Wintertime for a Gardener

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It is not easy to deal with cold weather when you are a gardener. Although we have not had much snow to bury our favorite garden sites, it still has been cold. By February, I find I am almost stir crazy not being able to garden. Over the years, I have developed a few tricks I would like to share on how to deal with this dilemma.

The first is not really a secret, as many gardeners know this trick. Start to plan your garden and order all the seeds you will need for the upcoming season. Take an inventory of any seeds you saved or were not planted the year before. Also, for older seeds, it is a great time to do test germinations if you have enough. Put ten to twenty seeds in a plastic bag with moist paper towels. Count the number that germinate after a week (time varies by seed type), divide by the total number in the bag, and multiply by 100 to get the percent germination. During this time, I also like to try and scout out new varieties of old favorites, or even try a totally new crop. As it is too cold to work outside, you will have plenty of time to read and plan. In February, I take cuttings of my favorite houseplants to propagate, but be careful that they do not dry out. Cuttings can be stuck in a tray of moistened vermiculite, perlite or other soilless medium to root. A plastic dome placed over the tray helps maintain high humidity while the cuttings take root.
Another useful pastime, since I cannot be outside gardening, is going to the local hardware store as well as nearby big box stores and looking at the garden tool sections. Many of the tools I have purchased were things I did not intend to buy because I did not even know they existed. Some of the tools may not be designed for my intended use, but it does not matter. Each gardener knows what he or she does and if you see a tool that can be useful, pick it up and make your life easier!

New vendors can open up gardening to new varieties of plants or tools/materials you have never seen before. Many times new catalogues just show up in the mailbox, but it doesn’t hurt to do an internet search every now and then. Sometimes it is not the variety of something I need, but the quantity. Winter is also a wonderful time to visit some specialty houseplant vendors here in Connecticut. Two of my favorites, if you like unique, hard to find plants, are Logees (logees.com) and Ballek’s (ballekgardencenter.org).

I saved my best tricks for last! The first is a hidden gem in Connecticut. Not that well known to the public are the UConn Ecology and Evolutionary Biology greenhouses (florawww.eeb.uconn.edu/). These are open to the public six days a week. They have a few familiar houseplants and a lot of rare specimens. There is nothing better than being in a greenhouse in the middle of winter. I have been there many, many times and still enjoy each visit as there is so much to see.

Last and certainly not least, is the CT Flower and Garden Show (ctflowershow.com). This is happening February 20-23, 2020. There are many outdoor gardening displays and vendors for about everything you can think of related to indoor and outdoor plants, tools, buildings, etc. There are floral displays, educational posters, a cacti and succulent contest, and numerous speakers throughout the weekend. Best of all, the UConn Home and Garden Education Center will be there all four days! Bring a half cup of soil for a free pH test as well as any plant related questions. The booth is something to see and loaded with information. Some UConn HGEC staff will be presenting talks during the show as well (check show website for schedule and topics). Although it can be difficult to make it through a seemingly long winter, there are many plant related activities you can do to connect with your warm weather hobby.
For your gardening questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.