



# Over The Garden Gate

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## Get Your Garden Tools Ready for Winter

By Keith Collier



Hand tools with metal blades, such as trowels, hoes, garden forks, and spades, especially need to be cleaned off and protected from rust over the winter months.

Winter is here, and if you are not planning to garden, what do you do to clean and protect your garden tools?

Hand tools with metal blades, such as trowels, hoes, garden forks, and spades, especially need to be cleaned off and protected from rust over the winter months. Plus, giving them a little extra TLC at the end of the gardening season means they'll be ready to go and right when you need them in the spring.

One method of cleaning is to mix linseed oil and coarse sand in a big bucket or container. Use coarse builder's sand, not play sand. Also, avoid motor oil, as this can pollute the vegetable garden, and vegetable oil could turn rancid. Use a stiff wire brush to clean off any dirt or debris, rinse clean, and dry the

blade. Once it is completely dry, plunge the tool edge first into the oil/sand mixture. Store the bucket in a dry, covered area.

Now, using some of the linseed oil and a rag, rub the wooden handles to prevent drying or splitting over the winter. Keep the bucket handy, and anytime you want to release some hostility

when those pesky sucking, chewing, or boring insects invade your gardens, plunge those tools into the bucket!

Here is a tip for your cutting and pruning tools: How many of us use bleach on our cutting and pruning tools as a disinfectant? While it is okay to use on shovels, spades, trowels, and such, it can cause pitting and erosion that will dull the pruning or cutting blade much quicker. Instead, before storing for the winter, or any time after using, apply isopropyl alcohol, but do not use a 100% solution. Why dilute the alcohol? For alcohol to be an effective disinfectant, the solution needs to contact a surface or item for at least 30 seconds. The reason not to use 100% alcohol is that it evaporates too quickly for this purpose. If

the alcohol concentration is less than 70%, it is too weak to kill disease-causing pathogens effectively. Solutions of 70% – 75% alcohol must be kept in a sealed bottle to prevent evaporation and can be stored, as the potency does not fade away over time. Pruning tool blades by dipping, wiping, or spraying with an alcohol solution before moving from one plant or tree to the next.

Follow these few tips, and you'll be ready for spring.

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# Share Your Secrets for Fun and Enjoyable Gardening

By Pat Bishop

Granddaddy Cecil could unstring a feed sack in six seconds, always knowing which string loosened the seal. Now, I think I have him beat with my handy steak knife.

One of the best gardening tools, the steak knife, was introduced to me by a fellow Florida Master Gardener, Eileen Hart. I visited her camellia-filled garden as she was cutting a cluster for a flower arrangement. Placing the edge of the knife against the stem, she cut a perfectly smooth angle, turned to me, and said, "This is the handiest tool you can use in the garden." Laden with branches of hard and soft stemmed plants, she also arrived at CE sessions to demonstrate how to make cuts for propagation. Of course, her tool was a steak knife.

Since then, the steak knife has become my go-to, must have tool. With its serrated blade, it can rip open a bag of mulch or potting soil

faster than Granddaddy could unravel the string on a bag of feed.

At the top edge of the bag, slice across with the steak knife, and the bag is opened in two seconds.

Other uses of this handy tool include the following:

- deadheading annuals
- trimming unwanted growth on small plants
- shaping tips of shrubbery
- stripping bottom leaves of stalks to make flower arrangements
- cleaning joints between stones.

As a word of caution, I suggest that you try to find knives with other than a black handle or paint the handle a bright color. I dread the thought of how many steak knives are lost in my garden because I dropped them and covered them with mulch or Black Kow, never to be found again.

Your steak knife does not have to be a costly Wusthof or a Henckels or a Viking. The best bargain is at the discount store where you can get four for two dollars.

Two other fellow Master Gardeners share these tips with you:

- Plant marigolds and basil among your tomatoes to ward off pests.
- Plant where you have water.

--Jeannie Zibrida

- Forget the professional landscapers' favorite practice. Avoid over mulching with a "cone" around the base of newly planted trees. Leave room around the base of the tree for watering and for the tree to breathe.

--Ann Fair

*Do you have ideas to share? Please send them to [patbee603@gmail.com](mailto:patbee603@gmail.com).*

## Take Care of These Winter Chores

On his web site, Walter Reeves gives us a detailed review of what we gardeners should do this winter to prepare for warm weather. Here are a few ideas.

### JANUARY

Keep poinsettias in bright light and only water when soil is dry.

