

A GARDENER'S GUIDE TO SURVIVING WINTER

by Ronnie Brancazio



How do you feel about winter? I'll tell you how I feel. Unless you are someone who skis or snowboards (for me, walking on a recently shoveled path is an Olympic sport), thinks snow is beautiful (not if you have a corner house in Queens with seemingly miles of sidewalks to shovel, like me), or describes bitter-cold weather as "brisk" and "bracing" (I prefer "miserable" and "godawful"), winter has one purpose only. And that is to make us really appreciate spring when it finally arrives!



Yes, I do love the change of seasons, and think the Northeast is the best place to live in the US. If it weren't for the change of seasons we wouldn't get to appreciate the life cycles of growing things, with all the beauty and fascinating transformations involved. What is more delightful than that first emergence of tiny, almost glowing, yellow-green buds on many of our trees? Or the first buds of - well - *any* flower? They are all miraculous! Almost every day in early spring brings new surprises and delights.

And fall is equally amazing. Not just the spectacular color changes of so many trees and shrubs, but the tiny wonder of flowers morphing into seed pods or other means of reproduction, and possibly seeing lovely berries, dramatic peeling bark, and more.

OK, I admit it, winter has its own special beauty as well. Bare tree trunks, the twisted or fanciful shapes of branches and vines, the lingering berries, seed pods and dried flowers on some perennials, and of course knowing that so many creatures are taking refuge and completing their own life cycles in the garden debris.

If you live surrounded by palm trees or cacti or tumbleweed, you will be missing out on all this drama and wonder. Sure, all those plants do reproduce, but not so you'd notice in your lifetime!

I guess what I would really like is a trade-off, with maybe one month of winter and the other months added on to the "good" seasons! But I don't think the earth can alter it's revolutions around the sun to suit my fancy, so the next best thing is to learn how to cope and make the most of what we have.

As with all arts, gardening requires that we put out a burst of energy and activity, and then take time to rest, renew, and restore ourselves. That, I think, is my positive spin on winter!

Here are some of the things that help me through the process. I'm sure most are very familiar to all of you, but I think it's nice to share common experiences, and perhaps some of my ideas will point you in a new direction.

READING MATTER:

Books, magazines, online articles - and the corner of a couch, a mushy throw pillow, and a cup of coffee or tea. What could be better? (Dog or cat curled up next to you is optional but desirable). Over the years I have accumulated so many garden books that it's scary, and I always resolve to dip into them but I never seem to. This past year I was gifted with some very special books involving botanical illustration as well as gardening, so I will be not dipping but diving into them!

I love magazines and subscribe to several gardening mags, and that's where I get some of my best ideas and inspiration. Each has its own style and something different to offer, so I enjoy them all. If I had to select one as the best, though, I would have to say **Fine Gardening**, for the quality of the writing, photography, and content. I am also loyal to **Horticulture**, which is less polished but also very professional and informative. As a member of the American Horticulture Society I receive their publication **American Gardener**, which also has many good articles but is not quite as much fun to read (maybe too much AHS business). Finally, I went ahead and subscribed to a magazine called **Gardens Illustrated**, which is perfect for you if you are British, wealthy, and have acres to plant on! The photos are indeed beautiful, so I enjoy them and mostly skip the articles. Considering that it is quite pricy, that's not good enough. Also it's printed in a large format with thick pages, making it very hard to read in bed, which I like to do! So I won't be renewing that one. I know there are others as well, but from their advertising I get the feeling that they are not of such great quality. I could be wrong though, so let me know if you have recommendations. When I finish reading my mags I bring them to our LIHS meetings, so check them out and decide if any appeal to you.

Online garden information is limitless and quite overwhelming so I use it mostly to get answers to specific questions, and to educate myself before trying new ideas or buying EVEN MORE plants. I am finding that no matter how off-the-wall or obscure a question is, someone out there has thought of it already and will have an answer for you! Amazing!

INDOOR GARDEN PROJECTS:

Those of you who are lucky enough to have the right window lighting can indulge in the care of your **houseplants**, perhaps adding to your collection with more exotic or challenging varieties. I am not so fortunate, and the only really good exposure I have is in my guest bedrooms where I overwinter the hanging and potted plants which would not survive in their homes on my unheated porch. It makes the guest rooms nicer, but is not much fun for me. I do, however, make a sort of project wintering over some of my tender outdoor perennials and tropicals, which I cut back, bring indoors, and (mostly) keep alive in that unheated porch.

For many, there is the fascinating and varied topic of **propagation**. Perhaps you have brought in stem cuttings from favorite annuals and can watch them root and grow, or you are starting new plants from leaf cuttings, root segments, or whatever (probably from the LIHS Raffle!). That's where the online research comes in, because it has the latest information and often you can find YouTube videos as well.

Forcing bulbs is great fun, and rewards you just when you are getting really tired of winter and need a burst of color and joy!

Propagation from Seeds is a wonderful winter project, which spreads out over the long winter months. First is getting the SEED CATALOGS and studying them over and over. I recommend spending many hours designing the perfect garden, listing all the seeds you need, and then picking out a few more simply because the photos are so gorgeous. Next is BUYING THE SEEDS and realizing that if you owned all of New Jersey you wouldn't have the space to plant them all. Next is ignoring that fact and figuring out the best PROPAGATION METHOD from the many possibilities, all of which can be successful. Mine is to use Jumbo size Jiffy pots, sow a few seeds in each, and place under grow-lights in my basement.

You now have to be patient and wait until the right time to PLANT each variety, since if you plant too soon you will have leggy, pitiful specimens. After that you have about 6 - 8 weeks of watering, feeding, thinning out, pinching back, and possibly transplanting seedlings to bigger pots until the time

arrives to - PLANT OUTSIDE! Oops, I forgot HARDENING OFF, in which you shlep the trays of seedlings outside for a few hours each day, then inside overnight or in bad weather, for a week or so, before planting them in their final home. Sound like fun? Actually, it is!

I used to start about 200 annual seedlings that way every winter and loved it. With increasing age and decreasing energy I only do about 30 now, but I still get a thrill from those first emerging leaves!

HORTICULTURAL CRAFTS:

This is my favorite territory since I have done various crafts for many years, but winter is the perfect time to learn a new craft or renew a past interest, maybe drag out some supplies that have been lurking in the bottom of a closet for years.

My #1 art/craft, as many of you know, is **Flower Pressing**, which is actually a very simple undertaking with very basic supplies and modest expenses. The one catch is that unless you have been pressing flowers and leaves during the growing season, you won't have the materials you need for this winter. Keep it in mind for next year though, and see me for suggestions.

Another wonderful activity is to go through your **Garden Photos** and print some out (or let Staples do that step), then create a framed collage, grouping, or other project. Another excellent horticultural photo project is to print and display one or more of your garden photos on the LIHS Exhibition Table! Or enter it (them) in our Botanical Arts Competition!

Finally, the best way to stay connected to your own garden and the gardens of others, and continue to feel creative and energized, is to come to the LIHS meetings and share ideas with others!

Please let me know how YOU make the most of the winter months, and what keeps you focused on your garden when you can't get your hands into the soil. [You can email me at peteron@verizon.net.]

