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Greetings,

Happy New Year! We took a bit of a rest earlier this month but are now back in the swing of wintertime office work. 'Tis the season for planning, budgeting, accounting and the like. A large computer upgrade is underway in order to better serve you, our first major one since 2006. Look for more details after February 15th when our spring e-letter will be sent.

Attracting Birds to Your Backyard this Winter

At this time of year there is nothing as hauntingly beautiful as the sight of a Northern Cardinal against a snowy winter backdrop. By creating backyard habitats that meet all of the requirements of wild birds- food, water supply, cover and future nesting places- you can have ready entertainment right outside your window.



Male Cardinal on a Snowy Day



Female Cardinal waits out the storm on an evergreen bough

Here are a few tips to get you started:

1. Provide food sources to accommodate birds with differing feeding habits. Wild birds don't need artificial feeding, but during exceptionally harsh weather, it can aid in their survival.

A blend of millet, sunflower seed, and cracked corn spread onto the ground will attract ground feeders, such as Mourning Doves, Northern Cardinals, and Dark-eyed Juncos. Sunflower and safflower seeds in tubular feeders attract Chickadees, Tufted Titmice, and White-breasted Nuthatches, while thistle is a favorite of the American Goldfinch. Suet in a wire mesh dispenser attracts insect-eating birds such as woodpeckers and wrens.

2. Make sure your landscape contains shrubs and trees that provide a food source over the winter. Birds such as American Robin, Cedar Waxwing and Eastern Bluebird do not use feeders. Stephen Kress, ornithologist and author of

The Audubon Society Guide to Attracting Birds, recommends these native winter favorites:

- Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*)
- Hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*)
- Hawthorn (*Crataegus viridis* 'Winter King')
- Crabapple (*Malus* 'Zumi', 'Sargent', and 'Red Jade') with small fruits that are perfectly sized for birds

3. Provide a water supply by using specially designed bird baths containing heating elements that prevent freezing.

4. Provide cover and keep predators away. Densely planted evergreen shrubs and windbreaks allow birds to take shelter from the elements and remain hidden from predators such as raptors. Locate feeders near trees and shrubs to provide refuge and make sure that squirrel guards are built in to the feeder. Keep household cats away as they can be severely detrimental to bird populations.

If you'd like to [learn more](#) about how you can make your backyard friendlier to birds, we'd be happy to help you with the right design.

Plant Pick: *Ilex verticillata* (Winterberry)

Many people have asked me why there aren't that many red berries in the landscape this winter. I chalk it up to the weird spring of 2012 when early, sudden warmth brought out the winterberry leaves much too early. Then a cold snap or two frosted this early growth and set back the emergence of flowers. Extremely hot weather at the time of their flowering probably discouraged pollination and subsequent berrying.



Ilex verticillata in the fall

Winterberries actually leaf out rather late in spring in a normal year. However, this past year they got tricked by the weather, unfortunately. But given a balanced garden soil, adequate light, and a more normal weather pattern, the red berries will be back in 2013. You'll need to plant both a male and female plant in order to produce berries. Since there is a subtle difference in flowering time among varieties, be sure to consult us on the correctly named male to go with your female(s) as this can impact berrying.

These plants belong to the same family as the evergreen hollies



Berries of the *Ilex verticillata* against a snowy backdrop

that also have red berries. But our *Ilex verticillata* drops its leaves each fall. Berries will begin to ripen in late September, usually right about the time a nearby native purple *Aster novae-angliae* is blooming in my garden. These two plants make a great combination! The red berries will warm the winter landscape when snow covers the ground. Finally, by February, a flock of robins will descend to devour the fruit. The birds find the berries more palatable once they have gone through several freeze-thaw cycles.

Good varieties to grow in our area include the females: tall 'Winter Red' or 'Sparkleberry' and the dwarf 'Red Sprite.' The latter makes a great hedge. We cut them for use in our winter container arrangements.

Some people might want to mix it up a bit and plant a bright yellow or apricot-orange fruited winterberry! Tower Hill Botanic Garden has a nice stand of these (however, not berrying this year).

The females 'Chrysocharpa', 'Winter Gold' and 'Golden Verboom' set very heavy fruit. These spectacular specimens are sure to provoke a "what's that" query from your friends.



Ilex verticillata 'Golden Verboom'

Breaking the Ice

If any of you have visited your local hardware store in search of an eco-friendly de-icer, you may have discovered a dizzying number of products labeled "green" or "pet safe."

De-icing products are an unregulated industry, so there are many falsely labeled products on the market. We urge you to be a smart consumer, read the label for ingredients, and take claims of environmental friendliness with a....well, a grain of salt. There really is no one perfect product yet.



Danger - slippery!

Here's a breakdown of some of the alternatives:

The Chloride Based Products

There are three common Sodium Chloride (traditional road salt)

alternatives on the market: Potassium Chloride, Calcium Chloride, and Magnesium Chloride. These are all technically salts. All of the chlorides should be avoided or used as minimally as possible as they can still be detrimental to the environment, corrode concrete, and vehicles and dry out or crack pets' paws.

Beet and Corn Based Products

There's a lot of news lately about municipalities adding beet juice or corn by-products to their salting operations in order to decrease the temperature at which road salt is effective. Both beet and corn based products are inefficient de-icing agents when used on their own. Also, they can be hard to find and the ones that I have found all contain chlorides.

The Acetates

Both Calcium Magnesium Acetate and Potassium Acetate are excellent "green" options, although they can be expensive. They are generally safe for the environment, although overuse can reduce Oxygen levels in water. The acetates are safe for plants and soils. In fact highway departments often use them on roads near wetlands. There are mixed opinions about whether or not they are corrosive on concrete.

Safe Paw

This is a product made by Gaia Enterprises. It's an amide/glycol mixture that works by attracting solar heat. I haven't found any information indicating any dangers to plants, hardscapes, animals or the environment. You'll see green pellets to provide visibility.

Products That Add Traction

Clean cat litter, sand, sawdust, gravel, chicken grit, and woodchips can all be used to add traction to slippery surfaces. They won't corrode concrete or harm the environment. Just be sure to sweep up these products, particularly sand, so as not to clog up storm drains or to track materials into the house. It's always a good idea to clean pet paws after winter walks.

January Is the Time For:

- Checking houseplants for signs of pest infestation (spider mites, aphids, mealybug, and scale)
- Applying a sharp spray of water, cleaning leaves and stems with baby wipes, spraying insecticidal soap, or cutting back hard and re-potting in clean medium will control these pests
- Holding off on feeding



houseplants until they show signs of growth next month

[E-mail me](#) today to help you design a space for an easy to manage raised vegetable garden bed for a healthy 2013!

- Watering tender plants stored in basements or garages along with windowsill houseplants
- Keeping feet off lawns and beds during times of open ground to preserve soil structure
- Planning vegetable gardens
- Checking stored vegetables in root cellars and culling out any spoiled stock
- Reading seed catalogs and placing orders
- Ordering bare root stock for fruit trees, berries, rhubarb etc.
- Taking inventory of garden supplies and reordering as needed
- Looking out your windows and pondering improvements to the garden view
- Reviewing garden notes from 2012 and planning 2013 projects

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Watch for our mailing next month with our Spring recommendations and Plant Health Care program. Please [let me know](#) if you would like to discuss any changes/additions to your outdoor living areas.

Sincerely,
Priscilla

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