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Spring Is Coming to the Gardens

by Joan Andersen

The first of the Gardens' annual plants will be delivered in late March, and thousands of baby annuals will be transplanted from the "plug" trays, where they were germinated, into larger pots, where they will grow until they are planted outside in late spring. I talked to Nia Primus, Garden Supervisor, about the flowers we can expect to see this spring. Weather permitting, the show should begin around mid-May.

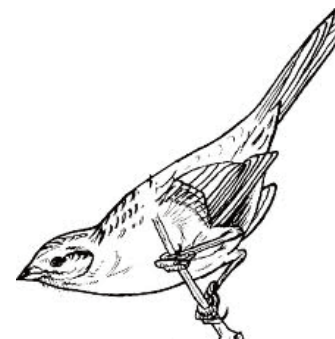
In 2010, many new tulips were planted for bloom in spring 2011. Because of their expense, they are planted with the hope that they will come back for several years. Nia took photos of the plantings when they bloomed last spring and then evaluated the areas again in the fall to see how they looked. If the areas looked too bare, they were replanted. After the tulips die back in the spring, they are overplanted with annuals.

Tulips can be found throughout the Gardens. A new area of the formal garden along Kilian Boulevard is planted with purple and yellow tulips plus daffodils and muscari. If you drive by and see these in bloom, you will know it is time to park your car and visit the Gardens!

At the south end of Clemens Gardens, look in the Treillage Garden, where four areas of tulips and other spring bulbs have been planted, each in

*Continued on page 3 • Spring***Seen These Birds
In Munsinger?**

by Donna Gorrell



We generally go to Munsinger Gardens to see the flowers and other plantings, the ponds, the river—not the birds. But the birds are there too, and they're as intent as we are on enjoying the Gardens' outdoor life. As they go about their business—searching for food, gliding about, singing their songs—they do occasionally intrude on our awareness. Here's a partial list of some of the birds I see as I walk the paths or sit on a bench and listen. You've probably seen them too. I start with some familiar small birds.

Song Sparrow. This tiny bird likes to sit on a branch of a small tree overlooking the river as it trills its melody. Unless it's singing, you probably wouldn't see it; even then it's hard to locate with its brownish coloring and pale striped breast. And because these vocalists don't normally flock like some other sparrows do, you would probably see only one or two of them. It's the song that draws your attention, beginning with three or four bright, repetitious notes and then lapsing into a brief melody. The whole pattern continues over and over. When you hear it you'll know it: "That must be the song sparrow."

Red-Eyed Vireo. This is another small tree-loving bird with a distinctive, seemingly endless sound (something like asking and answering the same question—*who me? it's me*—over and over). This vireo really does have a red eye, though you're not likely to see it. You're even lucky if you can locate the olive-backed bird as it hops from branch to thickly leaved branch near the tops of big trees, searching for insects. If you do happen to come close to finding it by sound, and you happen to have binoculars along, look for the white stripe over its red eye.

Black-Capped Chickadee. And of course you know this little black-and-white-and-gray bird. We can find it all year round singing its little *dee-dee* or *chick-a-dee-dee*. You may have it coming to your bird feeder for sunflower seeds. Chickadees usually hang out together in pairs, though in the winter they're often in groups, probably to huddle together as they shiver to keep warm.

Continued on page 9 • Birds

Blueberries are a BOGO

by Carl Hoffman

Meaning “Buy One, Get One” (free or at a lower price), BOGO has become an acronym in our marketing vernacular. Depending on the price of the original item, this may or may not be a good deal for the buyer, and the savvy shopper is wary. A BOGO that is a sure deal is a blueberry plant because, regardless of your reason for adding the plant to your landscape, you get something free. If you plant a blueberry for its fruit, you get a beautiful landscape plant free. On the other hand, if you purchase the plant for its landscape value, you get its fruit free.

Blueberries have become very popular for their fruit, which has not only a unique flavor but also well-documented health benefits. Their white blossoms in late spring, glossy green leaves in summer, and striking red foliage in autumn make them a popular landscape plant. Blueberries are a perfect fit in the edible landscaping movement.

Blueberries do, however, come with a caveat in that their demand for special growing conditions can present a challenge for the gardener. They require an acidic, well drained, organic rich soil that is common in very few landscape situations in Minnesota. Blueberries require full sun for optimum yield of fruit and quality plants. The soil pH should be in the range of 4.0 to 5.0 and have greater than 3% organic matter. Many soils can be amended to fit the demands of blueberries, but it is important to note that once the plants are established the acidity level must be monitored and maintained over the life of the planting.

It is imperative that the soil in the plot where you plan to grow blueberries be tested to determine the pH of the soil. Many of the soils in this area have a pH level in the range of 6.5 to 7.2, which is too basic for blueberries and must be acidified. Contact your local extension office for instructions and a sample kit. If

the pH is too basic, the plant growth will be impaired and the foliage turns yellow. If the condition continues, the plants will perish. I must stress that it is important to amend the soil before the plants are purchased and planted, ideally a year ahead.