Check your motorized tools: lawn mower, bower, edger. Give them a good tune-up, oil motors and blades, sharpen the blades.

### FEBRUARY

Prune shrubs and bushes: boxwoods, hollies, roses; trim winter-blooming shrubs after blooming.

Build raised beds.

### MARCH

Fertilize winter annuals.

Trim lirioppe.

For more ideas, refer to Reeves' web site:

<https://www.walterreeves.com/gardening-calendar>

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## Camellias Brighten Winter Gardens

By Ron Brechter

With hundreds of cultivars, camellias vary in shape, size, and purpose. The shiny, bright leaves and colorful blooms brighten any winter garden. Originating in Asia and brought to the United States in the late 1700s, camellias add beauty not only during the winter, but also throughout the year in our Georgia gardens.

The two species of camellias include **sasanquas** and **japonicas**. Blooming in the late fall and early winter, sasanquas have small leaves and flowers. In spite of the small leaves, they can grow to a mature height of 15 feet. With its bright red blooms that give every garden a Christmas present, a popular sasanqua for your winter garden is Yuletide (*Camellia sasanqua* 'Yuletide'). Japonicas bloom later with larger leaves and flowers that open in winter and early spring, and their heights have been known to get up to 30 feet.



With its bright red blooms that give every garden a Christmas present, a popular sasanqua for your winter garden is Yuletide.

The Brigadoon (*Camellia x williamsii* 'Brigadoon') is a breath-taking exam-

ple of a japonica hybrid with its five inch bloom, ruffled petals, and yellow centers.

The **tea camellia**, cousin to the sasanqua and japonica, has a story beyond its flowering ability. Have you ever had a glass of green tea? If so, you have had tea camellia, as green tea, along with white, black and oolong, is derived from the dried leaves of *Camellia sinensis*. Tea camellia is very similar to sasanquas in that it is smaller in stature and has smaller flowers that are cup shaped and can be seen in the fall months blooming either pink or white.

Regardless of the cultivar or species, camellias prefer partly shady areas with good drainage. Filtered shade under pine trees seem to be the perfect exposure for these plants. Dense shade can hinder flowering ability, and full sun discolors the handsome foliage. Much like azaleas and rhododendrons, camellias do not like wet soil. Good drainage is a must for healthy plants.

Camellias also prefer low soil pH, fairly typical in North Georgia. A soil test by the extension office can specify your soil pH and recommend amendments or additives to move the pH in one direction or the other. Soil tests can provide helpful insight into your soil's health.

If planted and established properly, camellias are easy plants to care for. Any pruning should be completed after flowering has occurred, preferably in late winter or early spring. One beneficial fertilizer, Holly Tone, is a



The Brigadoon is a breath-taking japonica hybrid with its five inch bloom, ruffled petals, and yellow centers.

slow-release fertilizer that can be applied in early March to give camellias a nutritional spring boost.

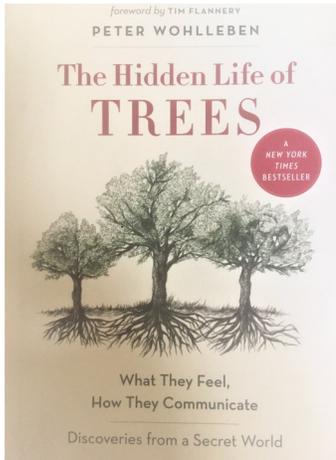
Camellias are tough scrubs, but they are susceptible to camellia flower blight, a disease that can be detrimental to the blooms of the shrubs. To help prevent this disease, routinely clean out spent flowers and foliage from under the plants. Removing old flowers and foliage will help prevent fungal spores from reproducing and help keep the plants clean and healthy. Fresh layers of mulch will also help prevent flower blight as well as insulate the root system during winter.

Camellias can be planted as specimens, accents, or even as screen borders in shady areas. Sasanqua and tea camellias are easily trained and look incredible as espaliers along a vertical surface like walls or fences. The full shapes of japonicas can fill a garden as individual specimen plants or clustered in groups.

Many believe that camellias are just large evergreen, flowering shrubs. Do not fall into that trap. Ranging from dwarf, dense plants to large, loose forms, they offer variety and interest to any garden.

## Book Review—*The Hidden Life of Trees*

By Russell England



What if trees could talk, at least communicate with each other? Peter Wohlleben, in his book *The Hidden Life of Trees* cites many examples of how trees do indeed communicate with each other. The book was originally published in Germany in 2015, and the English translation has been available since 2016.

