

Garden Kalendar: Winter 2023

This Winter 2023 Garden Kalendar is composed of edited excerpts from my daily, hand-written garden journal entries from January 1 to March 31, 2022--accompanied by occasional commentaries on those passages. The journal records my work in four gardens:

- The Alumni House Garden at Coe;
- A half-acre vegetable garden on a small farm adjacent to the Wickiup Hill Outdoor Learning Center near Toddville (a garden typically identified as the Wickiup garden);
- The gardens and landscape at Buffalo United Methodist Church, a small church not far from Mount Mercy College;
- The gardens at my home on Elmhurst Drive in Cedar Rapids.

This Kalendar constitutes about 50% of my journal entries in the first quarter of 2022. A map of the Alumni House Garden map is posted on the website's "map" page; here are links to simple maps of the Wickiup vegetable garden and the back yard garden on Elmhurst Drive. As for the italicized quotations inserted between journal entries, they come from Tony Lord's *Best Borders* (Penguin, 1994), an excellent garden book I read in the winter of 2022. Because of the length of this document, the complete Winter 2023 Kalendar is posted as a pdf. ~Bob

Why does a picture of plants grouped together have so much more beauty than the individuals plants alone? Is it the interplay of colors or shapes, the bold contrast of foliage textures, or the way the plants are lit by the sun? The answers to such questions are the key to inspired gardening. ~Tony Lord

2 January 2022. The first entry of the new year and everything feels out of sync. I'm writing this entry in the morning in my Garden Studio, not late at night in the sun room. Even more disconcerting, I'm writing with a gel ballpoint, not my preferred Lamy fountain pen. I just finished shoveling a path from the house to the Garden Studio through 6"+ snow. My fingers are too cold to type--in fact, my right hand is struggling to hold on to this pen. Yesterday it snowed all day, accompanied by a vigorous wind, so the snow is quite deep in some locations. Yesterday's temp hovered around 10F, but last night it dropped well below zero, and my Garden Studio thermometer informs me it's now -2F, but there's enough breeze out of the west to keep Leon's whiligig spinning and the cowbell in the stumpery clanging. Fortunately the electricity is working and the Studio was a pleasant 63F when I arrived. The temp is now 65F, and my fingers are becoming more functional. It's time to turn on the computer.

5 January. This week I've started a new project, developing a comprehensive system for organizing the garden photos. I'll continue to organize them by month, but I've now started a second arrangement grouping them by subject. One goal is to create a comprehensive photographic representation of every flower, shrub, and tree species in the Alum Garden and put that information on the website. Perhaps it will be an alphabetical catalog of plants with a brief slideshow for each species, showing photos at different times of the year and in different years. I'm also sorting photos for veggies & herbs, sculpture and furniture, greenhouse and tools, shrubs and trees, grasses, weeds, insects, animals, and views of specific beds. This photo catalog could provide website visitors a more comprehensive view of the garden than what's currently available. [*I worked on this project in the month of January, going through about half of my garden photo collection. Once spring gardening weather arrived in late February, I set the project aside. I*

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hope to make sufficient progress in the winter of 2023 so a substantial portion of this material can be posted to the website.]

11 January. Warmer today, temp into the upper 30s, sunshine, but I did no outdoor garden work. In the morning I sorted and edited photos from November and December of 2019, identifying photos that I can use for the comprehensive garden survey. It's a slow process, looking at hundreds of photos, many virtual duplicates, such as my many, repetitious photos of tall stonecrop seedheads. Fortunately, there are photos that capture a new detail or convey a fresh perspective. I was particularly pleased with the December 2019 photos of seedheads, dried leaves, and flowers, including a wonderful series of closeups of foliage on a Lamb's Ear.

Today I spent over six hours in the garden studio. I drafted a new Monday Morning Garden Report (MMGR) for the end of December and edited the Fall and Summer Kalendars. The Fall entry should be ready for posting. Even if it's not done, it's time to call it "done." The Summer Kalendar will need more work, but the basic text is done. It's now time to focus on the spring/summer seed orders.