Pine needles make ideal surface mulch for the plants, but contrary to common belief they have little or no effect on acidifying the soil. In “Blueberries for the Home Garden,” a University of Minnesota Extension publication written by Hoover, Rosen, and Luby, the authors recommend the following methods for acidifying the soil for blueberry plants.

If the pH is between 5.5 and 7.0, and the soil texture is sandy to sandy loam, the soil can be sufficiently acidified by incorporating acid peat. Mix four to six inches of acid peat into the top six to eight inches of the soil. In addition to acidifying the soil, the peat increases the organic content.



Although it takes at least one year to adjust the pH, elemental sulfur is an economical way to adjust the pH. For 50 cubic feet of sandy soil (the amount of soil in a space ten feet by ten feet by six inches deep), use two pounds of elemental sulfur to lower the pH one point. Loam soils require three to six pounds to get the same result. Iron sulfate (ferrous sulfate) will give the same results in less than one month, but the cost is greater. Multiply the rate of elemental sulfur needed by six to determine the required amount of iron sulfate. Aluminum sulfate, which is used to acidify the soil for hydrangea plants, should not be used for blueberries because the high rate of this compound can be toxic to roots.

If your soil has a pH greater than 7.0 and if it is a heavy, poorly drained soil, it is best to grow the blueberries in a raised bed or raised planting area. I have devoted a lot of space to amending the soil for blueberries because they are long-lived plants and proper preparation of the

soil is a wise investment. A well maintained blueberry planting may live 30 to 50 years.

Careful selection of blueberry cultivars is very important. Winter hardiness must be a consideration, as well as production and growth habits of the plants. There are seven cultivars recommended by the University of Minnesota, six of which are releases from the fruit breeding program. These seven cultivars are Northland, Northblue, Northcountry, Northsky, St. Cloud, Polaris, and Chippewa. They range in height from 12 inches to 40 inches, and their spread is from 24 inches to 60 inches. They vary in yield from one pound to nine pounds of berries per bush. It is recommended to plant at least two varieties, because cross pollination will produce more berries of larger size. Patience is necessary. Bare root plants will begin producing fruit two to three years after they are planted but will not reach full productivity and bush size for eight or more years.

Blueberries are relatively free of insect and disease pests, but the fruit is very attractive to birds, and the plants are rabbit candy, particularly in the winter time. Unless the goal of the planting is to attract birds, some kind of netting is necessary during the ripening period. If rabbits are a problem, enclose the plants with a fine poultry netting fence that is high enough to keep the rabbits from going over it when the snow is deep.

Although it may appear otherwise, the purpose of this article is not to discourage you from planting blueberries. Blueberry plants produce delicious, healthy fruits on plants that are an asset to the home landscape. You will have a successful, long-lived planting if you choose a sunny site, amend and prepare the soil before you plant, purchase recommended varieties from a reputable source, and use good maintenance practices. The probability of failure is high if you purchase the plants on an impulse and then make an attempt to amend the soil after they are planted.

To learn specific characteristics of the blueberry cultivars as well as additional information on preparing the soil and proper cultural practices, go to the University of Minnesota Extension website at www.extension.umn.edu and put “blueberries” in the search box.

White Garden

by Carole Pike

White seems like a strange color for a one-color garden. Even author Vita Sackville-West had doubts when planning her famous white garden at Sissinghurst Castle in Kent, England. She wrote about her plans for a gray, green, and white garden in her book *In Your Garden*. "This is an experiment which I ardently hope may be successful, although I doubt it," she wrote in 1951.

In 1994 when David Morreim, Saint Cloud nursery supervisor, planned to expand Clemens Gardens, he studied the size and topography of the area south of the Rest Area Garden and thought it would be a good spot for a formal herb garden. He talked to Virginia Clemens about the idea but she was not very enthusiastic. "I like white flowers," she said. "As long as it's a small area why not do an all-white garden."

After researching every book and magazine item he could find about the garden at Sissinghurst, Morreim and his crew began work on a white garden. William Clemens stopped by one day as they were laying the center path and asked Morreim where he got the idea. After hearing the answer, Clemens said, "I think you should go there," and David set out for England.

In 1930 Sackville-West and her husband Sir Harold Nicolson purchased Sissinghurst Castle, a series of run-down cottages, two towers, and overgrown underbrush. Sackville-West found the rose-colored brick of

the buildings beautiful and romantic. She also discovered that several hundred years earlier the estate had been owned by one of her ancestors. Sackville-West and Nicolson paid 12,000 British pounds or \$20,000 for the property and set about transforming it. They also purchased the castle farm. Every time Sackville-West wrote a book, she spent the proceeds on more land. Between 1932 and 1940 the pair and their staff planted hedges and laid out the borders of the gardens. With the onset of World War II the workers joined the army, and the couple turned some of the space into vegetable gardens, maintaining everything as best they could. They enlisted a donkey to pull the lawn mower. It wore booties to keep its hooves from damaging the turf, and a straw hat.


