

## Garden Kalendar: January 2020

This Garden Kalendar blog post is composed of edited excerpts from my daily garden journal written in January-March 2019, accompanied by my occasional commentaries on those passages. This Kalendar text represents about 50% of the total journal. The selections primarily focus on entries discussing either the Coe Alumni House Garden or my vegetable garden near Wickiup Hill Outdoor Learning Center. The italicized quotations inserted into the Kalendar are from *A Celebration of Gardens* (Timber Press, 1991), a remarkable anthology of writings on gardens assembled by Sir Roy Strong, the long-time director of the Victoria and Albert Museum and eminent authority on garden history. Because of the length of this Garden Shed posting, the complete text can be read as a pdf document by clicking on this link to Winter Garden Kalendar 2020. ~Bob

*Let us, then, begin by defining what a garden is, and what it ought to be.  
It is a piece of ground fenced off from cattle, and appropriated to the use and pleasure of man:  
it is or ought to be, cultivated and enriched by art, with such products as are not natural  
to this country, and, consequently, it must be artificial in its treatment, and may,  
without impropriety, be so in its appearance; yet, there is so much of littleness in art,  
when compared with nature, that they cannot well be blended; it were, therefore, to be wished,  
that the exterior of a garden should be made to assimilate with park scenery,  
or the landscape of nature; the interior may then be laid out with all the variety,  
contrast, and even whim, that can produce pleasing objects to the eye.*

~Humphry Repton, from *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1803)

[Repton coined the term “landscape gardener” to describe his efforts to transform the English countryside into a pastoral landscape.]

### Excerpts from Garden Journal, January-March 2019

**2 Jan 2019.** First entry of the new year. Normal January weather: temp mid to high 20s, some sunshine, light wind—chilly but not super cold. Treacherous walking on our driveway; thin veneer of ice with light dusting of snow. Also slippery on Alum Garden patio and steps. I went into the Alum House several times this afternoon to use the janitor’s closet. I cleaned out my vegetable blender (used for grinding up food parcels for the red wigglers), the compost tea bag, and the compost tea bucket. Filled my water containers and two watering cans with fresh water for the coming week.

I posted to the website the Fall ‘18 issue of *The Garden Quarto* and sent copies to Gabeba at Penn State and to Nick here at Coe. Yesterday I planted some Batavia lettuce; today I watered lettuce, kale, parsley, and fritillaria—all planted in last 2-3 days. [None of the fritillaria planted indoors germinated; a few planted in the “G” bed did appear in the spring, but less than a 25% germination rate.]

**5 Jan.** Crazy weather. This afternoon I worked outside at home for over three hours; so warm, I took off my fleece. Thermometer on garage said it was 50F; certainly in upper 40s until the sun started sinking. Ran the lawn mower, sweeping up and chopping 7-8 loads of leaves from front yard. It is now “done”—though a few areas next to the house still need to be raked and spruced up. Mowed the remaining hostas surrounding the pin oak. Looks much better.

As for the backyard, I concentrated on raking the old peony beds and walkways. Need to cut back astilbe and hostas before raking the rest. Leaves in a big pile over the rhubarb need to go through chipper/shredder. I might bring the gas chipper home and see if I can get it working again. Not doing any

good sitting in the portable greenhouse at Coe. [Later in the spring I donated my chipper to a local church, and one of the members of the congregation got it cleaned up and working again.]

I have been reading Will Bonsall's *Essential Guide to Radical, Self-Reliant Gardening*. While I'm not going to adopt his exclusive vegetable diet and self-reliant practices, he has some wonderful ideas—and he can be quite funny, a great speaking voice that makes the writing vibrant and appealing. I love his insight that there are no real borders to any garden. A garden is always part of the larger world surrounding it.

**9 Jan.** Mom's birth date, 106 years ago. The last few days I've been thinking about my parents, family history, home town, life on the farm. I've opened up several boxes with old family documents, reading dozens of letters Mom and Dad saved, including Dad's love letters during the War, after they were married in '42. These documents bring back many memories, nearly all pleasant. A few surprises—such as reading the letter to my parents informing them that MVM and I were engaged. Clearly I sensed they might not be pleased, something I had forgotten. Spent all morning going through old documents, many to be thrown away, including piles of my mother's old Medicare and insurance correspondence and forms.

Not much gardening today, but I did walk to Coe (trying to walk as much as possible, hoping to get in shape for the Scotland trek in June). It was chilly—temp about 20—and brisk breeze so it felt much colder—but sun was bright and it wasn't too bad during those moments when I was out of the wind. At Coe I hooked up the shredder and processed two more bags for the compost bins. A lot of the material that had been damp was frozen so it fed through the shredder much better than when it was wet and limp. The four cedar bins are close to being full. In the greenhouse, I was pleased to see the kale, lettuce, shallots and parsley are coming up. The parsley is tricky to germinate so I was pleased to see several sprigs appearing in the peat pots. I had covered them—having read they prefer to germinate in the dark—but after I found several seeds had germinated, I moved them into the shed and put them under their own light.

*It is not graceful, and it makes one hot, but it is a blessed sort of work,  
and if Eve had had a spade in Paradise and known what to do with it,  
we should not have had all that sad business of the apple.  
~Countess von Arnim, Elizabeth and her German Garden (1898)*

**14 Jan (Mon).** It snowed Friday night, probably 4-5"; now it's relatively warm, around 30F, so the main roads cleared off rather quickly. But we still have snow pack on Elmhurst Drive and our yard has a thorough blanket of snow. I didn't go to Coe this weekend, but when I checked on things this afternoon, the greenhouse and shed were both at 60F, thus the two heaters were working and everything in good shape. Most of the lettuce and parsley have germinated, but many are stretching for the light. My watering dislodged several new germinations, confirming they will not likely survive, but most of the pots needed thinning. I did turn on two fans so we have an air flow on the seedlings to toughen them up. I had ordered two clamp grow lights that arrived on the weekend, and I installed one over a group of seedlings. The new light has distinct reds and gives the impression of being much stronger than the tubular grow light. I'm curious to see if the new light makes any difference in the growth patterns.

