GARDENING TIPS FOR FEBRUARY

Re-invigorate your houseplants by removing the top 1/4 inch of soil and top-dressing with fresh potting soil.

Spider mites are apt to thrive in warm, dry houses. Frequent misting under the leaves of houseplants will discourage them. A solution of 1 cup flour, 1/4 cup buttermilk, and a gallon of cool water, applied in a mist, is a good organic deterrent.

Houseplants will be sensitive to overfeeding at this time of year. Provide lots of sunlight, fresh air, and frequent bathing for plants that seem a little worse for the winter.

Forced paper-white narcissus will bloom more quickly now than earlier in the season.

Shop early for seeds from catalogs and garden stores. The early shopper gets the best choice of seed varieties.


Test the germination of last year's surplus seeds before ordering new ones. Place ten seeds between damp paper towels. Keep them consistently damp and in a dark place. Check germination rates to determine how many seeds to use for your real planting.

Take an inventory of your preserved foods—in the freezer, in cans, or the root cellars. This should help you decide your seed order for the upcoming season.

Spread wood ashes around lilacs to benefit growth and bloom in the spring.

Test buds of peaches and other sensitive fruits for freeze damage. Bring in a few twigs cut from the trees and place them in a vase of water. If the twigs bloom in a week or two, expect blossoms in the spring and a crop next fall.

Set up birch branches that may have been bent by snow or ice, as
soon as possible. If neglected, the branches will permanently adopt their leaning position. Cut poles for peas, beans, and other climbers now. Peel off the bark and set them in a dry area until they are needed.

Keep this in mind while pruning: Fruit usually grows on the horizontal branches, rather than the vertical ones. Vertical branches may be trained to become horizontal by weighting them down for a few weeks. This may also be done in the summer.

A barrel or other covering placed over rhubarb plants will hasten the spring crop.

Start onions from seed now. They'll be ready for setting out in April. Onions from seed are generally firmer and longer lasting than from sets.

Start parsley indoors now. You may think you have successfully wintered over the plant, but it is a biennial and will soon go to seed.

Avoid walking on the lawn during a winter thaw.

Grow some herbs in containers, such as fresh parsley.

You can start some perennials now, including delphinium, carnation, and armeria.

Start some annuals, especially those that have slow growth, including marigolds, impatiens, pansies, snapdragons, and petunias.

Don't forget winter birds! Put out water, seeds, and suet.

Author unknown

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‘Woodward’ Is a Juniper that Grows Tall and Skinny

**Virtues:** We love ‘Woodward’ juniper (*Juniperus scopulorum* ‘Woodward’) for its tall, narrow shape, which makes it an ideal accent for small spaces or for use as a hedge or windbreak. This snow- and wind-tolerant evergreen is a Plant Select honoree in 2015. Plant Select identifies and promotes trees, shrubs, perennials and annuals that are well suited to the challenges of the Intermountain West and other dry areas.

**Common name:** ‘Woodward’ columnar juniper

**Botanical name:** *Juniperus scopulorum* ‘Woodward’

**Foliage:** Its evergreen foliage is soft in texture and dark green throughout the year, except in winter when it turns grayish blue.

**Habit:** Upright, columnar evergreen juniper tree growing 12 to 20 feet tall and just 2 to 4 feet wide. ‘Woodward’ juniper is a strong evergreen that typically will not bend or break in strong winds or under heavy snow.

**Season:** Year-round for green foliage.

**Origin:** A selection of a Rocky Mountain-native species of juniper that was made at the Cheyenne Experiment Station.

Author Meghan Shinn  Photo Gary Epstein
I moved into a house that has a pear tree in the backyard. I waited until the pears got a nice yellow color and I picked them. But when I tried to eat them, the insides of the pears were gritty and almost mushy, gravel-like. I have bought pears from the store and they have smooth, fine grained insides when I bite into them. What is wrong with these pears? Should I cut the tree down because it can’t make good pears? I have never eaten an pear that was this weird.