After the war they continued to transform the area, dividing it into a series of rooms each filled with an informal arrangement of plants around a certain theme. Sackville-West wrote her novels and newspaper columns in the tower of the castle. She enjoyed walking through the white garden in the moonlight watching for the white barn owl to swoop overhead.

When Morreim arrived at Sissinghurst, he found a garden almost the same size as the one in Clemens Gardens. A high yew hedge formed a background on one side with a strip of box edging along another side. A flagstone path divided it in half. Tall white Regale lilies came up through the gray of artemesia and cotton lavender. Dianthus formed the edg-

ing. Depending on the season, white pansies or peonies or irises provided drama.

Morreim inventoried the gray, green, and white plants. He could not create an exact replica of the garden here because not all of the plants are Minnesota hardy; however, he was able to use about two-thirds of the varieties he saw at Sissinghurst. Morreim tried growing the white rose (*Rosa longicuspis*) on the bowers but it did not bloom here. A white tulip almost turned into a catastrophe when it bloomed a pale yellow, but after one day it turned to ivory. Having plants revert to their original color provided another challenge. Some of the delphinium seedlings bloomed blue. "Anything not white had to go," Morreim said. Robinson Iron provided the planters, arbors, and posts with finials reminiscent of the castle.

Sackville-West must have approved of her experiment; and visitors to the Clemens White Garden surely agree that white makes a stunning one-color garden.



<h2>Clemens Gardens</h2> <p><i>Documenting History</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">1985 • Formal Garden1989 • Rose Garden1993 • Rest Area Garden1994 • White Garden1995 • Perennial Garden1996 • Treillage Garden

Spring • Continued from page 1

different colors for a bright spring show that can be seen from a distance. Since there are no blue tulips, cammasia (wild hyacinth) and hyacinth are planted for spring color in the blue garden. This area also features unusual varieties of allium, which visitors always notice. As you go up the stairs to the Treillage area, look at the spaces to the right and left of the stairs, along the banisters. They have been completely redone in mixed colors and planted with a spring mixture of wild tulips, dwarf daffodils, and muscari called "Aladdin's Carpet."

Another area to notice in late spring is the memorial dome near the Virginia Clemens Rose Garden. It is planted with a soft yellow/pink semi-double tulip called "Pillowtalk." Later, the roses planted here will bloom and annuals will be added to cover the

tulips when they are finished blooming.

When driving down the hill on 13th Street from Kilian toward the lower gardens (Munsinger), look across the street from the Rose Garden to the rock garden on the Froemming lot. Bright creeping phlox will be in full bloom—you can't miss it!

Finally, be sure to wander through Munsinger in your search for spring blooming plants. There is a large collection of sun and shade loving early season plants including bergenia, peonies, bleeding heart, trollius, scilla, pulmonaria, hellebores, and ferns. Munsinger also features some wonderful flowering trees including magnolia, azalea, and rhododendron.

Spring is truly a special time in the Gardens.

What's New in the Rose Garden for 2012

by Joan Andersen

Every year we look forward to seeing our old favorites, but there is always room for new roses. Deb Keiser, Rose Specialist at the Virginia Clemens Rose Garden, does a lot of research before selecting new roses. Besides the new hybrid tea roses she adds to the rose collection, she also trials new unnamed shrub roses for several rose companies and organizations.

The tea roses are tender and are covered with compost and construction blankets for the winter. In a "normal" year, the cover is removed around April 10-15. In 2011, it was April 25! Who knows what will happen this year? Once the roses are uncovered, the compost is pulled back and they are ready to grow. All the roses are labeled so you can write down the names of the ones you like and purchase them for your own garden. Some of the new tender roses that need winter protection are "Bull's Eye" (creamy yellow flowers with a cranberry eye), "Sparkle and Shine" (a yellow floribunda), and "Twilight Zone" (deep velvet purple grandiflora).

Watch for the new tree roses this year. Tree roses feature a rose

grafted on a standard, or stem. They are generally not hardy, because the graft is at the top of the stem and cannot be protected, so they are taken into the greenhouse for the winter. "Renae" is a medium pink with a weeping form that looks beautiful as a tree rose. "Electric Blanket" is a coral/salmon pink.

There is a tremendous interest in smaller shrub roses in our climate because they are grown on their own roots (not grafted) and should need less winter protection. Rose trials are done to find out if shrub roses are truly hardy in our climate, and to see if they show disease resistance and can be grown without spraying for fungal diseases. Roses are planted in the test garden, and also placed in some of the other garden areas to see how they do. The only winter protection is an extra covering of mulch.

