

Earthly Elements

“Helpful Information From The Trenches”

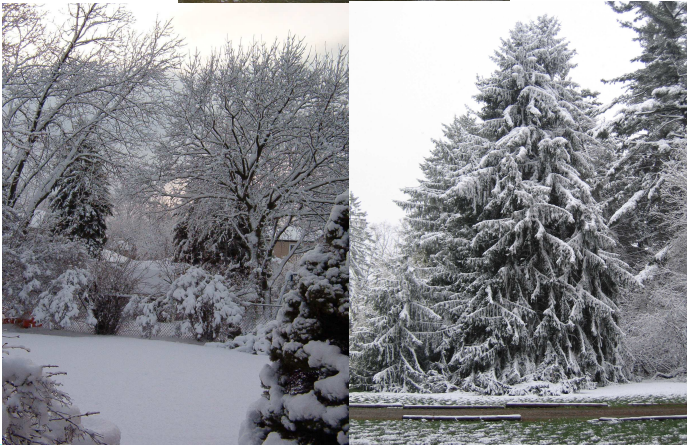
Issue 4

Winter Edition

December 2004

A Time of Snow & Slumber

Yes, winter is finally here and for a change I'm feeling VERY grateful for it. This past season has been a **most stressful** one.



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Paperwhite Perfume

For many, growing fragrant Paperwhites indoors is a winter tradition. *Narcissus tazetta*, a cousin of the garden Daffodil, grows so easily it doesn't even need potting soil! Here's a few tips to help you add some extra cheer to your holiday events.

1. Don't force the bulbs. They will readily bloom without the cold pre-treatment required by other spring bulbs even by other members of the *Narcissus* family.
2. Choose firm, plump bulbs without bruises or nicks. Bigger bulbs will produce more stems and flowers. If they have sprouts a few inches long, plant them right away.
3. Pot them in shallow containers with a layer of pebbles or gravel. Place bulbs on this layer. (Soil isn't necessary for growing paperwhites.)
4. Choose a container that's wide enough (4 or 5 inches deep should do) to hold a quantity of bulbs shoulder-to-shoulder on the pebble or gravel bed.
5. Pack as many bulbs as you can fit onto the pebble layer of the container with the pointy ends facing up. Place more pebbles or gravel around and between the bulbs to hold them firmly in place but don't cover them.

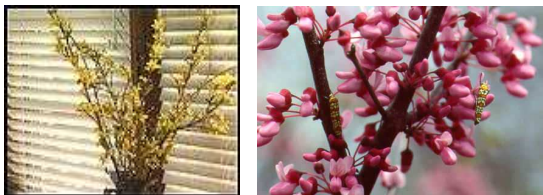


6. Add enough water to the container to cover the roots of the bulbs and reaching just the base of the bulbs. Do not submerge the bulbs in the water or they will rot.

7. Set the planted bulbs in a cool but sunny spot. You'll see roots developing in a day or so. Expect blooms in three to five weeks.



Beautiful Branches



Forcing branches for indoor bloom is one of the great pleasures of late winter, and it's a snap to do. Branches that force best include the Forsythia & Redbud (shown above,) as well as Pussy Willow, Quince, Cherry, Apple, and Witchhazel.

The easiest way to force blooms is to wait until you notice the buds starting to swell. Then just cut the branches, bring them indoors, put them in water, and wait a few days for them to work their magic.

If you want to introduce the season even sooner, you can cut the branches after the shrub has been dormant at least six weeks. Completely submerge the cuttings in a tub of cold water for several hours. Re-cut the ends, vertically slicing the lower inch or 2 of each branch in half so it can better take up water. Put the branches in a large vase of water in a cool spot near a window, and in two or three weeks, you'll have beautiful blooms.

Plant Profile: Snowdrops

Snowdrops are small bulbs belonging to the genus *Galantbus*, which means "milky flower" in Greek. There are 15 species and all are white flowered. Their native habitats include, the eastern Mediterranean, southeastern Europe, and Russia. Snowdrops are opportunists in the plant kingdom and tend to grow in late autumn, winter, or early spring (depending on the region). By doing so, they ensure themselves high moisture levels as well as less competition from other flowers for pollinators. Their common names vary from country to country. The list includes, "Snowbells", "Snowdrops", "Foolish Maids" and "Snow-Piercers". Whatever you call them, they're all cherished for blooming at such a bleak time of the year.

Features

Snowdrops and Daffodils are members of the Amaryllidaceae (Amaryllis) family. Their flowers open and close daily depending on the temperature, and can last for several weeks. In frigid weather, or under heavy snow, the entire blossom stalk freezes and lays flat on the ground, but picks itself back up again as the mercury rises. This is NOT a bulb that likes to be forced however, if you pick a few flowers---they're long-lived in a bud vase. Indoors, the blossoms have a lovely, honey scent. Left outdoors, they attract off-season bees. These bulbs are also distasteful to critters, both above ground and underground. That includes deer, rabbits, squirrels, chipmunks (above ground) voles, pocket gophers & mice (underground).