**22 Jan.** No garden entries the past week because there has been minimal gardening. We've had two rounds of snow, the second on Saturday giving us about 6" and it's snowing now, perhaps another 5-6". Forecast for temps below zero so it's good we have this additional insulation. I just finished reading

Eleanor Perény's *Green Thoughts* and should soon finish Will Bonsall's *Essential Guide to Radical, Self-Reliant Gardening*. Both marvelous books by experienced, opinionated writers, each with a unique, engaging, speaking voice. Bonsall is certainly going to have a significant impact on my vegetable garden plans and strategies this year at Wickiup—but it will be all behind-the-scenes stuff.

One big advance at the Coe garden: yesterday morning I picked up from Cara the new garden screens/supports. They look marvelous and will add a substantive year-around presence in the garden. Unfortunately the 9 screens (\$100 per screen) will not cover as much space as I had hoped, and they need to be located so they contribute to the impression of a coherent design and are not just randomly sprinkled around the garden. Perhaps could use six of them in pairs (rather than in two groups), giving the garden an additional structure. Could use three pairs in the "D" bed and a single 3-sided group around the Sioux Indian Grass in the "F" bed. [I eventually decided to use four of them around the Joe Pye weeds and goldenrod at the back of the "D" bed and a matching group on the other side of the garden, constraining New England asters and tall miscanthus in the "K" bed. The screens tended to disappear at the height of the summer's foliage, but have re-emerged this fall as the summer flowers and foliage have disappeared.]

I've also been trying to find an engraving company that will create a series of plexiglass panels engraved with short quotations. I sent two emails to a company in Marion but no response. Today I contacted an engraving company in Iowa City, and I may have found the folks I've been seeking. I also began editing the 2018 garden journal for the January Kalendar website posting. A big chunk of February was in London, so I need to decide if I want to use passages from the London Journal—and if I do decide to include excerpts from that journal, I need to find the journal.

**25 Jan.** Deep freeze. Driving to Coe this morning, the CR-V's thermometer registered -9F. Fortunately, there was little wind so the wind chill was not much lower. At Coe, my student assistant had cleared a path in the snow around the outer walkways and a path to the Alumni House patio door. So I could walk around the garden and took about 50 photos for a website slideshow. I'm still struggling to find the right settings for shooting photos with the stark white background. The garden's central lawn is a smooth, foot-deep blanket. It was reassuring to see several plants sticking up through the snow. Particularly appealing were the sweet Annie and the tall stoncrop: their seedheads still erect, unfazed by the snowfall and acerbic cold temperatures. Those low temps are creating a challenge for the poorly insulated greenhouse. I assume the space heater was running non-stop last night. When I arrived at 8:00 am, the greenhouse's thermometer temp was 33F, but it's stuck in the coldest corner of the work bench, and I suspect most of the greenhouse was about 40F.

**28 Jan.** Sang Happy Birthday to K on her voice mail. Hard to believe she's 39 years old—but that morning in St. Luke's when I first held her does feel like ancient history. As for the winter weather, it continues with temps in the mid teens. Several inches of snow last night so I had to shovel the driveway at home, including the path to my garden studio/office in the back yard. Snow is now over 1' deep in most places—and thank goodness for the snow cover since the forecast is for falling temps tonight, eventually dropping us to -30F or colder. High temp for Wednesday is predicted to only be -15F. Plus serious winds so wind chill will be near -50F.

At Coe this morning, it was reasonably warm in both greenhouse and shed. The parsley was dry so I did some serious watering, including the baby leaf lettuce and the kale. The big rosemary is now covered with light blue blossoms, quite attractive. And the dianthus I dug up and potted is growing; it might even be preparing to bloom. I did some snow shoveling at Coe, creating a path from the parking lot to the

greenhouse—and then I cleared a path from the greenhouse to the rear entrance to the Alumni House. The garden is serenely beautiful with the new snow. Virtually no evidence of animal life. No birds. No tracks in the snow. The snow cover is pristine, unblemished.

*Come, my spade. There is no ancient gentlemen but gardeners,  
ditchers, and grave-makers; they hold up Adam's profession.*

*~William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act V, sc. I*

**4 Feb.** To Coe briefly this morning to water plants and do some computer work. Big change in the garden's conditions. Temp was into upper 40s yesterday, 80 degrees warmer than three days ago and a lot of snow has melted, including chunks of ice and snow that slid off the Alumni House dining room roof and came crashing down onto the greenhouse—and I do mean crashing. I did a partial garden police call. Found one beer can and an empty bag of pet food, but overall the garden looked okay. Saw prints in snow on walkways that I thought were a raccoon's, but overall not much evidence of bird or animal life. I'm intrigued that few if any birds use the yews for protection from the wind and cold. Perhaps because yews are non-natives and don't provide any food sustenance, the birds don't see them as a welcoming environment.

One task I did complete today was editing and posting the December photos to the garden website, most of them taken the morning after a major frost. A high percentage of the photos were portraits of the frost on lamb's ear, coreopsis, stoncrop, diverse seed heads—a collection similar to what I posted last winter. Despite the obvious redundancies, each year—at least to me—feels freshly engaging, inviting, revelatory.