Deb also added some roses that are part of the Baileys "Easy Elegance" series of hardy shrub roses, including "Music Box" (light yellow with pink outer petals and buds), "Pinktopia" (a pink rose formerly known as "Pink Pearls"), and "High Voltage" (yellow). She is also planting "Sigrid"—a new addition



to the Northern Accents roses series of "Ole," "Lena," and "Sven." Finally, look for "Party Hardy," a hardy double pink shrub planted along the fence around the Rose Garden.

Some Conard-Pyle roses Deb will be testing for hardiness this year include "Eyeconic" (pink flowers with a red eye), "Thrive" (red flowers with the famous "Knock-out" as a grandparent), and "Coral Drift" and "Peach Drift" (double everblooming groundcover type).

Be sure to visit the Virginia Clemens Rose Garden this year and bring your camera and a notebook to write down the names of your favorite roses. Depending on the weather, the show begins in early to mid June!

Looking for useful and practical advice on caring for your roses?

Rose Education Day

will be held on **Saturday April 28** from **8:00 to noon**
at the Whitney Senior Center, 1527 Northway Drive, St. Cloud.

The sessions are FREE, but you need to preregister by calling Stearns County Extension at 320-255-6169 or 800-450-6171.

Topics and speakers at the event:

- **"What's Bugging My Roses?"**
Jim Beardsley, American Rose Society Master Consulting Rosarian and Minnesota Rose Society member.
- **"An Update on the Northern Earthkind Program."** Dr. David Zlesak, Assistant Professor of Plant and Earth Science at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls and Northern Earth-Kind Rose Trial Coordinator. The Earth-Kind program trials shrub roses for hardiness and disease resistance without using fungicides.
- **"Choosing Hardy Shrub Roses for Small Spaces."** Debra Keiser, Virginia Clemens Rose Gardens Rose Specialist, Stearns County Master Gardener, American Rose Society Consulting Rosarian, and Granite City Rose Society President.

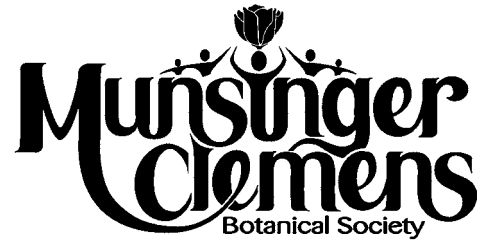
Registration begins at 8:00 am and classes begin at 8:30. • • • Coffee and rolls will be available.

There will be a limited supply of roses for sale at the event.





2012



Photography in the Gardens

Sponsored by Munsinger Clemens Botanical Society

Photos will be judged in two categories:

Landscapes (garden scenery) • **Hardscapes** (decorative features in the Gardens)

1st, 2nd, and 3rd place winners will be chosen from each category.

Any visitor to the Gardens is eligible to enter.

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Entries must be mailed (and received by October 19) or delivered to the **Lake George Municipal Complex**.

Submissions delivered will be accepted October 18, 8:00 am - noon & October 19, 2:00 - 6:00 pm at Municipal Complex.

Photos will be judged Saturday, 9:00 am, October 20, 2012.

Awards will be presented at a Public Reception on October 21, 3:00 pm in the Riverside Greenhouse.

### Guidelines:

- Photos must be taken January through October 19, 2012, in Munsinger and Clemens Gardens. (Photos are now allowed in the Rose Garden.)
- There are two age groups:  
Youth - 18 years  
Adult
- No professional equipment is allowed.
- Pictures must be identified as taken in Munsinger and Clemens Gardens.
- Maximum of three submissions per photographer per category.  
Submission fee is \$10 for each adult entry and \$5 for each youth entry.
- **Printed copy.** Minimum size 8 x 10. Maximum size 16 x 20. All photos must be matted for 16 x 20 frame. Frames will be provided for display of the winning photos.
- **Digital copy.** JPEG of your photo on a CD must accompany the entry. (Be sure to write your name on CD)
- Contest features scenery in the Gardens therefore no people pictures or close ups of flowers.
- Tape completed entry form to back of each photo submitted. Copying of entry form is permissible.
- All digital photos become the property of Munsinger Clemens Botanical Society and will not be returned. All non-winning photos may be picked up at the awards ceremony or at LGMC October 22 - 26, 2012.
- Each entry constitutes permission to print photos without further compensation to the photographer. If used, credit will be given to photographer.
- Prizes: \$100 to 1st place adult winners in each category, \$50 to 1st place youth-18 winners. 2nd & 3rd place winners will receive Award Certificates.

Winners will be notified Saturday, October 20, 2012.



