

# March 2018 Newsletter

December days were brief and chill,  
The winds of March were wild and drear,  
And, nearing and receding still,  
Spring never would, we thought, be here.

~Arthur Hugh Clough (1819-1861)



## Upcoming:

**April 10:** A Year In The Life of  
a Local Flower Farmer/Florist  
Speaker: Sylvia van Oort

**May 8:** Growing and Using Herbs.  
Speaker: Jean Dagley

**May 19:** ANNUAL PLANT SALE  
8:30 - 10:00am, Stewart School,  
Sunset Blvd.

## District 2 AGM

The D2 AGM will take place on  
Saturday, April 21 at the Manotick  
United Church. Please register  
with Barb Smith at our PDHS  
meeting if you wish to attend.  
The closing date for registration is  
April 8.

The D2 Photo Competition reg-  
istration closes on March 31. Visit  
the website for more information  
and the competition classes.

## When Fertilizer Turns To Rock

*By Larry Hodgson*

You open a bag or container of  
fertilizer in the spring and you're  
in for a shock: it's as hard as a  
rock! It can't be still good ... but  
in fact, it is.

You may not have noticed, but  
there is no expiry date on most

fertilizers. That's because they're  
made of minerals and the miner-  
als don't decompose ... well, not  
over a normal human lifespan,  
at least. So, to turn your lump of  
fertilizer into something useable  
again, just crush it up with a ham-  
mer or some sort of pestle (a piece  
of wood, for example). It's then  
good to go again.

Theoretically, liquid organic  
fertilizers could decompose and  
some manufacturers include an  
expiry date: quite a long one, usu-  
ally 8 to 10 years. In fact, though,  
if they decompose, they still only  
become simpler minerals that  
plants can use ... and therefore,  
they remain useful.

Even so, some liquid fertilizers  
can settle over time and form de-  
posits on the bottom or the sides  
of their container. If so, just shake  
them thoroughly to remix the de-  
posits with the liquid.

The exception to the rule that  
there is no expiry date on fertiliz-  
ers is "weed and feed" type fertil-  
izer, that is, one that combines fer-  
tilizer and herbicide in the same  
product. Usually, these products  
have an expiry date of 3 or 4 years,  
but it's the herbicide that loses its  
effectiveness, not the fertilizer.

Note that weed and feed prod-  
ucts containing synthetic herbi-  
cides have been banned in most  
countries other than the United  
States. Only fertilizers that contain



Lanark Orchid

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Horticultural  
Society

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District #2 of the  
Ontario Horticultural  
Association



**President:** Robin McIntosh • **Newsletter:** Irene Hofmann

organic herbicides, usually corn gluten, remain on the market in Canada, Australia, and most of Europe. There is no expiry date on these. Just reduce these “organic weed and feeds” to powder if ever they harden.

If dry fertilizers harden, it’s because they’ve come into contact with moisture. You can usually keep them dry and in top shape by storing them indoors in a dry spot over the winter. Fertilizers left outdoors, in a tool shed, for example, can easily be affected by condensation as temperatures drop. To prevent this, attach a pack or two of silica gel to the inside of the container to absorb excess moisture.

Fertilizers: even if their structure changes, you can still use them, right to the very last molecule!

## Helping Bats And Other March Gardening Tips

*Leonard Perry, UVM Horticulturist  
and Charlie Nardozzi, Garden Consultant*

Helping bats by installing a bat house, sowing seeds of arugula and other greens, and choosing and caring for Easter lilies, are some of the gardening activities for this month.

Bats are important to our ecosystems, particularly in catching huge numbers of insects that damage our crops and gardens, as well as those such as mosquitoes that carry diseases. Yet diseases and human activities, which have killed off many or destroyed their habitats, have made many endangered. You can help bring them back by proper gardening practices, and by installing a bat house.

Bat houses are flattened wood boxes, open on the bottom, with single or multiple roosting chambers. Height (12 feet or more off the ground), location (on buildings is best, but poles can be used), orientation (generally toward the east, away from prevailing winds), and color (black to absorb heat in cold climates) are all important considerations. You can learn more on where to buy them, or how to build your own, from Bat Conservation International ([www.batcon.org](http://www.batcon.org)).