Wohlleben worked for twenty years for the German state forestry commission, using traditional management practices geared toward maximum wood production. He now manages what he calls an environmentally friendly woodland where his goal is to eventually return the forest to a primeval state - to what the forest might have looked like before humans started tampering with it.

Decades ago in Africa, scientists discovered that umbrella thorn acacia trees being browsed by giraffes quickly started pumping a toxic substance into their leaves to rid themselves of the pesky browsers. The trees also gave off a warning gas (ethylene) that acted as a signal to other trees of the same species that a crisis was at hand. The giraffes saw that they were not welcome and moved on to other trees that

had not yet gotten the message. The trees were communicating by scent.

With some tree species, when a caterpillar begins to feed on a leaf the surrounding tissue changes. Electrical signals are sent out, and within an hour or so defensive compounds are produced in the leaves, thus ruining the pest's meal. And not just any compound. The trees have the ability to analyze the saliva of different insects and match the defensive compound to the pest at hand. The tree may also release specific pheromones that act to summon the proper beneficial predator.

Trees also communicate with each other through a vast underground network of fungal species. These fungi connect the tree roots to the soil and enable the exchange of carbon and nutrients from tree to tree. A study done in British Columbia using stable and radioactive isotopes demonstrated that photosynthetic carbon was being exchanged between Douglas firs and paper birches. The firs were receiving more carbon from the birches than they were giving up; thus, the birches were aiding the growth of the firs growing in the shade of the birches.

The underground cottony web of fungus, called mycelium, can be huge. A honey fungus in Switzerland covers nearly 120 acres and is thought to be about a thousand years old. One in Oregon is estimated to be 2,400 years old, covers 2,000 acres and weighs 660 tons. These are examples of how large the fungal networks can be, but apparently not all fungal species benefit all trees.

The oak milkcap fungus aids oak

trees, allowing the oaks to greatly increase their functional root surfaces which, in turn, allows the oaks to suck up considerably more water and nutrients. Twice the amount of nitrogen and phosphorus is found in plants that cooperate with fungal partners compared to those that tap the soil with just their roots. But trees generally do not depend on a single species of fungus, so if one species dies out for some reason the tree usually can adapt to another one.

The fungal connection is like a forest internet. Of course, the fungi do not perform all these beneficial services to the trees for free. Fungi, like animals, do not produce their own food but extract sugar and other nutrients from the tree roots for their services.

Old trees can perform specific functions in the forest ecosystem. The author cites research in Canada on Sitka spruce that were at least 500 years old and found large quantities of moss on the branches and in branch forks. Blue-green algae that capture nitrogen from the air and process it into a form that the trees can use had colonized the moss. Scientists found that the older trees fertilize the forest to the benefit of the younger trees as rain washes the nitrogen down the trunks and into the soil where it is available to the roots.

The book is well written and easy to read. The author includes references to numerous studies from around the world that have documented the various ways trees communicate. The book was fascinating to me, and it should be of interest to many master gardeners. No need to buy the book; it is available in the Hall County library system.

# Plant a Hedgerow to Support Wildlife

By Karin Hicks

Once a common practice in Britain, hedgerows are making a comeback in American landscaping. The growing popularity of native plants and a desire to increase biodiversity in home gardens are driving gardeners to rediscover the value a hedgerow provides.

A hedgerow is a landscape feature that is multifunctional. Basically, it is a strip of densely planted trees, shrubs and perennials that forms a border and is often planted along property boundaries, roads or driveways. It serves as a low maintenance 'living fence' that provides privacy for the gardener and food and shelter for wildlife.

Hedgerows differ from hedges in several ways. The goal is not a uniform look but a diverse planting (layers) of at least a dozen woody plants with an herbaceous groundcover as the base. The chosen plants should all require the same soil type, moisture and sunlight. As the plants grow together, there will be little opportunity for weeds to encroach. Once established, hedgerows create a microclimate by blocking the wind, providing shade, and slowing surface runoff.

Five years ago, we pulled out a monoculture of 55 knock out roses along our driveway and replaced them with a wildlife hedgerow. We included a selection of evergreen and deciduous trees, native shrubs and perennials. We immediately saw an increase in bird activity that appreciated the abundance of seeds and berries as well as natural nesting sites and protection from predators.

We chose plants that would support a wide array of wildlife, serving as host plants for butterflies and moths



A cardinal enjoys the American beautyberry's fruit in the cold of winter.

and seeds for birds all while meeting the soil, light and moisture conditions of the site. It sounds like an enormous challenge, but native plants will meet all these requirements.