**11 Feb.** It's midnight. Started to snow about 3:15 this afternoon and is still coming down. A gentle, quiet snow, but it's over a sheet of ice and the streets/highways could be treacherous—which means that I won't be going to Iowa City tomorrow to play with my buddy Theo. Meanwhile this was a big gardening day. I finished the vegetable seed chart—came to 33 pages, which I printed out. I then spent two hours this afternoon working my way through the table and deciding what seeds to order—and from what sources. Two catalogs I've used in the past—Totally Tomatoes & Seeds 'N Such—have not received favorable reviews on Dave's website, but they are notably cheaper than Baker Creek or Johnny's, so I've been undecided what source to use for some seeds. This evening I did submit on line my order to Johnny's, Seeds 'N Such, Seeds of Italy, and Botanical Interests. That still leaves me finalizing orders with Baker Creek, Territorial, Annie's, Pinetree, Totally Tomatoes, and Victory (whose printed catalog I didn't receive). Victory's printed catalog doesn't have any fancy photos, and their seed information is pretty basic, but this family-run operation has many heirloom tomatoes not available from other sources, and their seeds are typically less expensive than from my other sources.

This past week I've been reading John Sales' *Shades of Green*, his autobiography focusing on his experiences as the Head of Gardens for the National Trust in Great Britain. In Anna Pavord's Foreword, she identifies Sales' three fundamental principles, ones I find quite appealing:

- Garden are shaped by the quality of the gardening.
- Present values should never compromise future possibilities.
- A garden is a process, not a product.

Sales provides fascinating portraits of these gardens and their evolution over the centuries—though particularly focusing on how they have been treated once their development and maintenance has been

assumed by the National Trust. As a reader, my problem is that I've never visited most of these gardens, and it's hard for me to remember the unique histories of each garden. Nevertheless, a fascinating book.

**12 Feb.** A day of gardening—morning, afternoon, and night—but all inside, in my office in the basement or at the computer in the garden shed at Coe, filling out seed orders—mostly for veggies—orders sent to Pinetree, Territorial, Baker Creek, Victory Seeds, Annie's, Natural Gardening, and an Alumni House flower order to Bluestone. Once I submit the Richters Herbs order, and I should have all the veggie/herb orders done. The next step is to begin deciding what will be planted where, including more research on potential benefits of companion planting. Also need to create a more precise schedule for sowing seeds, soil prep, use of fertilizers, strategies for preventing insect damage, and decisions on the design of raised beds and cold frames. Amazing, after 40 years planting vegetable gardens in Iowa, I still feel like I'm starting from scratch. As I perceive how little I understand, it becomes more daunting trying to figure out how to get the gardening done right, how to make a garden that is well-designed and effective and efficient and productive and aesthetically pleasing and ecologically sound and nutritionally satisfying and beneficial to the environment. It was much simpler 40 years ago when I bought all my garden supplies at Hawkeye Seed on 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave and was thrilled when in April or May I could till my garden plot, build my raised beds, and sow my seeds.

While I keep trying to convince myself that my vegetable garden is making a small contribution to the health of Iowa and a few Iowans, I wonder if the instruments and techniques I use make that an impossible objective. For example, there's the problem of all that transportation and burning of petrol while driving my Chevy S-10 back and forth to the garden, a round trip of 20 miles (i.e., one gallon of gas). And could anything in the long term be healthier than stepping aside and letting nature have its own way. Yet, because of so many environmental problems we humans create, perhaps there can be some value in our efforts to create pockets of ecological richness. I certainly can testify the garden creates a diverse community of flora and fauna, but it's an artificial community dependent on my frequent interventions. If I stopped coddling my Wickiup garden, it would only take 2-3 years for most of it to disappear: perhaps a few raspberry bushes and asparagus plants and garlic would survive, but most of the plants in the garden are fragile annuals that would be no match for the tough Midwest natives. The locals would easily overwhelm my little island, composed almost entirely of non-native aliens.

**18 Feb** (Monday). This weekend another big snowfall. Started snowing late Saturday night and continued through Sunday—probably 6-7" total. Fortunately before the snow arrived, we had some melting mid-week, which enabled us to remove a slick layer of ice on our driveway.

Primary gardening task at Coe was clearing plants and everything else off the garden work bench and giving the surface four coats of polyurethane. The first two coats went on with no problem, but the third coat was applied in the morning and shortly thereafter there was condensation on the ceiling that started dripping onto the not-yet-dried polyurethane. The result was a mess: hundreds of bubbles on the surface. So two days ago I went to Coe in the evening, sanded down the bench (removing the worst bubbles), and applied a 4<sup>th</sup> coat at a time when the air was cold and there would be minimal condensation. When I arrived this morning, the polyurethane had dried and the water droplets dropping from the ceiling were beading up and not soaking into the wood. Sweet success. So I put the three grow lights back on the work area and returned the plants. After I did some watering, I felt we were back in business, better than ever.

Another accomplishment of the last two days was contacting the poet Katie Riegel and asking if we could include one of her poems in the next issue of the *Garden Quarto*. I had no email address for her so I wrote the message using Facebook Messenger, only the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> time I've ever used Facebook to initiate a

contact. A few hours after sending the message, she wrote back, giving us permission to use her poem, no strings attached. So the next issue will probably consist of pieces by Riegel, R. Drexler, and Mrinalani (a Coe alum), plus a short bit of poetic prose submitted by Gina. I still need one more piece and we'll be good to go. My plan is to find one or more appropriate passages from Paul Engle's papers. Surely he wrote something that includes garden/nature imagery. [My guess proved correct. While I never found a complete, sustained poem that proved satisfying, I did discover several short passages with garden-related imagery that made a nice collection.]

One other gardening task today. I took the plexiglass sheet with the Francis Bacon garden quote to Cara's shop in Marion, and we came up with a design for creating stainless steel supports that will be used to anchor these plexiglass panels in the garden. I now need to choose 5-6 more quotes and send them to Jim's Plexiglass in Iowa City so I can have a group of these in the garden—though I'm not sure if it would be best to distribute them in different beds or have them congregate in one bed. [I opted for dispersal. Cara's final design was a bit different from what we had initially discussed, but her supports have worked perfectly. I have been surprised, however, that during the past year I can only recall two instances when anyone commented on the plexiglass panels. I thought they might garner more attention, but whatever visitors may think of them, I love them.]

