

Master Gardeners of Johnson County Missouri  
February 2015 - The Gardener Corner Article  
The Winter Gardener  
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For many Johnson County gardeners the post-holiday period of February and March is something like a steady state, where little is happening except snow shoveling, an unending series of cold fronts, and bird feeding. This time frame however presents the opportunity to plan, something we often do not but should do for happier gardens and happier gardeners. Granted, gardening can be a wild and wooly heuristically fun activity, but there are advantages to thinking ahead. Begin with the concept of your ideal garden, then employ some more or less logical thinking, and then plan your gardening for the full spring, summer and fall period. Decide, right on the front end, what you want to get out of your gardening: a hobby, an enjoyable retreat, a vegetable garden, home beautification, a specialty garden designed to attract bees, butterflies, and birds, specialize and grow only Hardy Plumbago (*Leadwort-Ceratostigma Plumbaginoides*) and so forth. The obvious point being is to do your own gardening thing, but narrow it down to a level that is enjoyable and achievable. Planting too much garden is a common mistake made by beginning gardeners. And much to their dismay even senior gardeners sometimes are overly ambitious. A second planning element is elemental e.g. the right plant in the right location. Don't plant too close to structures, don't plant water needy plants too far from water sources, do plant shady plants in shade, sun-loving plants in the sun, allow for growth (planting a white oak that will grow to be 60' only 2' from the house is dysfunctional in the long run), and always remember, particularly when selecting plants to grow in your garden, that Johnson County is prairie and not a rain forest. A passion flower (*Passiflora edulis*) just won't make it outside in a normal Johnson County summer (or winter!). If you are into the finer points of planning that include a plant's blooming

period be sure to note the growth schedule for a given flower variety. Ideally you would like for your garden to have plants blooming in harmony and blooming all season long. There is a context for all this and it is growing Zone 6a. This is a USDA designation based on the average coldest temps for a given geographic area. For Zone 6a this is 0 to -10 degrees Fahrenheit (-18 to -23 Celsius). At one time Johnson County was Zone 5, a colder zone, but this has since changed in response to a warming climate. Within a zone, as in the case Zone 6a, there are microclimates that vary from one another in winter and summer temperatures, rainfall, altitude, soil condition (Johnson county clay??) and many other variables that may, to varying degrees, impact on your plants and gardening plans. In addition to the USDA designations based on winter cold temps there are numerous gardening resources that state it is also the average summer temps that are equally important when selecting plants for a garden. Many long time gardeners and area farmers have been saying this for years. While there are numerous helpful web sites one in particular, <http://garden.lovetoknow.com>, group categories of plants for Zone 6 that you may find helpful for your garden planning. There isn't sufficient article space to list the many individual plants but the categories can be: Full sun Perennials (13 varieties); Full to Part Shade Perennials (9 varieties); Deciduous Shrubs (16 varieties); Conifers (6 trees); Deciduous Trees (20 trees); Fall and Winter Vegetables (15 plants); and, spring and Summer Vegetables (14 plants). Of course there are more in each category but the ones listed on this site provide a good foundation for any Zone 6a garden. Flower blooming times, as mentioned previously, can also be reviewed for their respective monthly blooming period. Speaking of selecting plants late winter is when the seed catalogs start to arrive. If you are so inclined seeds can be ordered and started in the house on windowsills, or if you more adventuresome, in other cold weather growing environments. These methods are simple and information on how to do this is available at the MU Extension Office. There are

numerous books and web sites that are also readily available on how this is done. And for the hardy gardening souls that just have to get outside, February and March isn't too late to do tree pruning, flower bed clean up and soil prep. And finally, if planning your garden isn't your thing just now, but you still want a productive activity, there is always available the infamous ala Travis Caramel Earthworm Brownies recipe that is sure to be an indescribable hit at the next church coffee. This recipe, and other rewarding gardening information, is available on the Master Gardener web site.

Happy Gardening