## Photography in the Gardens 2012

This form must be attached to each photo entry · Please Print Clearly

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Photo Entry Title

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

2.  Youth-18  Adult (Select 1)

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

3.  Landscape  Hardscape (Select 1)

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

4. Garden where photo is taken:

Submit by  
October 19, 2012, to:

Lake George Municipal Complex  
1101 7th St. South  
St. Cloud, MN 56301

- Munsinger  Rest Area
- Formal  Rose Garden
- Perennial  White Garden
- Treillage

# Summer in the Gardens - 2012

## Music in the Gardens

June 10  
Granite City Brass

June 24  
Al Asmus Jazz Quarter

July 15  
Gina Chavez Latin Folk Singer

July 29  
Dennis Warner Folk Group

August 12  
Dolce' Wind Quintet

August 26  
Laura Caviani Jazz Quartet

## Art Fair

in the Gardens

Thursday, July 22

10:00 am - 8:00 pm

## Evening

in the Gardens

Tuesday, August 14

6:30 to 8:30 pm  
(members or invitation only)



AMERICAN  
HORTICULTURAL  
SOCIETY

### Reciprocal Admissions Program (RAP)

The AHS RAP Directory is now  
available online in full color.

For a listing of RAP benefits go to:

<http://www.ahs.org/events/reciprocal/index.html>



For up-to-date information visit our website: [www.MunsingerClemens.com](http://www.MunsingerClemens.com)



# Minnesota Hardy Succulents

by William M. Cook

By the time you read this our season will be turning to spring, which is the time my horticultural attentions shift toward outdoor plants again. In recent newsletters I have written on cacti and succulents, many of which are interesting plants but can't make it through a Minnesota winter outdoors. Happily, there are a few groups of succulents which are winter hardy! I will discuss some of these in this space, just in time for you to put them on your spring shopping list.

In Minnesota, the list of conditions needed to grow (selected) cacti and succulents outdoors is fairly short and simple. They want lots of sun and well-draining soils, and in some cases they should be protected from full exposure during the winter. Full sun and a position on a south-facing slope are ideal, and in some cases placement on the south side of a wall or building is appropriate. Soil selection and composition is critical. Most cacti and succulents tolerate nutrient-poor soil, but it must be porous, permeable, and quick-draining. Most plants figure to be happy in a mixture consisting approximately of half garden soil and half drainage material (coarse sand, fine gravel). Some folks that I know have built special growing beds for succulents in which they dug out the existing soil down to 1-2 feet, and built raised beds with specially mixed soil and rock or gravel on top. In general, a rock garden environment is good for succulents. Be careful, however, when adding sand; there is coarse sand and fine sand, and fine sand is very bad for drainage, particularly when there is any clay in the existing soil. Succulents grown outdoors should generally not need to be fertilized or watered much, since they are adapted to poor soils and low precipitation. They should be planted in spring to make sure they are well-established by fall.

Some Minnesota-hardy succulents require no special winter care, but others may need particular attention to survive a winter. There are two main challenges involved with growing succulents outdoors: 1) many don't die back to the ground and 2) some are quite sensitive to excessive moisture.

With regards to #1, plants which remain above-ground during the winter are, like trees and shrubs, much more exposed to wind, sun, desiccation, and cold, especially during a winter like 2011-2012 with poor snow cover. Just being underground or under the snow moderates conditions tremendously (I have placed thermometers in cold-frames during winter, and under deep snow it stays close to 32 degrees no matter how cold the air is). A few seasons ago I planted some hens-and-chicks (*Sempervivum spp.*) in a strawberry pot, and left this on my patio over winter. All but one plant in the strawberry pot died, whereas my plants in the ground did wonderfully. Other plants can take cold temperatures but don't like ice and snow directly on them; for several years I kept some marginally hardy (i.e., Zone 5-ish) *Euphorbia myrsinites* alive by digging a pot into my annual vegetable garden in November, and covering with a plexiglass window and mulch. The one winter I didn't use the plexiglass, they didn't come back (even though the snow cover was good that year). I have seen *E. myrsinites* successfully overwintered in Clemens Gardens under mulch, as well.

With regards to #2 above, conditions in Minnesota are usually pretty dry during the coldest part of the winter, but in fall and spring we can experience the cold and soggy conditions which can be death to cold-hardy cacti. Other than prickly pears, the majority of true cacti that may be worth a try around here are adapted to drier climates mostly to the south and west of us. Here, again, the placement and drainage is important. Placing plastic containers or frames over plants in late fall can again be helpful. This both modifies the temperature somewhat, as discussed above, and protects plants from moisture. Hardy succulents, and particularly cacti, also collect leaves in the fall since they are still above-ground and prickly. Ideally, plant them in places where leaf piles do not naturally form in autumn.

