text=Sometime%20during%20the%20winter%2C%20make.and%20the%20time%20of%20planting.>

When buying seeds for your spring and summer plantings, all the information you need to help you make the right decisions is there on the outside of the seed packet. A photograph or a drawing of the plant when it is fully mature will be on the front panel along with its common and scientific names. Both are good to know because scientific names make it easier to find specific plants and it shows which plants are related.

There will also be a description of plant attributes such as size, color, and blossom type. The plant will be listed as either an annual, biennial or as a perennial. Annuals grow for one season and then die off. Zinnias are a good example of a true annual. You must replant zinnias every year. Biennials take two years to grow from seed to maturity and then die off. Hollyhocks and forget-me-nots are two beautiful examples. Perennials come back year after year and include some local favorites, such as hostas, lavender, and peonies.

Planting depths, zone information, harvesting times and disease resistance will also be easy to find typically on the back of the package. One of the most important things to look for on the seed packet is the packed for/sell by date. This date ensures the seeds you buy are viable, meaning they will have the best germination rate.

Seed libraries are a good starting point for expert advice on local plant seeds, planting guides and resources. Check your local library to see if they have one or use the link that follows to the seed library at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. Anyone can request seeds and information from the 3 seed libraries are housed there. Check out this link to access their catalogues and resources. <https://libguides.utk.edu/seedlibrary>

Not all of January's gardening needs to be done from the comfort of your favorite armchair. You can still add mulch to your garden beds and clean up never stops. Be on the look-out for fallen and split branches. Take care of them before they become an issue. If you had a natural Christmas tree this year, after removing all the decorations and tinsel, you might consider putting

it out at the back of your garden to provide shelter for wildlife. Our native, local wintering birds need food, water, and shelter. Consider providing that for them by putting up a birdhouse, feeder, or a water source. It's a great family project and you can all learn to identify your local birds as they come to feed and shelter. You can find some helpful information on how to do just that at these 2 links:

“Providing Winter Habitat for Non-migratory Birds”,
<https://gardens.si.edu/learn/blog/providing-winter-habitat-for-non-migratory-birds/>

“Winter Bird Feeding – The Basics”,
<https://extension.psu.edu/winter-bird-feeding-the-basics>

There's always something to do related to gardening. It is one of those hobbies that makes us smile every day of the year. Happy New Year of gardening!

There's still time to sign up! **NEW CLASS:** The next University of Tennessee Master Gardener class at the Sullivan County Extension Office located at 140 Spurgeon Ln, Blountville, TN. starts on **January 30, 2024** and continues every Tuesday for 14 weeks from **10AM – 12noon.**

Call the Extension Office for information and application form.

423-574-1919

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.