To get an early harvest of arugula and other greens, dig out a large shallow container and sow some seeds. Grow them indoors until the

weather warms enough to put them outside during the day. Keep cutting leaves from the outside of the plants to prolong the harvest. Or you can sow seeds for a mesclun mix and cut off the leaves when still young. They will regrow for another harvest in a few weeks. Look for seeds to sow and grow quickly just for sprouts.

When buying an Easter lily, look for a plant with flowers in various stages of bloom from buds to open or partially opened flowers. Foliage should be dense, rich green in color, and extend all the way down to the soil line (a good indication of a healthy root system). Look for a well-proportioned plant, one that is about two times as high as the pot. You also should check the flowers, foliage, and buds for signs of yellowing (improper culture), insects, or disease.

At home, keep your lily away from drafts and drying heat sources such as woodstoves or heating ducts. Bright, indirect light is best with daytime temperatures of 60 to 65 degrees (F). Water the plant only when the soil feels dry to the touch, but don’t overwater. If the pot is in foil, make sure water doesn’t collect and remain in the foil; this will keep the soil too wet. To prolong the life of the blossoms, remove the yellow anthers (pollen-bearing pods) found in the center of each Easter lily flower. If you get this staining pollen on fabrics, don’t rub it off, but remove it with sticky tape. *(If you have pets, keep them away from your Easter Lily – they are toxic.)*

Probably the biggest gardening project for March is to start transplants. Cabbage, broccoli, and other cole crops that can be set out early in the spring, as well as slow-growing flower varieties like verbena, pansies, and petunias, can all be started this month. But wait until April to sow seeds for tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, and most flower varieties that cannot be transplanted until the danger of frost has passed.

Warm days may tempt you into removing winter mulch but wait a bit longer. We still could have snow and some very cold nights, and plants still need protection. The freeze and thaw cycles of early spring can damage plants that have survived a cold winter.

Other gardening activities for this month include repotting your houseplants, buying a Shamrock plant for St. Patrick’s Day, and pruning on a non-freezing day—fruit trees, blueberries, and summer-flowering shrubs.

*(Charlie Nardozzi is a nationally known horticulturist, author, gardening consultant, and garden coach; [gardeningwithcharlie.com](http://gardeningwithcharlie.com)).*



# Beets—2018 Vegetable of the Year

*Helen Halpenny  
Master Gardener, Lanark County*

The “Vegetable of the Year” for 2018 is Beets (*Beta vulgaris*), and no wonder! It is a powerhouse of nutrients. Although it has more sugar than any other vegetable, it is high in fiber, vitamins and minerals. Beets are loaded with potassium, manganese and vitamin C. Experts say beets will help to lower blood pressure, fight cancer and inflammation, boost your stamina and support detoxification. Both the leaves and the root are delicious. The leafy tops are higher in iron than spinach and are used like Swiss Chard. The root is very versatile—grated raw in salads, canned, pickled, juiced or used in soup – a favourite being borscht.

Beets get their lovely rich colour from pigments called anthocyanins. The particular anthocyanin of beets is beta cyanine. This pigment is water soluble and is destroyed by heat, so when beets are cooked, the beta cyanine leaks into the water and stains it red. Golden beets lack this pigment, so another pigment present in all beets – beta xanthine – shines through to give the roots a beautiful golden colour. Yellow beets do not stain the cooking water the way red ones do.

Beets grew naturally along the coast in North Africa, Asia and Europe. Originally it was the beet greens that were consumed but as far back in history as ancient Rome, the beetroot was also part of the diet. By the 19th century, beets were recognized for their sugar content. In Napoleon times, beets were a primary source of sugar.

Beetroot will thrive in all parts of North America. Pests and diseases are not major concerns. It is easy to grow in most soils, doing best in rich, sandy loam with a pH of 6.5. Beets can be cropped in succession every two weeks from mid spring to midsummer. Beets planted in the heat of summer may become tough and stringy. Most seed will germinate in 5-10 days. Unsettled weather conditions and checks in growth will often cause ‘white rings’. Beet seeds should be planted 1 cm deep and 5 cm apart. When plants are 5-10 cm tall, thin them to stand 10-15 cm apart. They can be harvested

when their size suits you. When harvesting, remove the tops leaving about 2.5 cm attached to the root. Beets are more tender when they are small. A fifty-foot row will probably yield fifty pounds.