This might come as a great surprise to you but apples and pears have not much in common other than being fruit trees. Apples are picked differently than pears. Apples are picked when a sample apple from the tree is removed and tasted. If it tastes good to you, pick them. But pears are different. They are mealy in texture when they are picked ripe on the tree. For pears to have that smooth, fine-grained texture, they must be picked when they are in what is called a “mature green stage.” The pears ripen the rest of the way off of the tree. Pears ripen from the inside out which is different than apples. At the time the flesh right under the skin is good, the core is breaking down and may have started to rot. The mature green stage can be determined by picking up a pear still hanging on the tree. When lifting the pear to a horizontal position from the normal vertical, the pear detaches easily from the tree. You should not have to use anything other than just gentle pressure. If Bartlett pears are stored at about 30 degrees, it only takes about one or two days to be ready to eat. But if the pears are Anjou, Bosc or Comice, it could take two to six weeks. At room temperature, Bartlett is ready to eat in four to five days, Bosc and Comice at five to seven days and Anjou at seven to ten days. But there is a very small window of opportunity to have the pears be ripe and firm. So be prepared to have a plan of canning, making jam, making cobbler or eating right away. If you hesitate, the pears will become coarse, mealy or begin to decay. Your pear window has slammed shut.

I want to grow tomatoes next year. I was recently cutting up a tomato for a salad and I noticed that it has lots of seeds. How do I grow tomato plants from these seeds in my store-purchased tomatoes? I think this could save me some money.

And I think that this is the wrong place to economize. I am guessing, but I think that you are a new gardener. Unless you have knowledge of starting plants from seeds, it requires more work than you might imagine. Tomatoes cannot be directly seeded into the garden and produce a big crop. There are not enough growing days. By starting them indoors six or eight weeks before moving them outside, you give them more time in the garden. That’s why tomatoes are usually bought as transplants. You have a month and a half to two months start on picking fruit. But that isn’t the big reason to not save seeds. First, you have no idea what tomato you have. If it is a hybrid, the seeds will not produce a tomato like you took the seeds from. A hybrid is created by mating two different kinds of tomatoes and the first generation cross gives a superior product. But this does not carry over into the second generation seeds that you have in your tomato. They revert to one parent or another and are not as good. Another reason is that this tomato was created so it is able to be shipped across the country. It does not necessarily have the best flavor; it just travels well. I am surprised you did not notice the lack of good taste. Saving seeds from store-purchased produce will not give you the quality of food that you want. You are better buying seeds that are labeled. Saving a couple of bucks on seeds is the wrong place to economize. If you are looking to grow tomatoes just for yourself, one or two plants could take care of your needs. Consider purchasing transplants until you have learned more about gardening and feel confident to start your own seeds.
Christmas Cactus, Thanksgiving Cactus and Easter Cactus

A Christmas cactus is one of three popular holiday cacti: Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas. You can probably guess by their names when these festive plants usually bloom; Thanksgiving cacti typically start in late fall and Christmas cacti around a month later. An Easter cactus starts producing flower buds in February.

If you have a Christmas cactus that always blooms around Thanksgiving, it is probably because of one of the following reasons: it is actually a Thanksgiving cactus or it blooms early due to growing conditions.

Thanksgiving cacti are often sold as “Christmas cacti” and these two holiday plants look very similar. Both fall under the genus *Schlumbergera*, have the same color scheme and require the same care. There are two main differences between a Christmas and Thanksgiving cactus: the flowering season, which we have already discussed, and the segments of the leaves. To help determine whether your cactus is a Christmas or Thanksgiving variety, will depend on the edges of the leaf segments. Christmas cacti have smooth, round edges while Thanksgiving cacti have pointy, jagged ones. A Thanksgiving cactus is shown at the top of this article; a Christmas cactus is shown at right. Note the difference in the leaves.

If your holiday cactus still sounds like it belongs to the merry Christmas groupings, than it probably flowers early in the season due to the growing conditions. Thanksgiving and Christmas cacti need cool temperatures (roughly 55 to 65 degrees Fahrenheit) to begin the production of flowers, so your cactus is most likely exposed to this change in weather early. You can help instigate when your plant will bloom by keeping track of the temperature outside. When it is below 50 degrees, you can place the container by a drafty window or when it hits the ideal 55 to 60 degree range, place the container outdoors. These cacti are most successful with longer periods of uninterrupted darkness, around 13 to 16 hours, and shortened days.

My biggest piece of advice for you if you want a Christmas cactus to bloom later in the season, is to make sure it actually is a Christmas cactus and not a Thanksgiving one. When purchasing a new cactus go by the botanical name instead of the common one. A Christmas cactus is *Schlumbergera x buckleyi* and a Thanksgiving cactus is *Schlumbergera truncata*. As for now, manipulate your cactus’s exposure to light and temperature conditions to try to achieve the perfect blooming season for your needs.