14 January. Snow began this morning after sunrise and it's still coming, though tapering off. It's been windy so it's hard to estimate the total snowfall but probably 6-7". Temp in the 20s but it will drop tonight, approaching zero. Another polar express. This morning my first task was going to the church and posting four new messages on the church's electronic sign, the first time I've done it without A's assistance. Somehow it went smoothly, no hiccups. I was thrilled. I then walked around the church property, trying to estimate the number and location of trees we should plant this spring. I came up with the following possibilities:

- Two large trees along 30th street between the burgundy maple and the property line.
- One large tree southwest of the shed.
- One large tree between the shed and the church, replacing the lone, emasculated tree that survived the derecho.
- Two large trees along the north fence.
- 4-5 small trees (probably evergreens) in the corner of the property behind the wind chimes.
- A line of 4-5 small trees along the north property line (perhaps cherry or serviceberry) and a comparable line on the south side along the fence of the old parsonage.

Graham Thomas's color theory of "the omission rather than the inclusion"; he explains, "One border has got no pinks, mauves, or purples, the other has got no oranges, reds or yellows, and that, I think, is the way to do gardens."

24 January. The last two days I've lived in the basement staring at the computer, doing vegetable seed orders from Johnny's, High Mowing, Territorial, Baker Creek, Southern Exposure, Totally Tomatoes, J. Scheepers, Victory, and Burpee's (where I ordered one item--Murasaka Japanese sweet potatoes, a variety my daughter often purchases at the Co-op). I intended for my initial order to be with Pinetree, which is often the least expensive of my preferred sources, but while entering my order, the website crashed. Today, I tried again, and again the website stopped functioning. If they are still not up and running tomorrow, I'll send in my order the old-fashioned way, using the U.S. mail service. Of course, 40 years ago the old-

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fashioned way was driving to Hawkeye Seed on 2nd Avenue and purchasing seeds from wooden drawers. In those days there were few options—a red beet was a red beet—but now we have dozens and dozens of varieties of tomatoes and cukes and beans and most of the other popular vegetables. Thus I've spent four days doing nothing but perusing catalogs and working on these seed orders. And the result is I will end up with far more seeds than I could ever plant. Just consider all the seeds left over from last year. While most of those are still viable, I prefer to use fresh seeds when direct planting in the garden. While filling out the on-line seed orders, I made a couple of errors, either failing to include a seed variety only available from this supplier or in a couple cases submitting duplicate orders of seeds previously ordered from another supplier. A third problem was discovering that because of the increased numbers of home gardeners, some items were already sold out (such as the Lambkin Skin-of-the-Toad melon seeds from Johnny's). Once I have completed the Pinetree order, I will then do the orders for flower seeds from Select Seeds, Swallowtail, American Meadows, and Annie's Heirloom.

26 January. High today in single digits and predicted low this evening of -10F, which would set an all-time record for this date. Wind chill will be at a truly dangerous level. I did drive to Coe this afternoon and found everything in good shape. Both space heaters working okay. A student worker had done a good job shoveling the gravel walkways—much more thorough than I would have done: she shoveled the full width while I just shovel enough for a narrow walking trail. In walking around the garden, I saw no notable trash and few animal tracks. I put the garden key back in the lockbox so the student workers can have access to the shed and greenhouse, but I left the SW gate unlocked. When the lock freezes in such low temperatures, it's almost impossible to unlock the gate.

Here at home I completed the Pinetree seed order—a return to the 20th century—which required me figuring out the state sales tax. I hope this mail-in order works because the Pinetree veggie seeds represent many of the most basic vegetable options in the garden, including four of our most popular watermelon varieties. My other afternoon chore was sorting old garden photos into family and species categories. Today I worked through the photos from May of 2020, a month when I shot well over 100 photos. Many duplications. Who knows how often I've shot rain, dew, and perspiration dots on lady's mantle leaves. But those leaves with those water beads are endlessly appealing. It's obvious why alchemists and herbalists were so strongly attracted to the *Alchemilla* and the perceived purity of those water droplets.