Here are some of my favorites that we included in our full sun hedgerow:

**Wax Myrtle** (*Myrica cerifera*) is an evergreen plant that can be pruned as a shrub or left to grow to a small tree. It is fast growing and provides privacy quickly. The foliage is aromatic and the birds love the small berries (be sure to get a female plant). They are not picky about soil but do like good drainage and slightly acidic conditions.

**Downy Serviceberry** (*Amerlanchier arborea*) is a multi-trunked deciduous tree that blooms in early spring and fruits in summer. The berries are edible (and delicious), but the birds will gobble them up before you get to pick them. It doesn't require pruning but is in the rose family (*Rosaceae*) and, therefore, susceptible to insect and disease problems similar to those found with apples and pears.

**American Beautyberry** (*Callicarpa americana*) is an easy-to-grow woody, deciduous shrub that puts on a show of purple fruit that attracts a wide range of birds in the fall. The flowers support a variety of pollinators including bees and pollinating flies. This native is a host plant for the spring azure butterfly and snowberry clearwing moth.



The American Beautyberry's purple fruit attracts a wide range of birds in the fall.

**Dwarf Fothergilla** (*Fothergilla gardenia*) is a compact, four-season shrub that deserves a place in every garden. The bottle shaped, honey-scented blooms appear in spring and support a variety of bees. In fall, the foliage is a kaleidoscope of color that you will fall in love with.

See Hedgerow, 6

## Master Gardener Field Trips Planned for Spring Enjoyment

By Pat Bishop

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**Grancy Graybeard** (*Chionanthus virginicus*) is a small deciduous tree with an open branching structure that needs little pruning. It bursts into bloom in spring with white, fragrant fringe flowers that attract beetles and tiny bees. This small tree is adaptable to a wide range of soils and has a high tolerance for pollution.

**New Jersey Tea** (*Ceanothus americana*) is a compact, low growing shrub that fills in the layer between shrubs and herbaceous plants. It performs well in hot, dry sites and has deep roots that hold in soil (erosion control/steep slopes). The flowers attract butterflies, hummingbirds, pollinators and beneficial insects. It is a host plant for gray hairstreak and duskywing butterflies.

**Chokeberry** (*Aronia arbutifolia*) is a multi-stemmed shrub that will sucker and spread. It tolerates a wide range of soil types, even boggy soils. White blooms appear in spring for early pollinators. Red berries develop later in the season and persist through winter. Birds and other mammals eat the berries which can also be used in jams and jellies.



**Chokeberry's red berries develop later in the season and persist through winter.**

Creating a hedgerow in our garden is the best landscaping decisions we ever made. As natural habitats continue to shrink, wildlife rely extensively on our home gardens to survive. Our hedgerow provides important food, shelter and protection for wildlife, especially birds and hibernating insects.



**A group of Hall Masters Gardeners gathered at Gibbs Gardens to celebrate the beauty of a November fall. Those attending include Patti Lewis, Mindy Wade (and Carly), Ron Brechter, Penny McGowan, Garrett Hibbs, Jeannie Zibrida, Ann Fair, Pat Bishop, Dinah Wallace, Beverly Brinson, and Karin Hicks.**

Taking advantage of our fall trip, a group of Hall Masters Gardeners gathered at Gibbs Gardens to celebrate the beauty of November. Especially enjoyable were the Japanese gardens ablaze with oranges, yellows, and reds.

Future field trips planned include the following:

- ◆ February—Camellias  
Massee Lane, Ft. Valley
- ◆ March—Daffodils and Cherry Blossoms  
Gibbs Gardens, Ball Ground
- ◆ April—Rhododendrons  
Hamilton Gardens, Hiwassee
- ◆ May—Garden Center and Home Decor  
Scottsdale Farms, Alpharetta

- ◆ June—New plants and practices  
UGA Trial Gardens, Athens
- ◆ September—Garden walks  
GA State Botanical Gardens,  
Athens

These dates depend on weather conditions and maximum bloom time, but Karin Hicks will keep us up to date as to specific places and times as the year progresses. As Karin summarizes, "It was fantastic to start going on field trips again, and our visit to Gibbs Garden was a great time taking in all the spectacular fall foliage and chatting all things horticulture with fellow MGEVs. I hope more folks will join us in 2022 as we plan trips throughout the year. It is a good way to get to know members better while exploring gardens, nurseries and nature centers."