Author Maria Woodie
Organic Slug Control Methods

Slugs

It takes only a little rain to bring garden slugs out of hiding. Feeding at night, slugs chew irregular holes in a long list of vegetables, and they are especially fond of salad greens, beans and cabbage family crops. Deep organic mulches provides habitat for slugs, so problems are most severe in heavily mulched gardens during periods of prolonged rain. Good organic slug control methods include handpicking, habitat modification, traps, copper barriers and commercial baits based on iron sulfate.

What Are Slugs?

Soft-bodied mollusks often described as snails without shells, slugs exude sticky slime as they move across leaves. Rarely seen on sunny days, slugs feed at night and during periods of wet, overcast weather. Slugs damage plants primarily by feeding on foliage, though they will also make holes in tomatoes, beans and other vegetables.

Several species of different sizes often inhabit the same garden. Small gray milk slugs are frequent problems on lettuce, Chinese cabbage and other leafy greens. Larger gray garden slugs climb up taller plants to damage leaves and fruits. During the day, slugs hide in mulch or inside the boards used to structure beds.

What Slug Damage Looks Like

Slugs chew irregular holes with smooth edges, which often appear overnight. In spring when little other food is available, slugs may chew young seedlings down to the ground. Frequently slugs return to the same plant to feed for several nights. Faint shiny trails of slug slime are easily seen early in the morning and confirm the presence of garden slugs. In leafy greens, tiny slugs can often be found hiding in leaf crevices near the bases of the plants.

Slug Reproduction

Some slugs overwinter as adults, way slugs survive from year to in spring and fall, though slug rainfall. Slugs cannot move un-are moist.

but buried eggs are the primary year. Egg laying takes place mostly populations invariably follow on less the soil and their feeding areas

Natural Slug Predators

Numerous natural predators consume slugs, including frogs and toads, small snakes and turtles. In the soil, eggs and young slugs are eaten by ground beetles and firefly larvae. Among domestic animals, ducks are highly rated for their slug control talents.

Organic Slug Control

The most fundamental way to impact slug populations is by making your garden as inhospitable as possible. Delay mulching until the beginning of your dry season. Irrigate with soaker hoses, which do not wet the foliage, and avoid using hoses or sprinklers late in the day. Thin leafy greens to help the sun dry out the soil between plants.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 7
When a period of dry weather is predicted, sprinkle Diatomaceous Earth (DE) atop the soil beneath high-risk plants like lettuce or bush beans. Until rain washes it into the soil, DE deters slugs by abrading their bodies as they move across it.

You can lure many slugs away from vegetables using slug traps. These can be as simple as orange or grapefruit rind halves placed on the soil at night, or you can make pit traps. One popular and effective version involves placing an inch of beer (or sugar water with a pinch of yeast) in a small container such as a tuna can or yogurt tub, and burying it up to its rim among plants. At night, slugs crawl in and drown. These slug traps must be emptied and refilled daily for maximum effectiveness.

Another good slug trap can be made by digging narrow holes, four inches wide and six inches deep, and covering them with a roofing shingle or piece of plywood wrapped in aluminum foil. Leave the trap alone for two to three days; as the moist conditions in the pit trap are discovered by slugs, they invite others to join them. Another popular method is to place wet newspapers beneath boards laid on the soil’s surface. Slugs use these traps as daytime shelter. Gather slugs caught in various traps and drown them in soapy water before dumping them in the compost.

Need more organic slug control methods? Caffeine can be an effective spray, whether you use cold coffee or caffeine tablets dissolved in water. When slugs are a problem in containers or small raised beds, encircling the perimeter with copper tape can stop the invasion. Slugs suffer an electric shock when they must cross copper.

All of these methods should be supplemented with attentive handpicking. This often can be done on cloudy mornings or during the day in drizzly weather.

As a last resort, try slug baits that use iron phosphate as their active ingredient. This is often a good solution in perennial beds that are kept mulched year round.

More Advice on Organic Slug Control

Look for secret slug habitats around your garden and move them away from your crop plants. Logs, upturned flower pots, boards, and compost piles placed along the edge of the garden can keep enough slugs around to satisfy natural slug predators, which also consume other garden pests.

At the end of the season, allow chickens to feed in beds where slugs were present. They will eat large numbers of slugs and slug eggs. In climates where high rainfall favors slugs, ducks may be enlisted as excellent slug slayers.

Historically, salt was applied to slugs to kill them, but any salt sprinkled on slugs will end up in your soil, where it may prove troublesome for sensitive plants.