This afternoon I finished the first draft of the February Garden Shed posting, my annual annotated bibliography of garden books I had read in the past year. Since we are leaving on Sunday for a trip to Tybee Island, I needed to get the bib revised, edited, and posted. Before our departure, I must complete Buffalo's March newsletter and the taxes and a bunch of stuff for the History and Writing Center Alum websites. Next five days are going to be busy. Plus I also need to do an MMGR since I've only done one so far this year.

This morning read part of a conversation (in the 17 Feb 2019 issue of the *NY Times Style Magazine*) between the architect Frank Gehry and the Chinese artist Weiwei. Gehry said that in doing his art he wanted to work "hands on" like he thinks Weiwei works. "You pick up materials, you put them somewhere, you make things. I always felt it was more direct, more human, more related to the body." Gehry's remarks also describe my gardening principles and practices: I put plants somewhere and then watch to see what happens. Weiwei says of Gehry, "You make good mistakes."

**21 Feb.** Lovely winter day; welcome sunshine, temp into low 30s, so a little melting. Began morning by picking up the Roadtrek camper for the upcoming trip to Tybee, only to discover a dead battery. After jump starting, I took the van to Keenan Auto and discovered the battery was under full warranty—so I got a free battery. Since we're leaving for Georgia tomorrow morning, rest of the day was spent on miscellaneous tasks. I did finish the church's March newsletter and completed the February Garden Shed post (10-page annotated bib on garden books I read the past twelve months) and submitted a Monday Morning Garden Report, my first report since the arrival of serious winter weather. Today's commentary did talk about the winter garden, but half of the posting was on Bluestone Perennials I've ordered this month. Today was the final day for 50% off specials and I ordered over \$200 more plants—so the total will be near \$1,000, a \$2,000 value according to their listed catalog retail value. One exception: I did order three Rozanne Geraniums that were not on sale. The Rozanne in the "F" bed has been a fantastic bloomer, and I want to add several more to the front of the "D" and "G" borders. I noticed they were rated as Z5, but the Rozanne handled last year's winter without a problem, and I trust that with the good snow cover it will do fine again this year. [It did.] While looking through the Bluestone I was disappointed they don't carry any persicaria. I really liked how well the 'Firetail' persicaria looked at the back of the "G" bed

berm the last couple of years. They didn't reappear this year, and I wanted to give them one more shot by giving them more space and more light.

Another job today was ordering six more plexiglass garden quote panels from Jim's Plexiglass. Took me a long time to settle on the quotes. Finally chose James Carse on gardening as infinite play, Alice Walker on a flower's independence, Thoreau on seeds, D. H. Lawrence on flowers and manure, Sackville-West on gardening as an act of putting flowers together, and Leopold on the subject of the land ethic, a passage from the *Sand County Almanac*. It's a diverse group, American and European, philosophical and pragmatic, some gender and ethnic diversity. Managed to include several of my favorite authors. Lawrence is for me the outsider, but I really like his short quote. I was saddened that I had to leave out an Ecclesiastes passage (just too long) and nothing by Emily or Walt, no Shakespeare or Emerson. Nothing by anonymous—all the quotes were from identifiable authors. There is a Heidegger quote I really like, but I didn't want a panel tainted by his Nazi, anti-Semitic sympathies; didn't want that kind of controversy with these garden art pieces.

*Take it from us, it is utterly forbidden to be half-hearted about Gardening.*

*You have got to LOVE your garden, whether you like it or not.*

*~W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman, Garden Rubbish (1936)*

**10 March** (Sunday). Over two weeks since the last entry. During that time, we drove to Georgia, spending one week at a campground on Tybee and two nights in the State Park on Jekyll Island. Overall, the trip went very well. The weather in Georgia was good, most days in the 50s and 60s. Rained at night a couple times, but daytime weather was dry and comfortable. Jekyll was chilly the second night, temp into the 30s, but the van heater worked fine and we were quite cozy. A few gardening observations:

- On the entire trip we saw only one vegetable garden. None on Tybee or Jekyll. Rather amazing when one thinks about how much country we drove through—though sizable chunks of the trip were spent on the Interstate, not the best route for conducting an intimate investigation of the countryside.
- On Tybee and Jekyll, we saw a lot of minor landscaping but almost no personal flower gardening. In most instances landscapers had stuck in the ground a few palm trees, a few shrubs, a statue or two, and that was it. Only one time, while walking on the north end of Tybee, did we see someone gardening—an older woman, on her hands and knees, re-positioning some bedding flowers in front of a modest cottage (a modest cottage that in this location would be worth several hundred thousand dollars).
- We saw a lot of blooming cyclamens, particularly on Jekyll. All appeared to be recent greenhouse transplants, some in planters, some in bedding arrangements as part of a flower border.
- My favorite flower discovery was on a walk from the campground to the old Army theater on Tybee. As we were passing a vacant, dilapidated Army home—surrounded by a wild, unkempt, weed-infested lawn—we saw two clumps of snowdrops, each with 4-5 small white blooms hanging from the 8-10" stalks. My guess is they were *G. elwesii*. When I bent over to look at them, it was easy to spot the lovely green patches on the tepals—clean and distinct. I wondered how long they had managed to survive in this location, with no evidence of any other garden specimens around them. Later, while walking on the south end of Tybee, we passed a home that had a walkway from the house to the street with dozens of snowdrops on both sides of the path. I did not expect to see snowdrops so far south, in an environment where it never snows.
- On this trip we periodically drove past large patches of yellow daffodils in bloom. In several instances they had been planted in distinct, rectangular beds in the middle of a grassy area along the side of the highway. While I was glad to see these spring flowers, I also felt they looked like misplaced foreigners,

segregated from their surroundings. I was more impressed in those instances when we saw the daffodils randomly growing along a ditch, apparently at home in their adopted countryside.