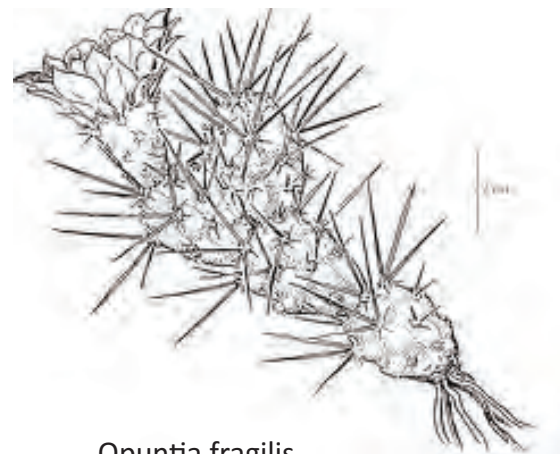
Any lists of Minnesota-hardy succulents have to start with the prickly pears (*Opuntia spp.*). This is a large group (~200 species) of cacti with round and oval pads, which mostly occur in the deserts in southwestern North America and South America. However, there are native prickly pears in most of the United States, including *O. macrorhiza* and *O. fragilis* in Minnesota. *O. fragilis*, the brittle prickly pear, is found as far north as 56 degrees latitude in British Columbia! There is a significant population of *O. fragilis* in Quarry Park. Prickly pears in our area are short plants which slowly spread laterally into a groundcover in full sun. I have five varieties of prickly pears in my backyard, patiently waiting for the snow to melt but otherwise unprotected. Relatives of prickly pears such as certain chollas

(*Cylindropuntia spp.*) can be hardy to Zone 5, but not really around here.

There is a handful of small, round cacti which are hardy or possibly hardy in our area. I have done best with *Coryphantha vivipara*, but there are also members of the genera *Escobaria*, *Pediocactus*, and *Echinocereus* which are often listed as hardy to Zone 4. These are generally not available except through mail order, and if you try to grow these remember that they rot easily, and since they are only 2-3" tall they are easily overgrown by other vegetation in summer.

If you have read previous articles in this series, you will of course remember that there are plenty of other succulents beyond cacti. There are several groups of familiar plants in the Crassulaceae (jade plant family) which may be growing in your garden already. For instance, upright sedums such as "Autumn Joy" are largely indestructible and found all over. There are a number of species of spreading groundcover sedums (including aggressive species such as *S. acre*) which will grow happily in our area, including a couple of species which can be seen in Clemens Gardens. Be careful where you plant some of these species, since they can take over. Sedums are often recommended as green roof plants, since they are tolerant of extreme cold in the winter and hot and dry conditions in the summer. Do note that there are many similar-looking sedums which can only be grown as annuals in our area. Sedums do often die back to the ground for the winter, which gives them an advantage over other succulents. The aforementioned hens-and-chicks (*Sempervivum spp.* plus some close relatives) make great rock garden plants which can be infinitely propagated. There are two places in Clemens and Munsinger Gardens where sempervivums usually grow, one quite obvious, and one fairly hidden.

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*Opuntia fragilis*

# Wimpy Winter Wonderings by Carl Hoffman

With the risk of being redundant, repetitious, and very boring, I am going to write a few thoughts about what we can expect as to the effects of this unusual winter on our landscape plants. Many of us have said or repeatedly heard phrases like “unusual winter,” “abnormal temperatures,” or “where’s the snow?” when describing the winter we are experiencing. Depending on your choice of winter recreation or residence, you may be either enjoying the winter or grumbling about the lack of snow and normal temperatures. Although we are breaking a few records, this is not the most unusual winter on record. On his radio show, Jim Gilbert informed his audience that in the year 2000 the temperatures in early March were in the low 70s and a farmer near Truman, Minnesota, was seeding oats on March 3. Wasn’t 2000 also the year we had single-digit temperatures in early April and the leaf and flower buds on trees and shrubs froze? I distinctly remember a year when I was still in high school (which was a while ago!) when it snowed on May 8. The apple trees were in full bloom and the blossoms all turned black and there was no crop. I have been gardening for over five decades and nearly every year has been “unusual” in some way.

The two major concerns relating to weather and our gardens and landscapes are lack of snow cover and lack of moisture. We rely on snow cover to enhance our efforts to prevent the alternate freezing and thawing that damages many of our perennials and tender shrubs. There has been little cover snow so far this winter, but we have also had no great temperature fluctuations, which may help the tender plants. Other than concrete blan-

kets on my roses, I chose not to use cover hay this year, so I may be a good customer at garden centers and nurseries this spring. On a more positive side, the survival temperature for zone 5 plants is -20 to -15 degrees F and most of our temperatures have been above the zero mark. Gardeners and homeowners have been reporting the emergence of perennials and tulips since late January. I was able to take cuttings from my Red Carpet sedum in mid-February.