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**PLEASE NOTE**

The January meeting minutes will not appear in this issue but will be in the March DTE along with the February minutes,
Southern Biscuits Recipe

Ingredients:

- 2 cups (10 ounces) all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- 1/4 teaspoon baking soda
- 3/4 teaspoon kosher salt
- 3 tablespoons (1-1/2 ounces) unsalted butter, chilled, cut into 1/2-inch cubes
- 3 tablespoons (1-1/4 ounces) vegetable shortening, chilled, cut into 1/2-inch cubes
- 1 cup buttermilk

Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 450 degrees Fahrenheit.

2. In a medium-size bowl, whisk the flour, baking powder, baking soda, and salt together to blend. The mixture should be light and free of lumps.

3. Add the butter and the shortening, and toss gently to coat. With your fingertips, work the fats into the flour mixture, rubbing the larger pieces between your fingers until they are pea-size.

4. Add the buttermilk all at once. With a wooden spoon or rubber spatula, mix the ingredients until they're just blended and coming together to form dough. Do not over mix.

5. Empty the dough onto a clean, well-floured work surface. Gently pat the dough out into a rectangle approximately 12 x 8 inches. Lightly flour the surface. Fold the dough into thirds, as if you are folding a letter. Scrape the folded dough from the work surface; if necessary, flour the surface again. Once more, pat the dough into a rectangle, flour lightly, and fold into thirds. Finally, pat the dough out to a thickness of approximately 1 inch.

6. With a well-floured 2- or 2-1/2-inch round biscuit cutter, cut biscuits out, and place them on a baking sheet. You may reshape biscuits from the scraps, but they will not rise as high as the first cutting.

7. Bake for 12 to 15 minutes or until the biscuits are a light, golden brown. If you would like, biscuits can be brushed with an additional coating of melted butter. Serve immediately. Homemade biscuits are best eaten the same day that they are baked, but any leftovers can be eaten warm the next day. Simply reheat them in a low 300 degrees Fahrenheit oven for 5 minutes.
CHOOSE NATIVE PLANTS FOR A SUCCESSFUL GARDEN

9. Eastern Deciduous Forests

Grasses:
• Bottlebrush grass *Hystrix patula*: Seed heads look like skimpy bottle brushes. Partial sun to light shade. Moist to slightly dry soil. 5 feet.

Shrubs:
• Eastern redbud *Cercis canadensis*: Pink flowers on bare stems, followed by heart-shape leaves. Shade. Little water. 25 feet.
• Witch hazel *Hamamelis virginiana*: Blooms in late winter. Aromatic. Sun or partial shade. Moderate moisture. 20 feet.
• Mountain laurel *Kalmia latifolia*: Blooms in early summer. Evergreen. Partial sun to shade. Wet to dry. 20 feet.
• Gray twigged dogwood *Cornus racemosa*: White flowers and white fruits that birds love. Sun or shade. Moderate moisture. 15 feet.
• Wintergreen *Gaultheria procumbens*: A ground cover with edible red berries. Sun to shade. Dry to moderately wet. 6 inches.

Wildflowers:
• Spring beauty *Claytonia virginica*: For woodland gardens. Blooms early. Partial sun or shade. Moist. 12 inches.
• New England aster *Symphyotrichum novae-angliae*: Purple fall flowers with yellow centers. Great for the back of a garden. Sun to partial shade. Moderate to moist soil. 5 feet.
• Wild blue phlox *Phlox divaricata*: Slightly fragrant spring bloomer. Partial sun to shade. Average to moist soil. 1 foot.
• Wild ginger *Asarum canadense*: Tidy groundcover with curious maroon flowers below leaves. Shade. Moderate moisture. 8 inches.
• Blue bead lily *Clintonia borealis*: Bell-shape flowers develop into shiny blue berries. Shade. Moderate moisture. 1 foot.

This Old House

Tower of Herbs

5 terra cotta pots. Center smaller pot inverted with at least 6 “ to the edge of the larger pot. Repeat with the next smaller pot only 4” to edge. Place the last pot right side up. Fill with potting soil.

Marth Stewart living
Beautiful Spring-Flowering Shrubs

- **Viburnum**
  Viburnum is an all-around winner. Most varieties bloom in shades of pink and white, and many offer a wonderful fragrance or great fall foliage color.

  **Name:** *Viburnum* selections  
  **Growing Conditions:** Full sun and well-drained soil  
  **Size:** To 15 feet tall wide, depending on type  
  **Zones:** 2-9, depending on type  
  **Here's a hint:** Attract birds to your yard in summer with selections such as American cranberry viburnum, arrowwood, and doublefile viburnum.