One accomplishment while on the trip is that I went through my vegetable seed orders and created a working draft of where everything would be planted at the Wickiup garden. Of course, as I already knew, I have ordered far more seeds than I can ever use. But I also hope this year I can adopt several techniques that will enable me to make better use of my garden space:

- I'm not planning to set aside separate beds for the radishes, lettuce, and spring-planted spinach. My intent is to plant them at the front of the raised beds that will include vegetables that reach full size later in the summer. The radishes, lettuce, and spinach will be harvested as these larger plants (such as the tomatoes) fill in the space.
- Concerning peas, I am going to experiment with a design where I plant two similar varieties together in the same bed, sowing the shorter cultivar on the outside of the 3' wide beds and the taller, later producing varieties in the center. [I did try this in two different beds and it was a total failure; as the pea vines grew, they become inextricably intertwined with each other, defeating the purpose of the experiment.]
- I plan to add more trellis structures so I can get most of the cucumbers and winter squash off the ground and growing vertically. [The wire trellises I added to the garden worked beautifully with the cucumbers, improving the health of the vines and making it much easier to harvest the cukes in a timely manner. The winter squash—acorns and butternuts—never got planted, but based on the success of the cucumbers, I'm intending to use trellises for several winter squash varieties this coming year.]
- Cut back on bush beans and plant more pole beans, which tend to be more productive than the bush varieties. [While I did not cut back on my bush bean acreage, I did increase the use of pole beans and their average productivity usually exceeds the bush varieties, assuming I keep them freshly picked. This coming year I may also try having pole beans send up their vines around some okra and sunflowers.]

**12 March.** Most of the day with grandson in Iowa City. Got back to CR about 3:30 and drove out to Wickiup, first visit since January. I wanted to measure the length of several raised beds. Overall the garden looked okay. All the fence was intact. The garden gate was ice-bound, frozen at the bottom, but I could get my measurements by pacing off distances outside the fence. I did reposition the head of the scaredeer so it would rotate in the wind—though I doubt the balancing act will last long. Garden was still covered in 3-5" of snow. This evening it rained hard (some water running through my office in the basement), which will speed up the melting. The entire state is under a flood watch/warning. With all this rain coming down on frozen ground—plus the melting snow—there is going to be a lot of flooding.

I managed to do some research on planting veggies in containers. Discovered the Astia zucchini (which I've already ordered) work well in containers. The cherry tomatoes I planted in containers last year were a total failure, even though I provided the containers with fresh dirt and compost. This year I'll try new varieties. I might also try sowing some green beans in a couple containers on the driveway and planting small basil around tomatoes.

**14 March.** This morning felt like spring. Temp was up to 50F; heard sparrows vigorously chirping, and the world appeared, to quote e. e. cummings, "mud-luscious" (though I did not see the lame balloonman). Despite imagining I could feel the release of winter's tensions, I had to admit that by noon brazen spring was in retreat with the return of a cold wind and a light drizzle. In an unwise disregard for the benefits of the attractive morning temperatures, I spent most of my time inside. First task was attempting to print a small sign to go on the *Garden Quarto* display in the Alum House, but I couldn't get the sign to print because the label sheets kept getting jammed in the Chemistry Lab printer. I then tried to tape a sign to



the display case, but it looked crude and unprofessional. So I set up the display with no sign, trusting the little publication to speak for itself.

Today there was a student on the patio, sketching the chess players statue. I told her she was the first garden visitor of the year. G. came by at 10:00 and helped clean up some of the "M1" & "M2" beds, a lot of wet leaves and dead vegetation needing removal. I gave the thyme in the rock garden a substantial haircut—and uncovered a small flower (whose name escapes me at the moment) that produced some beautiful white blooms last spring.

The gravel walkways are a real mess: water logged, boots leaving deep impressions when walking on the clay/gravel mixture. In the "A" walkways, frequent puddles of water, products of the melted snow. Nearly all the snow on the north side of the garden is gone. As for the south side in the shade of the wall and tall yews, there's still measurable snow remnants. At the beginning of the week, the steel gazing ball was almost completely covered, over 2' deep. Now the snow on the "C" flower bed is 2-3" and some areas are brown.

**16 March.** The battery of the Chevy S-10 was charging overnight at Keenan's, so I walked to Coe this morning, found the keys behind the gas cap, and drove to the Alum Garden, where I worked the rest of the morning. One of my first tasks was ordering 15 dahlia bulbs, including six Kelvin Floodlight—since they all failed last summer. I checked the old 2018 tubers stored under the work bench in the greenhouse and they all seem in good condition. I'm hoping to get the dahlias started earlier this year, some in pots in April and others in the ground by early May. [Alas, I failed on both counts; the dahlias did not get planted until the first week in June, resulting in delayed summer blooms.]

Most of my work at Coe was sowing seeds, about 200 seed cubes, including 3 kinds of basil, black knight scabiosa, celosia, cilantro, summer savory, coleus, kiss-me-over-the-garden-gate, etc. At 3:30 I drove to Tractor Supply and purchased 25 steel livestock panels (8' long and 50" tall) and loaded them in the pickup. After tying them down, I drove to Wickiup, hoping I would not encounter a police officer because the panels were sticking out the back by 2' and I wasn't sure I was completely legal in my transport arrangement. At Wickiup I discovered all the snow was melted. The garden is very muddy, but if we have 2-3 days of decent weather, I could start planting in the raised beds. I'm ready to bury some seeds in the ground.

