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JANUARY 2021

Meet our new Greenhouse Manager. Learn different techniques for winterizing plants.



Happy New Year to All,

It hardly seems possible that we are more than halfway through January. Even though the days are barely longer than they were last month it definitely has an effect on the natural world. Plants in the greenhouses are starting to show some new growth. Outdoors, daffodils are breaking through the ground, and buds on Edgeworthia (Paper Bush) and Witch Hazels are showing that spring is not all that far away. So far the winter has been a fairly mild one. While we have been in the lower 20s at night a few times, I don't think we have had one day when it has been below freezing. In another month some of the early flowering bulbs such as snowdrop and crocus will be in bloom to be quickly followed by early daffodils and Lenten rose.

Here at MBG, we are working on preparations for our Spring Plant Sale. Plants that we propagated last summer will be moved up into larger pots and new plant material will need attention as it arrives filling up the greenhouses and other growing spaces. On days when it is dry enough to work the ground, we will plant trees and other woody plants and prepare beds for spring planting.

In this *Vine Line* our newest employee, Tyler Taylor, our new Greenhouse Manager, will introduce himself and do a short explanation of how he views the cultivation of plants from a very natural,

and yet, scientific approach. It is refreshing to me to see someone from the younger generation with lots of enthusiasm taking a thoughtful and realistic approach to growing plants. I think our greenhouse operation will prosper under his care. Our volunteers and staff will certainly benefit from his knowledge and expertise.

Blair Combest, who manages our Urban Garden, will talk about how he manages to handle his busy life and garden as a vocation at the same time. He will tell us why we follow some practices to put our gardens to bed for the winter and why they work. Blair's approach to what he writes is always entertaining.



If you have indoor plants, remember we have more cloudy than sunny days at this time of year. It is difficult to give them too much light. A light misting every morning helps and if occasionally they can make a trip to the kitchen sink or for really large plants to the bathtub to be rinsed off for a couple of minutes with lukewarm water they will take on a new lease on life. Once we get to mid-February you can start giving them a little water-soluble fertilizer. Don't do it before then, because with shorter days it will cause them to make weak spindly growth.

This is also a good time to do pruning of deciduous trees and shrubs because it is easy to see their shape while they are devoid of foliage. If you have roses, I would wait until late February to prune them. You can remove dead tops from perennials and ornamental grasses, but don't remove any protective mulch until the first of March. There is always plenty to do in a garden any time of year!

Happy Gardening to All,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rick Powell". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

MBG Director of Horticulture



Meet the New MBG Greenhouse Manager

By Tyler Taylor, MBG Greenhouse Manager

Greetings Fellow Plant People!

My name is Tyler Taylor, and I am very excited to start my new position managing the greenhouses at the Garden. I am a Memphis native who grew up in the garden crawling through my Grandpap's blackberry jungle to pick the hard-to-reach berries or hoeing weeds in my Peepaw's giant tomato patches. Plants were always of interest to me, but they quickly became a passion of mine in the past decade from starting with growing a few herbs and tomatoes on my back porch during college to spearheading a 2-acre urban farm and community garden right across Goodlett in the Normal Station neighborhood. The deeper that I delve into the world of plant biology the more entrenched my belief becomes - plants will truly save us all one day.

Through my urban farming years, I became very fascinated with soil ecology, and if I'm being truly candid, that's where my real passion lies. There's lots of new interest in recent years in the realm of "gut health" and how the flora and fauna of our digestive system plays an important role in our immune system as humans, but imagine if our gut were also our brain – this is the true phenomena of plants. The rhizosphere of the plant is one of the most important parts of the environment for a plant, and ultimately that's what plant cultivation is – environmental cultivation.

This interest in soil ecology and a living rhizosphere brought me to my current level of understanding regarding "controlling your grow environment." In 2017, I moved out to Oregon for a year to work with my cousin who was the Master Grower on a medical cannabis operation outside Sheridan, OR. There I quickly learned that when dealing with sealed-off growing environments you really are "playing nature," and that is no small task. But nature doesn't

micromanage or overextend herself, nature relies on a community of microorganisms, insects, fungi, etc. to symbiotically accomplish a goal (humans could learn a thing or two).