27 January. Midnight, the clock just chimed the arrival of a new day, K's birthday, 42 years ago. This morning I called EOP, asking where my travel documents are for the Holy Land trip. I had found MVM's in my SPAM file, along with many other email items that typically appear in my inbox. The documents arrived shortly after my phone call, and most of the day was consumed with preparations for the trip. So many unknowns, including the likelihood we will pass the COVID-19 test at the Des Moines airport. It's hard to feel everything will work out okay.

Yesterday I churned out and printed four church bulletins for the next four Sundays in February, plus the February church newsletter, and this morning everything was delivered to the church. It does feel good to know that I need not worry about this set of tasks for the next

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month. My one notable gardening achievement was ordering five more dogwood from White Flower Farms, thinking I would add them as a row in front of the burning bush along the west side of the house. Another attempt to develop a garden with more winter appeal. I also submitted a large flower seed order to Select Seeds, almost 50 different seed packets. This should give me plenty of seeds to play with this spring.

[No Garden Journal entries in the first two weeks of February because of an 12-day trip to the Holy Land, including three days in Jordan. A commentary on the flowers observed on that trip was posted in March of 2022 to the Garden Shed blog.]

18 February. After our return from the Holy Land, we're slowly sliding back into our regular routines. I've started sorting through our trip photos and have created a file for the plant/flower photos. I suspect we have about 50 different plants in the photos, including many that I can not yet identify. Fortunately, on our last day in Jordan, we experimented with MVM's phone flower ID app and discovered it worked for all the flowers we photographed at the Dead Sea.

Yesterday I did a quick tour of the Coe garden. A student assistant had sanded the greenhouse work bench and applied a new coat of polyurethane. It looked beautiful. The two rosemary bushes in the greenhouse were in good shape, and the earthworms in their green hut appeared to be okay. There was some snow on the ground, but a student assistant had shoveled the walkways, making it easy to walk around.

After two weeks enjoying a Mediterranean spring, the Coe garden felt dull and barren, reminding me that February often feels like a month of slow endurance, waiting for those days when I can begin serious outdoor gardening. At the moment it still feels like the bleak mid-winter. One major accomplishment yesterday: I organized the two vegetable seed boxes and started sorting the garden seeds that had arrived from High Mowing, Johnny's, Totally Tomatoes, Territorial, Seeds 'n Such, J. Scheepers, and Annie's Heirloom. Should still have seeds coming from Baker Creek, Pinetree, and Victory.

21 February. President's Day, a Federal Holiday. This was the first day since returning from our trip when I really felt I was back in the gardening groove. Yesterday should have been that day—with temp into the mid 50's—but I got bogged down with other tasks (plus a long nap in the afternoon). One notable achievement is I sorted through all my flower seeds and organized them according to their sowing requirements. In one pile are the seeds to be started in the greenhouse, sequenced according to the day when they are to be sown. I stored in the refrigerator all the seeds requiring cold stratification.

MVM started teaching at 7:30 this morning so we drove to Coe together, and I spent the rest of the morning at the Coe garden, except for a short trip to the Cardiology Clinic. They strapped me up to the EKG, listened to my heart, and confirmed that they want to schedule another heart shock treatment on Thursday and see if they can convince my heart to return to a steady, rhythmic pattern.

As for gardening at Coe, I began my morning by sitting in the gazebo and taking notes for a Monday Morning Garden Report. My first discovery was that someone had stolen the nice thermometer on the wall of the gazebo. Very disheartening—and a big surprise considering that

the garden gates are usually locked and the garden does not have many winter visitors. As with the previous thermometer, stolen last summer, someone had carefully unscrewed the bracket that held the thermometer to the wall and left the screws in the gazebo. It occurred to me that the thermometer might be a potential item for a pawnshop, so I walked to the pawn shop on 1st Ave and looked around. I had not been in the shop since I was looking for a stolen leafblower, lifted from the back of my Chevy pickup several years ago. In both cases, I did not find what I was seeking. Once I finished taking notes for the MMGR, I unlocked the Alum House and filled my two water containers so I could moisten my seed germination mix. I cleaned up the soil blocker and created 50 blocks, filling one plastic tray. Tomorrow I'll start sowing seeds.