**18 March.** A great day, the first day when it was warm enough and dry enough that I could do some serious gardening at the Alum House Garden. One task was putting up the four cedar wren houses I purchased last fall. Since I'm not certain when male wrens arrive in east central Iowa, looking for places to build their nests, I was hoping to get these houses installed in time for early arrivals. I wasn't sure about best locations, but I had read wren houses should be located 5-10' off the ground and in a site that would get about 60% sunshine. The houses had a pre-drilled hole—probably intended for using a loop to hang from a tree—but I used a wood screw for installation to a fence or pergola post. I also wanted these to be some distance from each other, perhaps increasing the likelihood of multiple residents. After inspecting several potential sites, I decided to place one house on the fence near the SW gate, one on the fence behind the NW bench, one on the fence not far from the gazebo, and one on a post at the SE corner of the pergola. Tomorrow I'll hang out a couple bags of dryer lint that perhaps a wren—or another nest-builder—might use to make a nice, cozy bed. [Alas, in their first year, none of the houses was adopted. Perhaps we'll have more success in 2020.]

After the wren housing project, I concentrated on cleaning up the "C" bed and the "M" walkway. The latter mostly involved raking recent leaf arrivals. Two days ago the walkway was a muddy, murky mess,

but most of the water has drained away and the gravel paths are in decent shape. As for the "C" bed, I cut back a lot of dead foliage (gayfeathers, iris, daylilies, penstemons, yarrow, stonecrops, nepeta, sparges) and raked up loose leaves, stems, etc. While the bed now looks much better than it did, the improvement would only be obvious to someone who saw how rough it had looked. To the novice visitor's eye, the bed probably would not look very appealing.

I did see signs of spring growth, particularly on the garden's north side, which receives the most sun. I did a photo shoot this morning and tried to capture many of the new arrivals. Numerous daffodils are showing up on the north and east sides of the garden. The red tips of tulips are appearing in the "M2" bed under the espalier and the "J" bed. As for the lawn, all the grass that germinated last fall came through in good shape. The western 2/3 of the SW quad section has a good stand of grass; the eastern 1/3—the last to be planted—is sparser but it also has a decent distribution of grassy clumps. As for the eastern two quad sections, there's no grass, nor any signs of the 2,500 crocus bulbs we planted last fall. They should be appearing soon if this warm weather continues.

Completed the day by spending 45 minutes "repairing" the walkway garden light in the SE corner. The light pole had fallen over and the inside of the base was full of mud. Those light fixtures were poorly designed, held up by a single small screw that must catch under a small lip at the base. They are frequently being knocked down. Today's mud was only part of the problem. I also had difficulties loosening the screw so I could screw it back in. Fortunately some WD-40 did the trick.

**19 March.** No gardening this morning—had to drive to Iowa City and play with my buddy Theo, but it was a short gig and I was back in C.R. by 1:30, enabling me to put in four hours at the Alum Garden cleaning up the "M" and "G" beds. In the "M" beds, I cut down some coneflowers, asters, and Joe Pye—and then ran the leaf vacuum over the bed. Filled up two bags for the compost pile. The rock and crevice gardens are now—at least for a few days—reasonably pristine. I still have a big job cleaning up around the honeysuckle, removing the vines running all over the ground. I need to do a better job of pruning and controlling those runners, convincing the honeysuckle to focus on producing flowers. [A worthy goal but I failed to keep the rambunctious honeysuckle properly pruned, and the result—as I foresaw—was the absence of blooms until quite late in the fall. Perhaps in 2020 I'll be more successful in following through on this task.]

As for the "G" bed, I pulled up or trimmed back most of the *Verbena bonariensis*. I collected several seed heads and spread seeds not only in "G" but also in two areas in "D" and "F"—we'll see if we get any results. I'd like to see the verbena more widely spread throughout the garden. [No success in the "D" and "F" beds, but the verbena continued to spread, particularly along the "G" and "H" borders, making its own decisions on where it wanted to introduce new progeny.] The biggest cleaning up task was trimming the two big clumps of Siberian Iris in front of the "G" rose bush. A slow operation but it now looks much neater. A lot of daffodils emerging in that area. Maybe we're two weeks from the first blooms?

**20 March.** A third great gardening day. Most of my time at Coe was continuing to clean perennial flower beds. This morning I focused on the area behind the NW bench. Cut back most of the giant miscanthus. Some day those big dudes should be removed, but their roots are incredibly hard to cut through, a task for another year. Although I did bring out the deep spade, thinking I might dig out a few miscanthus that had expanded into the yews, I never did tackle those strays. I did, however, get out the hedge trimmer and pruned a corner of the yew in the "L" bed so there was more room for walking on the stepping stones through that bed. I also re-positioned three stones, but that short path deserves more attention. Need to rethink how to finesse that corner. I also cut back and raked out the foliage of the big miscanthus

I planted in the middle of the “K” bed. After cleaning up that area, I brought out two of Cara’s new plant support screens and set them up so they could hold in this year’s new growth. The supports look good.

In the afternoon I only had two hours before a church board meeting. Spent most of that time around the pergola, cutting back the ornamental grasses, raking up dead foliage, cleaning up daylilies. The “G” bed peninsula still looks rather trashy.

This evening after supper, I mixed together a tablespoon of castor oil with dish liquid soap and a gallon of water—and then sprayed the soil around all the fresh mole hills—and there were a lot of fresh hills. A tablespoon of castor oil doesn’t seem like much, but that’s what the recipe called for. [I don’t know if the castor oil was a factor, but the moles moved on and I had no more fresh mole hills through the spring and summer.] Right now the yard is a mess, needing a serious raking. If the weather remains nice for another day or two, I should be able to get everything raked into piles and use the mower as a chipper/shredder. There’s plenty of empty space in two of the big compost bins in the back.

This evening before going to bed, I did my first seed sowing in the basement: sowed four varieties of broccoli and four varieties of cabbage.