It was here that I fine-tuned my understanding of cultivating an environment for plants beyond just the rhizosphere, and I picked up my annoying tagline which you will undoubtedly hear me say if you ever spend a day with me in the Garden: "Don't cultivate plants, cultivate an environment for plants." The plant doesn't need your help; the plant just needs the proper environment to thrive. Ultimately, we have really over-complicated many of the botanical processes by ignoring this.



My days at the Garden consist mainly of monitoring temperature and relative humidity in each grow house, watering plants, propagating or dividing up a diverse array of plants, checking on the beneficial insects I've released, constantly shuffling plants around, maintaining a weekly OMRI IPM regimen, and mostly, just paying attention to detail and taking note of changes that I've made and how different plants have responded to those changes.

Away from MBG, I work on my home garden which occupies the entirety of my front yard, caring for my chickens, snuggling with my two dogs and cat, and enjoying the company of my lovely wife while talking her ear off with extraneous plant information.

I am excited to be a part of the MBG family and look forward to learning whatever I can from the many talented people here and to implementing the various practices that I've learned and perfected over the past decade. I believe the rule for plant cultivation is the rule to a healthy life overall on this planet – cultivate your environment.



Rants About Winter and Plants

By Blair Combest, MBG Horticulturist

Please don't come to my house right now expecting to see a well-manicured lawn, cozy perennials, winter interest, or pansies. I have none of that, you see. There, I have an azalea, a wife, a 15-month old baby boy, a puppy, a dog, a cat, six hens, and a hot-water heater that seems to display such a hatred for me—and demand such attention—that one could deduce that the blasted thing is alive; or at the very least is an in-law. For the remaining forty hours of the week, I try to be a gardener, but this time of year I am busy planning, decorating, and working Holiday Wonders at the Garden. But some things take priority over others, and one is putting perennials to sleep for the winter. If you come here and ask around about winterizing plants you may hear several differing opinions.

The holiday season is full of sugary things. Maybe fattening foods and treats and drinks were once a necessity to provide our bodies with a metabolic plan b in case sustenance became scarce in the deep of winter. This is no longer the case for most of the modern world but still is as important to overwintering plants as it has ever been. Carbohydrates (sugars) provide plants with energy to grow, repair, and reproduce. Through photosynthesis, they create carbohydrates and then use them throughout the year for these tasks—storing the excess in their roots. Here it can act as an “antifreeze,” lowering the freezing point, and keeping tissues alive underground. In winter, sugar water in the roots can lower the freezing point of plants by six or seven degrees—from 32F to around 25F or 26F. (If this doesn't seem like a big difference to you just realize that only 8 degrees separate boiling water and coffee from some low-end coffee percolators.)

Usually, plants can take care of themselves with little help from us. (Think: millions and millions of years). But if we want them healthy and lovely in the spring—or if they are a little out of their element anyway—we can help them out a bit with a little winter preparation. For instance, once the first few cold snaps had killed off the

foliage of my cannas, I made sure they were labeled, cut them down to four-inch-tall spikes, and covered them with collected pine straw (needles).



The reason I use pine straw instead of mulch, leaves, or straw, is because they have more insulative qualities than the aforesaid. They are oily and shed water, and they knit together forming a kind of blanket—this last ability, says Rick Pudwell, Director of Horticulture, makes them good for mulching on slopes where heavy rains may cause hardwood mulch to simply float away. Pudwell also

suggests pine straw when dealing with potted plants in winter as the roots can freeze on all sides, with the exception of incredibly large pots. He says when winterizing pots, wrapping them in bubble wrap and insulating them with pine straw is the way to go. He notes, “you want a slow freeze and a slow thaw, not an up and down, freeze-thaw, freeze-thaw situation.”

Sherri McCalla, from the Herb Garden, takes a different approach with most of her plants. For instance, with eucalyptus she simply mulches the crown with about three inches of pine straw, and then, in the spring after the threat of frost has passed, she rakes it back and if new growth is present, she then cuts back the old growth above. Jill Maybry, from the Delta and Butterfly Gardens, provides an ecological perspective. “For most of my perennials, I leave them standing until they start looking ‘ratty’ and the seeds have been picked clean by Goldfinches and other wildlife; finally cutting them back in late January or February.” Her logic is that leaving them provides shelter for insects, food for birds, and the old-growth above can help protect the stems and roots from cold wind and rains in marginally hardy species.



Something you want to learn more about?

Email our Director of Horticulture at
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