At home in the afternoon I worked in the garden studio: drafting the MMGR, transforming a student assistant's garden notes into an MMGR for one of the weeks when I was gone, and creating the first entries for this year's annotated bibliography on garden books I read in 2021. After sitting at the computer for a couple of hours, I switched to repairing two greenhouse grow lights. One florescent light is now working but I had to drive to Best Buy and purchase a new transformer so the other would work. I also unpacked two power strips with timers that I had ordered in January. We now have a timer for each work bench in the greenhouse. My next task was ordering bulbs and plants from High Country, including three bags of dahlia tubers (three Bishops, three Kelvin Floodlights, and three other dinner plates), some Peacock Orchid tubers, and two perennial sunflowers. I forgot to note that shortly after returning from the Holy Land trip, I ordered from Bluestone in Ohio a Sedum Bertram Anderson, a Kelvedon Star Rudbeckia Hirta, three Miscanthus sinensis 'Purpurascens' (for Buffalo), three Miscanthus sinensis 'Malepartus' (for Buffalo), a Delosperma Congestum Gold Nugget (for the oval rock garden in the back yard), a Cotinus Winecraft Gold (for somewhere in the back yard), and an Agastache Golden Jubilee (for the back yard). I'm anxious to see if those Agastache I purchased last summer from Cedar River Garden Center will survive the winter. They turned out to be such beautiful plants with ideal foliage, blooms, size, and visual texture. I would love to add another variety to the mix.

Graham Thomas's planting plans show that he is no believer in the old rule that plants should be grouped in odd numbers of one, three, five, or seven.

This he consider to be "a lot of silly nonsense": whereas three plants cannot fail to be seen as a triangle, the addition of a fourth plant inevitably makes a more interesting shape. There is often no need for a fifth plant. In narrower borders, his plans often feature groups of just two plants, though a third will generally be placed within the distance of a yard or so.

22 February. I had intended to work on annotations for the annual bibliography of garden books read the past year, but I never made it to the studio. Instead, I spent the day labeling and sorting Holy Land garden photos, a slow but interesting reconstruction of our trip. While on that project I received an email from High Mowing informing me they had no Seychelles pole beans so I went online and ordered the beans from Vermont Bean, a company I've not used for several years. In addition to the beans, I also ordered two varieties of sweet peas intended for Wickiup. My dream is to have them growing on the N, E, and S fences, surrounding the garden

with their fragrance. They self-sowed on the west side of Elizabeth's garden for over twenty years, but at the time I didn't appreciate how fortunate I was to have those cohabit with the vegetable garden. While on the computer I also wrote to Dana, asking if she wanted any old vegetable seeds from last year and offering her free tomato, pepper, and eggplant seedlings later this spring.

This evening I had a 53-minute phone conversation with Terry B., an old Army buddy, someone I have not seen since the summer of 1974, when we met up briefly before I conducted a remedial reading workshop for middle and high school teachers in Alabama. While our lives have gone in such opposite directions, each living in dramatically different cultures, (I suspect one of us voted for Donald J. and one of his did not), he was a fantastic friend during my 13 months in Germany, I deeply appreciate his effort to stay in touch, and it was a great pleasure catching up on his life (ten grandchildren, including one who is a quarterback at Auburn).

After the phone conversation, I finished reading *The Sceptical Gardener* by Ken Thompson. The book is mostly comprised of his summaries and commentaries on botanical and scientific research that has some applicability to gardening. He introduces a wealth of relevant scientific literature that most of us would never consult. Many topics covered in the book, consistently interesting and occasionally offering practical ideas worth holding on to, such as the construction of hot beds, composting practices, benefits of mulching with sugar-enriched soil, the benefits of a drought (helps to kill weeds), etc.