**Bridalwreath Spiraea**
This is another shrub you probably saw in grandma's garden. Bridalwreath spiraea still exudes charm and is a perfect pick for cottage gardens. Bridalwreath bears clusters of pure white flowers in mid- to late spring and develops great fall leaf color.

**Name:** *Spiraea prunifolia*  
**Growing Conditions:** Full sun and well-drained soil  
**Size:** To 6 feet tall and wide  
**Zones:** 5-8  
**Here's a hint:** Bridalwreath spiraea is drought tolerant and a good choice for low-water plantings.

**Heath**
Heath, also called heather, brings bright doses of color to the late winter or early spring landscape. Heath is a tiny, compact shrub that's ideal for rock gardens and other spots with well-drained acidic soil. It bears a profusion of pink, white, or red flowers.

**Name:** *Erica carnea*  
**Growing Conditions:** Full sun and well-drained soil  
**Size:** To 10 inches tall and 2 feet wide  
**Zones:** 5-7  
**Here's a hint:** Plant heath in a sheltered spot to (CONTINUED ON PAGE 11)
prevent drying winter winds from turning the foliage brown.

**Camellia**

Perhaps the most eye-catching evergreen shrub, camellia bears stunning rose-like flowers in shades of pink, red, and white in fall, late winter, or spring, depending on type.

**Name:** Camellia selections  
**Growing Conditions:** Shade and moist, well-drained acidic soil  
**Size:** To 15 feet tall and 10 feet wide  
**Zones:** 6-9, depending on type  
**Here's a hint:** Look for the Ice Angels series of camellias if you live in Zone 6; these are the hardiest varieties.

**Forsythia**

Few plants announce spring as dramatically as forsythia, which seems to burst into bloom overnight. This bold shrub covers itself with bright, golden-yellow flowers you can see a block away.

**Name:** Forsythia selections  
**Growing Conditions:** Full sun and well-drained soil  
**Size:** To 10 feet tall wide, depending on type  
**Zones:** 4-9, depending on type  
**Here's a hint:** Add interest after forsythia blooms fade with selections such as 'Citrus Swizzle', 'Fiesta', or 'Kumson', which feature variegated foliage.

**Weigela**

Though once grown for their springtime displays of pink, red, or white blooms, new weigelas shine with foliage so colorful you hardly notice the flowers.

**Name:** Weigela selections  
**Growing Conditions:** Full sun and well-drained soil  
**Size:** To 6 feet tall wide, depending on type  
**Zones:** 4-9, depending on type  
**Here's a hint:** 'My Monet', 'Wine and Roses', and 'Eye catcher' are three outstanding newer varieties with gorgeous foliage from spring to fall.
Inge Look  Old ladies  by Ichabodlides

**DATES TO REMEMBER**

**MGAGCC monthly meeting** is February 19, 2015. All meetings start at 6:00 pm (social time) 6:30 Business Meeting and 7:30 Program. Our speaker will be Trish A. Hacker-Hennig who is owner of American Roots and will be speaking on wild flowers.

**Know and Grow Seminar at a Glance,**
Saturday, February 21, 2015 at Bullock Creek High School, 1420 Badour Rd. Midland, Mi. 48640. Early registration is $60.00. For online registration: http://dowgardens.org

**Backyard Fruit Tree Pruning Workshop**

With Bob Tritten, MSUE District Fruit Educator on Sat. March 28, 2015 10:00 am-12:30 pm at Greater Holy Temple C.O.G.I.C. 6702 N. Dort Hwy. Flint, Mi.48505. You can register online at www.edibleflint.org, mail to edible flint, MSUE Extension, 605 N. Saginaw St., Ste. 1A, Flint, Mi. 48502 or call Deb Hamilton at 810-244-8547. Cost is $10.00 due by Wednesday, March 25, 2015. More information coming soon.

**MSUE Urban Farmer Tune-Up Workshop**

This class is good for anyone growing produce (or wishing to) in urban environments. This class is offered two different days. March 20, 2015-Flint, MSU Extension Genesee County, 605 N. Saginaw St. Flint, Mi 48502 and March 21, 2015-MSU Extension Tollgate Education Center, 28115 Meadowbrook Road, Novi, Mi 48377. Fee is $35.00 Full day/$20.00 Half day; Pre-registration is required: Register at:http://events.anr.smu.edu/urbantuneup/
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