**21 March.** A perfect day for gardening. At Coe, I interviewed three people for the summer gardening position; I’ll probably hire the sophomore from Colorado. She has a car and can do both the Coe and Wickiup gardens. I really liked a Cambodian applicant, but she does not have a car and caring for the Wickiup garden while I’m in Scotland in June would be difficult.

As for gardening, one big task was cleaning out the portable greenhouse. G. and I took my old gas chipper/shredder to the storage shed at the church, which enabled us to find space for storing the new Patriot electric shredder. And later this afternoon I used that shredder to process four bags of old vegetation for the compost bins. I did have some problems because the leaves were damp and clogging up the shredder wheel. Fortunately it wasn’t too difficult to remove the bolts holding the feeder chute and get it cleaned out—but it was still a 30-minute delay. I did not come close to emptying the big bin, but at least today’s operation opened up new space for collecting more plant stuff.

After supper MVM and I drove out to Wickiup. It was chilly (MVM was wearing winter coat with hood and ear muffs), but it was a beautiful evening. A red-winged blackbird was serenading us and we heard a barred owl off in the distance. MVM laid out newspapers in the pathways, and I covered this paper foundation with hay and straw. The central walkway through the garden is now covered and ready. We also managed to rake and clean up several of the raised beds. With one more day of dry weather I can start planting.

**23 March.** Great day, ideal weather. After making lunch, I went to Menards and bought six bags of manure/compost and two bags of processed peat. Then out to Wickiup. Ate lunch while looking at the garden, reflecting on spring prep priorities. It was sunny, a breeze from the south, a few clouds—though it eventually turned into an overcast sky by 4:00. Temp in 50s, darn near perfect conditions for early spring gardening. We’ve had a week of dry weather so some beds are ready to be worked. I initially focused on a north/south 30’ long bed near the front gate. After hoeing out some weeds and grass, I used the broadfork recently purchased from Johnny’s Seeds. It was expensive—about \$150 plus shipping—but I was impressed how it raised, loosened, and aerated the soil. Easy to use, almost no strain on arms, back, legs, shoulders. After broadforking the bed, I mixed in three bags of compost/manure and raked it smooth. In the bed I put up three 8’ livestock panels to serve as the trellises for the peas—and the cucumbers that will follow the peas. I then sowed some peas, planting two inner rows of a tall snap pea (4-5’ Lincoln peas) and two outer rows of a shorter 18-24” variety (Kelvedon Wonder and Knight peas). Prior to planting I

mixed in some inoculant granules, supposedly loaded with micro-organisms. We'll see. I intended to bring along my soil temperature gauge to check soil temperature, but I forgot. Just from working with the soil, I thought it was certainly above 40F. The soil was moist but not wet, so I'm optimistic we'll have a good germination rate. [As it turned out, I did have problems with the germination rate for the Knight peas, but what really killed the experiment was a visitor, probably a rabbit, that ate many of the seedlings shortly after they emerged; the Kelvedon Wonder and Knight peas never really recovered.]

Although I left the garden at 6:00, this was a day when I felt I could work forever. Still a lot of cleaning up to do. While raking around the rhubarb, I was pleased to discover a red rhubarb stalk beginning to emerge, reminding me I need to clean up the rhubarb bed at home, a bed currently covered with a large pile of leaves.

*Gardeners are good. Such vices as they have  
Are like the warts and bosses in the wood  
Of an old oak. They're patient, stubborn folk,  
As needs must be whose busyness it is  
To tutor wildness, making war on weeds.*

*~Gerald Bullett (1893-1958)*

**26 March.** Because of family duties, I didn't get to the Coe garden until 4:00 pm. Spent an hour cleaning up the rain garden and under the pergola. Cut back the tall hyssop, several ornamental grasses, astilbe, turtleheads, Siberian iris—which already have a lot of new green foliage shoving through last year's flattened russet leaves.

We have 15-20 crocus blooming in the "C" and "L" beds—and one lone snowdrop. The increase in the snowdrop population should be a major focus for this fall's bulb purchases. At this time of the year, we have many patches of bare soil/mulch where it would be perfect to have clumps of the *Galanthus* appearing on the scene. I need to find an unobtrusive technique for marking these locations so I know where to plant the bulbs in the fall. One notable arrival this spring are the first blooms of *the Iris reticulata* planted last fall in the crevice garden. Those are stunningly beautiful blossoms, a great addition to that bed.

One notable achievement for me the last 24 hours is that I managed to read all the articles in the March/April 2019 issue of *Horticulture*, the spring issue of *The American Gardener*, and the May issue of *The English Garden*. Here are a few items I noted:

- One author praised the value of a useful "weed": Ribwort Plantain; the plant's tannins can be used to treat insect bites.
- One author stressed how important it is never to step on the soil of raised beds; he advocated digging deep to promote drainage; should cover the soil in the off-season to reduce erosion (a recommendation I've encountered several times in recent articles); use cover crops to improve the soil's organic richness.
- False indigo (*Baptisia*): think of it as a shrub, not just a perennial flower.
- Recommendation to check out several online nurseries I was not familiar with: Gossler Farms Nursery in Oregon, Quakin' Grass Nursery in Connecticut, and the Sandy Mush Herb Nursery in North Carolina.
- Recommendation of Felco #6 Bypass Pruner. In cutting flowers for a vase, it's important to have a sharp clean cut that does not compress stem; place stems immediately in cold water and recut stem every 2-3 days. Good, fragrant roses for cutting and display in vases include Charlotte, Munstead Wood, Princess Alexandra of Kent, and Boscobel.
- Suggested ground covers in shade: bunchberry dogwood and wind ginger.