26 February (Saturday). On Wednesday MVM had her colonoscopy and on Thursday I had my electrical cardioversion treatment at Mercy—which did convince my hear to return to a regular beat. On neither day did I feel like doing much gardening after a few hours in the hospital. My lack of initiative was perhaps exacerbated by the serious cold weather and the recent snowfall. Fortunately I felt more engaged when we drove down to the University of Iowa to see four female dancers perform a new version of K's metronome piece. A fascinating bit of choreography, an insightful exploration of how the dancers respond to variations in the beats of the metronome. I really liked one of her dancers, though you could tell she was breathing hard, as her cloth mask collapsed across her face each time she inhaled. Another example of COVID affecting so many aspects of our lives.

The first piece of the night began with a prologue that had already started when we walked into Space Place. Several dancers were on the stage floor, moving and stretching. Periodically another dancer would join the group and a dancer would get up, say a few words into one of the two microphones, and return to the dancing/stretching exercise. What struck me was the shallowness of their remarks. Nothing said that seemed original or personally insightful or thought-provoking. Nearly everything was some version of a cliché (e.g., "I want to live in the present"). These verbal banalities made the entire piece feel shallow, undermining whatever creativity was accomplished in the dancing. I suspect this was a piece where the dancers contributed collaboratively to the choreography, and perhaps the collegial, communal exploration was beneficial to the participants engaged in the creative process. But does that have any value for the audience, who are not involved in this developmental process? We arrive in time to witness the final product. To my mind the final product was rather thin, and I found the performance underwhelming.

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I wonder how this compares with gardening. I'm engaged in the process of transforming a garden at Coe, a creative task that provides me with an enormous satisfaction. But I'm just an amateur, still struggling with the most basic of garden design principles. To anyone with professional expertise as a gardener (such as a Tony Lord), my efforts would not be viewed as well done. While the garden has some nice flowers, after eight years (wow—eight years!), it's still an haphazard affair with many failures. The Coe garden is more a collection of miscellaneous plants than a thoughtful, coherent design. And what coherence the garden does have doesn't come from my plant choices but from the garden's original layout. Even with some lovely plants introduced in the last eight years, most of the garden's strongest elements derive from its fundamental layout--the walls, the white gravel walkways, the fountain, the yews, the size and arrangement of the beds, the flowering crab trees, the pergola, the row of viburnums, the many key plantings that were in place when I arrived (e.g., the Baptisia along the north side of the patio, the purple-leaf loosestrife, the hydrangeas, the peonies, the Siberian iris, the Joe Pye weeds). Perhaps my most important contribution boils down to helping visitors see the garden's key strengths. But I have not yet contributed many appealing combinations of plants. I rely on happy accidents. Not much different from those student dancers, limited in their sense of what they are doing and how to express aspects of life they don't yet fully understand.

Meanwhile there's the war in Ukraine. So incredibly sad. Inconceivable we see a repeat of World War II style aggression in 2022. So much senseless misery and destruction. So many lives lost--and likely tens of thousands more to be lost in the coming months. And I sit here in my comfortable, warm house and dream of a summer garden. Why am I so lucky? And that's all it is, just luck. Of course, there are always wars. This one just happens to be in the news. If it's not Ukraine, it's Palestine or Syria or Ethiopia or Yemen or Burma or some jungle in Central America or Afghanistan or Columbia or western China or life in a U.S. inner city (we just finished watching season 1 of *The Wire*). So we retreat into our gardens and in the midst of this pain, we hope for moments of grace and peace will be made available. Perhaps the flowers or vegetables in a garden will make a small difference in someone's life. That's probably the most we can ask for, the most we can expect.

28 February. First day of spring, a day early. A beautiful day. Arriving at Coe about 7:15, I did a garden walk, shot about 30 photos (including the spring's first snowdrops), picked up small bits of litter, and chopped up veggies for the worms. Next job was sowing seeds. I had already moistened my Johnny's germination mix. I read yesterday in Mattus' *Mastering the Art of Vegetable Gardening* one should only use fresh germination mix--the old stuff from last year loses its conductivity. This was news to me. But I have a full bag left from last year, so I'm hoping it retains some "conductivity." I added more water and arranged 50 seed blocks in the plastic tray. Sowed ten blocks of Asarina 'Joan Lorraine' and Lobelia 'Starship Rose' and fifteen blocks of Rudbeckia 'Cherokee Sunset' and Foxglove 'Sunset.' All Select seeds, all quite small, all new to me. All need light to germinate (thus I left the seeds uncovered) and moderate warmth (goal of 65F). I put them on a heat pad, which might be too warm. Tomorrow I'll take the soil thermometer to Coe and check the temperature of the germination mix. It was exciting to get back in the seed sowing routine.