Lack of moisture is the greatest concern for plant survival, and many of the surrounding areas have been in drought conditions for at least seven months. We received that welcome moist snow during the Leap Day storm that for many of us was the most moisture we have received since last August. But the joy was short-lived because, on the very next day, March came riding in on the back of a gray-colored lamb and the snow began to melt. With temperatures expected to tickle 50 degrees and more, the snow will melt before the ground is thawed and it will all be runoff. Unless we receive more wet snow or, even better, adequate rainfall early this spring, it will be imperative that we begin soaking our lawns, gardens, trees, and shrubs as soon as the soil thaws. Water well, but do not fertilize until the lawns and perennials are growing well. In spite of what you may hear on the media, unless trees and shrubs have received supplementary water since last August, do not fertilize them, because fertilization will magnify the stress on a woody plant that is growing under stressful conditions. It is far better to keep them well watered this season and apply fertilizer to the woody plants in spring 2013. It is also a year to prune judi-

ciously and to delay pruning the trees that “bleed” sap, i.e. maple, birch, and mountain ash, until late June and July. Because trees may die eight or more years after a severe drought, it definitely is prudent to give them some special attention.

I will leave you with two time-worn phrases: “it depends” and “wait and see.” The survival of our plants depends on many factors, including location, hardiness, health of the plants last fall, amount of moisture we receive, the remainder of temperatures and snowfall, and even the care we give the plants. We will have to wait and see what damage, if any, has occurred and then make decisions about replacement and care. Maybe you will be joining me on trips to garden centers for replacement plants, or, on the other hand, your plants may come through the winter unscathed.

Remember that you do not have to make all decisions about plant care alone. For help with any problems and questions you may have, contact the Stearns County Extension Service and talk to the horticulturist or one of the 130 knowledgeable Stearns County Master Gardeners.



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The physically largest species of succulents that can make it through a central Minnesota winter are presumably yuccas. These rosette-shaped plants with spear-shaped leaves can grow leaves two feet long, and form clumps several feet across. They send up large stalks of white flowers every few years, though not on a fixed schedule as is often thought. Hardy species include *Y. glauca*, *Y. filamentosa*, *Y. baccata* and the dwarf *Y. nana*. Unfortunately while many of the visually impressive tree yuccas (such as the famous Joshua tree, *Y. brevifolia* of California) are reasonably cold-tolerant, none are hardy here to my knowledge. Yuccas can often be passed around by dividing clumps. Be careful of yucca placement, since they really do want full sun and their foliage can be damaged by having plow rolls dumped on them in winter.

There are a few other odd succulents that can survive a winter here under the right conditions, including a couple of species of *Lewisia* in the lily family. There is a botanical miscellany of “ice plants” which, including members of the genus *Delosperma*, are almost but not quite Minnesota hardy. I kept pots of *D. nubigenum* alive in a cold-frame for several years. I really would like some agaves to be hardy in Minnesota since they are large, beautiful plants worthy of being garden focal points. The closest they come is probably *A. parryi*, which is a plant of the high plateaus of northern Arizona and southern Utah, where it experiences the occasional -30°F in extreme cold snaps, but in general is not used to being frozen solid for extended periods. My *A. parryi* are routinely outdoors until Thanksgiving and again beginning in March, where they seem not to be bothered by snow and ice. However, extended and extreme cold seems to do them in, and they don’t survive a full winter even in my cold-frame.

Overall, many Minnesotans have some hardy succulents in their yards, even if in some cases they haven’t identified them as such. Each year, several species can be found in Clemens and Munsinger Gardens (as well as the occasional nonhardy species, such as the row of *Agave Americana* just east of the University Bridge in 2011). Maybe you would like to treasure-hunt for succulents in the Gardens, and if anyone is interested enough I’ll list a few in the summer newsletter. It’s spring now, so go out and find them!



**White-Breasted Nuthatch.** Another small black-and-white-and-gray bird that comes for sunflower seeds at your feeder identifies itself with a nasal *way, way, way* call. In between its chatter, it walks up and down tree trunks and limbs looking for seeds it deposited in cracks at an earlier time. Like the chickadee, it's with us year round.



**Northern Cardinal.** The cardinal seems to be a favorite with many people in Minnesota, probably because it's been a resident in the state for only decades. (And because it's so beautiful. And friendly.) Having moved northward during the 20th century, it may not yet have extended its range much farther north and west than Stearns County. So now, here it is a year-round resident, brightening winter snow scenes with its vibrant colors and cheerful *birdy-birdy-birdy* song, and welcoming spring as the trees turn green once again. (The name *cardinal* comes from the Latin meaning not "red" but "important.")

**Eastern Phoebe and Eastern Wood-Pewee.** These two flycatchers are birds I like to watch for in the spring. The phoebe and the pewee are similar in appearance, both being a deep gray with white undersides, but their differences make them easy to identify. First, only the pewee has white wing stripes. Second, they each sound like their own name: *fee-be* and *pee-ee-wee*. Another sure sign is that the phoebe arrives about early April and the pewee about six weeks later.

**Gray Catbird.** This is another bird that tells you its name. After some rattly chatters, this mostly gray bird lets out a mew that sometimes sounds very much like a cat. It generally arrives sometime in May and settles into shrubs alongside the river. You'll hear it more often than you see it, though sometimes it'll come out, bobbing its long tail as it goes about inspecting the ground for insects and spiders.