To some people a beet is a beet is a beet, but to gardeners in the know, different beet varieties are suited to different purposes. If you want to store your beets to have them on hand for winter use, try varieties such as ‘Detroit Dark Red’ type or ‘Carillon’, which is a cylindrical shape. ‘Tausus’ is touted as being best for pickling, and ‘Chiogga’ is a flat globe beet with contrasting purple and white interiors. ‘Touchstone Gold’ is bright gold in colour and does not bleed interior colour. ‘Eagle’, a baby beet, has delicious medium green tops and is excellent for canning. ‘Avalanche’ is a new white flesh variety with good disease resistance. How interesting they would be when combined with other red and golden beets. ‘Red Ace’ is a favourite multi-purpose beet. There are many choices, both hybrid and open pollinated.

With beets you get two veggies from one. Do plant some in 2018.

## Willow Water: Mother Nature's Rooting Hormone

*By the Laidback Gardener*

With the return of longer days, a gardener's mind starts to turn to plant propagation: starting plants from seeds ... and also cuttings. Amazingly, it's possible to multiply the vast majority of pluriannual plants (houseplants, perennials, shrubs, trees, vines, etc.) by stem cuttings, but some, especially those with somewhat woody stems, are often reluctant or slow to produce roots. In these cases, you can apply a rooting hormone and it will usually stimulate faster rooting and even ward off root rot in the process.

There are commercial rooting hormones, of course, in powder, gel or liquid form, and they are very effective, but you can also make a home-grown hormone from willow (*Salix* spp.) stems. Willow stems emit an auxin called IAB (indol-butytric acid), a hormone that naturally stimulates roots to grow. In fact, commercial rooting hormones are essentially made up of synthetic forms of IAB. In addition to rooting hormone,

willow stems release salicylic acid (AC), which slows the healing of the wound, allowing the sap to continue to circulate ... and giving roots more time to develop.

You probably already know salicylic acid for its effect in humans: slightly modified, it is ASA (acetylsalicylic acid), better known as aspirin.

#### **Willow Water Recipe**

There are several ways to make willow water, but the easiest probably just to crush a few dozen freshly cut willow twigs with a hammer and let them macerate in a container of water for 24 to 72 hours. This will release IAB and AC into the water. Now, filter the resulting liquid and pour into a glass. Place your cuttings in this liquid in a warm and brightly lit spot and wait patiently. As soon as you see roots starting to appear (at first they'll look like small white or yellow bumps on the stem), transfer them to potting soil.

Do not wait until the roots are long and intermingled! Cuttings made in water should be moved quickly into a terrestrial environment (i.e. into a potting mix) as soon as roots appear, otherwise there is a serious risk of losing them.

You can make rooting hormone from any willow, both shrubby and tree species, but the auxin is most concentrated in new shoots and especially shoots harvested in late winter or early spring. So, the rooting hormone you produce will be at its most efficient at that time of year.

Willow water is most effective on moderately easy-to-root plants, generally softwood and semi-hardwood cuttings. It is rarely effective on cuttings that have the reputation of being hard to root, as is the case with most hardwood cuttings, notably those taken from lilacs, fruit trees and conifers.

Willow water doesn't always work: there are plants that will only root when a stronger commercial rooting hormone is applied. For such "difficult cases," you'll find you get much better results with commercial rooting hormones of an appropriate strength.

And of course, "easy-to-root" plants, usually those taken from herbaceous (non-woody) plants such as coleus, chrysanthemums and philodendrons, don't need any extra hormones at all, be it willow water or commercial hormones, because when you put their cut branches in an appropriate environment, they quickly produce their own rooting hormones.

## **Discounts:**

These local nurseries will give a discount to Perth Horticultural Society members. You will need to show your membership card and may be required to show photo I.D.

- Gemmell's Garden Centre, Smiths Falls, 613-283-6371
- Herb Garden, Ottawa (Old Almonte Rd), 613-256-0228
- Hillside Gardens, Perth, 613-267-4031
- Kiwi Gardens, Perth, 613-2647-7384
- Make It Green, Stittsville, 613-599-3419
- Reid Landscape & Garden Centre, Carleton Place, 613-253-3467
- Rideau Woodland Ramble, Merrickville, 613-258-3797
- Rockwall Gardens, Perth, 613-267-6684
- Stoneridge Gardens and Nursery, Middleville, 613-256-4348
- Sylvia's Plant Place, Perth, 613-267-7365
- Whitehouse Perennials, Almonte, 613-256-3406