- Good website for assistance in the identification of insects and plants: *inaturalist*.
- Two books receiving very positive reviews: *The Food Explorer* by Daniel Stone and Niki Jabbour's *Veggie Garden Remix*.
- Wonderful article on bellflowers in the American Gardener. Recommended varieties include:
  - \**Adenophora liliifolia* (lily leaf; Z3, tough, drought & heat resistant)
  - \**A. bulleyana*: lavender bluebells
  - \**A. preskiiifolia* (Z5)
  - \**A. aethyst* (Z2; large blue flowers)
  - \**Phyteuma spicatum*: Z5 spiked rampion; fascinating bloom
  - \**Phyteuma scheuchzeri* (Z5; long-lived shade lover from the Alps)
  - \**Jasione laevis* (Sheep's bit scabious; Z5)
  - \**Pratia pedunculata* 'County Park' (1" tall ground cover; Z5)

*I have always noticed that the more a man loves his garden, the more he delights in constantly changing the arrangements, which were, perhaps, good for a time, but which, as time goes on, must give way to others; and the most uninteresting garden is one that has been made on a fixed plan, rigidly adhere to through succeeding years, till what may have been good and beautiful at the beginning becomes dull, uninteresting, and ugly. ~Canon Ellacombe, In a Gloucestershire Garden (1895)*

**27 March.** Warmest day of the year; in fact, highest daytime temp since late October, reaching mid 60s, though it was windy and cloudy and felt cooler. This morning at Coe, working in the "L" and "M" beds. Filled two bags of with leaf vacuum; cut back dead foliage, mostly coneflowers and tall stoncrop; and did some raking. The "L" bed looks much better, though no visitor would ever suspect since I'm just removing stuff with no contributions to fill in the vacant spaces. I also worked on last week's MMGR. I had written the first paragraph on Monday but left it unfinished. This morning I pulled up the Bluestone Order and made a list of everything I ordered. Started collecting notes on many of the flowers, notes that will help fill in the MMGR.

In the afternoon only two hours gardening at Wickiup before I had to drive to Iowa City to take care of T. While at Wickiup, I focused on weeding the asparagus bed, which has become weed-infested. Very slow going because I don't want to damage any asparagus spears lurking below the soil. After cleaning half of the north bed, I spread some compost and miscanthus mulch around where the new asparagus should be emerging in a couple of weeks. I then cleaned two raised beds and used the broadfork to loosen and lift the soil. It was perfect weather for gardening, but after two hours, it was time to head south.

**28 March.** This morning at Coe, watered plants in greenhouse and set up two fly traps to catch gnats which have recently appeared on the scene. Then into the garden and spent two hours cleaning up "C" and "L" beds—plus raked up dead foliage in the rain garden. My blower vacuum bag is rotting away. Despite my exquisite repair work (bag now being held together by six safety pins and black electrical tape), I need to purchase a Craftsman replacement bag. Another option is to start using the leaf vacuum I purchased several weeks ago that is still in its Home Depot box.

More crocus are blooming the the "B," "C," and "L" beds—though I don't recall planting any of these bulbs in these locations. Still only one snowdrop. The *Iris reticulata* look great in the crevice garden: marvelous, complex, orchid-like blooms. Unfortunately, I did a terrible job in their arrangement: instead

of lining them up in a neat row, they should have been informally grouped so they don't look so regimented.

Big news: appearance of the first Tommy crocus planted in the lawn area late last fall. Actually, we now have four blooms on four crocus. While most welcome, they look quite lonely in this barren territory with no other vegetation around them. The soil is still very wet in the eastern areas of the lawn, and I fear the slow drainage will prove inhospitable to the crocus bulbs.

This afternoon I was at Wickiup, mostly a day of spring cleaning. I did remove the straw covering most of the strawberries in the old strawberry bed. I also weeded and raked several north-side beds. After the weeding, I worked in several bags of compost/manure. Those beds still need to be mulched. Also began preparing two beds on the west side of the garden. One bed had a great crop of pole beans last year and it was easy to clean up. Before coming home, I planted in one bed six short rows of Hailstone radishes, two rows of Golden Sweet Peas (from Baker Creek), and two rows of Little Snowpea White.

**31 March** (Sunday). Posted the March Garden Shed essay, this one a revision of an older essay—with a two-paragraph introduction—on Mr. A, my high school science teacher. Originally composed this essay several years ago and sent to a high school friend who was dying of cancer. I struggled with the introduction, unsure how to provide a clear context for this personal essay and get the wording so it felt right. In the process of reworking this essay, I discovered that Mr. A's wife, who died 2-3 years ago, was probably a second wife. The essay talks about my impression he was already married while teaching at Howard, but perhaps that was not the case. I'm sure the essay has some inaccuracies, but eventually one just needs to get on with it, doing the best one can. Also last night, I went on the Santa Rosa website and ordered several hundred dollars worth of plants, inspired by a 35% discount coupon they sent me.

This afternoon I went to Wickiup and worked there from 1:30 until 7:15. Did a lot of hoeing and raking; used the broadfork on two beds. Prepared one long bed for planting by installing three livestock panels as trellises, and sowed two varieties of peas: Little Snowpea White (which should be producing peas by the first two weeks in May) and Early Alaska (a 58-day pea that might be ready before we leave for Scotland). Between the trellises, I planted three rows of Sora radishes. Still no sign of germination of the peas and radishes planted last week. We had a decent rain on Friday we have had good conditions for germination. I have seen a few spears of spinach planted last fall. The rhubarb and garlic are emerging. I'm curious what will happen with the onions that overwintered and what kind of bulbs they will produce.

*I have often thought that if heaven had give me choice of my position and calling,  
it should have been on a rich spot of earth, well watered, and near a good market  
for the productions of the garden. No occupation is so delightful to me as the culture of the earth,  
and no culture comparable to that of a garden.  
~Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to Charles Willson Peale (20 August 1811)*