**Chipping Sparrow.** Unlike tiresome house sparrows, these little birds are always a pleasure as they hop around on the ground searching for insects and seeds. With a white underside, a reddish cap, and a black line over a white line above the eye, they're easy to identify. Their sound is some rattly chips.

**American Crow.** Nobody likes these black, noisy, pesky birds, but I guess I need to include them. The crows are here any day, every day, and always more than one of them. They've been called "sociable," flying about in groups or sitting in trees, calling to one another or scolding passersby with a noisy *caw, caw, caw*. They're also said to be among the most intelligent of birds, adapting well to the ways of humans. I suppose humans might just as well adapt to their ways.

*I should also say something about woodpeckers. At one time or another you may see the downy, the hairy, the red-*

*bellied, the common flicker—plus the one that gets a paragraph here because it is so impressive:*

**Pileated Woodpecker.** This dashing crow-sized bird lets you know that it's around by its loud, long series of *kik-kik-kiks* that grow gradually louder and faster and then ease off, or by its noisy knocking sound as it drills holes in rotten wood in its search for carpenter ants. Its coloring is mostly black with a brilliant red crest and flashy white underwings. Whether you see this woodpecker gripping the side of a tree or sweeping away in flight, you'll mark it as one of the better things that happened to you that day.

*These next birds are also likely to draw attention to themselves when they appear.*



**Northern Harrier.** This slim hawk is common in open country, but I've seen it also in Munsinger diving to the ground and between the trees chasing a squirrel, sounding its repetitive whistle, or sitting on a dead tree branch next to the river, watching for mice, voles, snakes, or other likely food. About the size of a large crow, this small raptor is mostly brown (the female) or mostly gray (the male). It is the only harrier in North America.

**Osprey.** This large bird is more common north and east of Saint Cloud, but I've observed it sitting on a tree overlooking the Mississippi and flying over the river. Another raptor, it is somewhat larger than a hawk but smaller than the bald eagle. Like the eagle, it has a black back and white head, but its underside is also white and it has a distinctive large black cheek patch. Another difference from the eagle is that it flies with a bend in its wings. It eats mainly fish, gliding over the water until suddenly it dives feet first and comes up with a fish in its talons. Its unimpressive voice is sharp, short, repeated whistles, like a "cheep" or "chirp."



**Bald Eagle.** Majestic in appearance, the bald eagle always attracts upward glances as it glides and soars over the Mississippi along Munsinger Gardens. Its brilliant white head and tail, plus its seven-foot wingspan, leave no doubt of its identity. Less admirable would be its feeding habits, such as eating carrion and stealing fish from ospreys. Perhaps two eagles were looking for food last August when they circled over the area in Munsinger where Evening in the Gardens participants were filling plates at the food table. Needless to say, the birds attracted our attention just as we attracted theirs. Perhaps they were considering crashing the party?

Undoubtedly, you can add to this list birds familiar to you as you stroll Munsinger and Clemens. Maybe at another time I'll make a new list of some I should have included this time.

Sources: *Birds in Minnesota*, by Robert B. Janssen; *Peterson Field Guides*, Eastern Birds, by Roger Tory Peterson; *North American Birds*, *Peterson Multimedia Guides*, CD, with Roger Tory Peterson; *Birds of Minnesota*, *Field Guide*, by Stan Tekiela.

# Bits and Pieces

## **Got Kids? Got a Garden?**

We'd like to put together an article about gardening with children, but we need your help. What do you do in your garden with your kids? What do they enjoy doing that's more productive than playing in the mud? If you have some stories and ideas to share, send them to me and I'll put them together to share with all of you. —Donna Gorrell (dgorrell@stcloudstate.edu)

## **New Employee at the Gardens**

Jason Kubela joined the year-round Gardens staff on February 27. He is the new maintenance person responsible for keeping the fountains and irrigation systems in working order and doing other maintenance needed in the greenhouse and Gardens. Jason is moving to Saint Cloud from Wahpeton, North Dakota. He has a background in landscape planning and installations. Fun fact: Jason worked at the Gardens for three years during the mid 1990s and was on the crew that constructed the White Garden, Perennial

Garden, and Treillage Garden.

*Welcome back to St. Cloud, Jason!*

## **MCBS Website**

We are in the process of developing a new and improved website. The current website is giving us problems so please bear with us! We hope to have the new site up and running before summer.

## **Music in the Gardens**

June 10 • June 24 • July 15  
July 29 • August 12 • August 26  
Sundays at 3:00 pm

## **Art Fair in the Gardens**

Thursday, July 19 • 10:00 am - 8:00 pm

## **Theatre in the Gardens**

Sunday, July 22 • Details later

## **Evening in the Gardens**

Tuesday, August 14 • 6:30 - 8:30 pm

## **Photography in the Gardens**

All season. Deadline October 19

## **MCBS**

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