Growing Snowdrops

Snowdrops prefer cool climates and ample moisture while growing, so they are well suited to our area. The bulbs resent drying

out so the best way to propagate them is "in

the green”, just after flowering but before the foliage has died down. They are sold in the dried bulb form (dormant) for early fall planting. These will grow well, but take longer to get established and multiply than those planted “in the green”. If you know someone who has an abundance of Snowdrops, it’s worth asking to dig up a few clumps. The bulbs should be separated, and planted 2” deep and 4” apart (heavy clay) and 4” deep, 4” apart (sandy soil). While they prefer an alkaline clay soil, they grow well anywhere. Organic matter & a slow release fertilizer (Espoma BulbTone.....for more information go to espoma.com) helps bulbs prosper in sandy soil by retaining moisture and keeping the soil cool.

In the wild, Snowdrops grow in open deciduous woods, moist high-altitude meadows, and rocky shaded places. In our home gardens we should grow them in dappled shade under deep rooted trees, intermingled with shrubs, in mixed perennial borders, or tucked in cool crevices in rock gardens. They resent being forced, yet they can be brought inside just before the flowers open.

Plant Partners

Plants with evergreen foliage or early bloom are ideal partners. Some examples include: Mahonias, Witch Hazels, dwarf conifers (Norway Spruce) with very dark foliage or Junipers with blue foliage (‘Blue Star’) make good companions. In naturalized areas under deciduous trees, pair Snowdrops with Golden Winter Aconite. For a look that’s “avant-garde”, pair Snowdrops in groups around the foliage of Black Mondo Grass (‘Ebony Knight’). Other companions might include European Ginger, “marbled leaf” Cyclamen, Hellebores (bold and bulkier foliage), or purple leafed varieties of Coral Bells (Palace Purple, Plum Pudding or Amethyst Mist).

Best Varieties Available

Giant Snowdrop (*Galanthus etwesii*, zones 4 to 7) 10" to 12"; broad leaves and long, narrow, long-lived blossoms; winter bloom. Look for nursery-propagated stock, as over-harvesting has endangered this one. The problem has become so bad that the plant is now under special exporting protection and the bulbs can be hard to find and expensive.

Common Snowdrop (*G. nivalis*, zones 3 to 7) 4" to 8", narrow foliage; late winter to early spring bloom; needs the most moisture of all species. There are several forms and hybrids available.



Christmas Star Croutons

This recipe is “kid -friendly” and fun to make. The stars are a decorative snack eaten alone, served in a salad or as a “mini sandwich” with your favorite filler (cream cheese, lunch meat etc.).

Ingredients

- 8 slices white bread
- 1/4 cup melted butter or margarine
- 1/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese

Preparation

Use a rolling pin to flatten each bread slice to a 1/8” inch thickness. Choose a star shaped cookie cutter and cut 1 or 2 stars (depending on how big the cutter is) out of the slice. Place stars in single layer on a greased cookie sheet. Brush with butter; sprinkle with cheese. Bake at 300° for 18 to 20 minutes or until crisp and golden brown.



Christmas Meatballs

These quick and easy microwaveable meatballs can be served alone as a festive holiday appetizer or as a main dish over rice or noodles.

Ingredients

1 1/2 lbs. lean ground beef or turkey
2 eggs
1 envelope onion soup mix
1/2 cup seasoned bread crumbs
1/4 cup chopped dried cranberries
2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley

SAUCE:

1 can (16 oz) whole-berry cranberry sauce
3/4 cup ketchup
1/2 cup beef broth
3 tablespoons brown sugar
3 tablespoons finely chopped onion
2 teaspoons cider vinegar

Preparation

In a bowl, combine eggs, soup mix, bread crumbs, cranberries and parsley. Crumble beef over mixture and mix well. Shape into 1" inch balls. Place 12 to 14 balls on a microwave-safe plate. Cover balls with wax paper and microwave on high for 3 - 4 minutes, or until no longer pink. Remove to paper towels to drain excess grease. Repeat with remaining meatballs.

In a 2 qt. microwave-safe dish, combine sauce ingredients. Cover and microwave on high 3 - 4 minutes or until heated through, rotating once. Gently stir in meatballs, coating well. Cover and cook on high 1 - 2 minutes till heated through. Makes about 3 dozen.



You don't have to cook fancy
or complicated masterpieces -
just good food
from fresh ingredients.



Julia Child

Gardener Gatherings

Places to Go & Things to Learn

What & Where

"Great Greens 2004"

Matthaei Botanical Gardens

December 11

(wreaths) **10 am - 12 PM**

(centerpieces) **1 pm - 3 PM**

Matthaei is offering 2 classes this year. The first class, will guide you step by step to assemble your own holiday wreath using fresh cut greens.

The afternoon class will teach you how to arrange a beautiful evergreen centerpiece.

Registration fee: \$40 non-member

\$35 member

(includes all materials for each project)

Deadline for registration is December 6

call 734-998-7061