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After lunch I worked here at home. Applied the first coat of polyurethane to the greenhouse garden bench. I first had to wipe off the dust and debris and then sand the bench and then wipe the benches clean again. I started applying the first coat with a foam brush but quickly switched to a regular brush: went much faster and easier to produce a smooth finish. Once the first polyurethane coat was applied, I moved to the patio bed, where a group of snowdrops have emerged and are blooming. I cut back several flowers left over from last fall (e.g., catmint, platycodon, a mum, ground ivy, daisies, coneflowers), raked up some matted leaves, and dumped everything in the compost. It's now much easier to see and appreciate the snowdrops.

I finished the afternoon by cutting back various plants in the two big triangle beds, including a lot of goldenrod and *Verbena bonariensis*. With the latter, I cut off many seeds and spread them around the area, hoping to assist with self-seeding. As the sun was going down, I turned my attention to the row of Siberian Iris in the long west bed. Trimmed about half of the bed before I had to go inside and prepare supper. Although my physical exertion was not excessive, my body is telling me I did more physical labor today than I've done for several months, probably since the middle of December. No pain but my back and arms are fatigued—though it's a good fatigue.

It is curious that most British gardeners feel uncomfortable with a backless border, though in North America they are not uncommon, sometimes paired with a path in between. The insistence on enclosure, creating the feeling of an outdoor room, seems to be one of the most characteristic features of what is called the English garden (though it might more accurately be called British).

2 March. Today there were many more snowdrops blooming in the patio bed, and I saw several small bees (looked like honey bees) moving from flower to flower. Quite exciting to see all that bee activity. The patio bed is several days ahead of any comparable area in the Coe Garden. Here at home many crocus are close to blooming, but I have not yet seen any so advanced at Coe.

4 March. While I like working with Johnny's germination mix, it is expensive and the shipping cost for two bags is \$60, more than I want to pay. I've been studying the ingredients for several kinds of germination mix. They are usually composed of peat, perlite or vermiculite, and ingredients to lower the acidic pH (to counteract the peat's acidity). I think I will try preparing my own since the ingredients are much cheaper when purchased separately. One lingering question is whether I can properly adjust the pH. I may try a mix that uses cocoa coir and eliminate any reliance on peat. Today, using Johnny's mix purchased last year, I sowed 50 cubes: 25 shallots and 25 leeks. I treated the seeds just as I would onion seeds. I left the space heater in the greenhouse running overnight, and this morning the temperature was right on target at 60F.

Tonight after supper MVM and I canned 6 ½ quarts of Regal Tomato Soup, using frozen tomato juice from last summer's tomatoes. We have canned 13 quarts this week. It takes two gallons of tomato juice to make six quarts of soup. We still have six more gallons of frozen juice in the basement chest freezer.

5 March. About ten minutes ago (9:15 pm), we had a real toad strangler, with frequent lightning strikes, but it was a fast-moving storm and the rain is now a light drizzle. This is our third rain cycle today: an intense outburst this morning, a short-lived moderate storm cell about 1:00 pm, and this third round. Several tornadoes this evening west of here. I suspect we are now on the backside of these storms, all moving toward the NE. Despite the rain, a good day for working outside. By mid-afternoon, I had my shirt off, just wearing a tee-shirt and a henley. In the sun I was quite comfortable, but when the sun went behind the clouds, it cooled off quickly.

My major task today was assembling wooden panels for the big compost bins in the back yard. Made some progress, adding two panels to go with the one already in place. I would have installed the 4th panel, but the ground was frozen solid, making it impossible to level out the area around the west end of the compost bins. Depending on the weather, I will need to wait a week or two until that area thaws. It receives very little direct sunlight at this time of the year.

In the greenhouse I sowed 50 more onion blocks, so I have done 150 blocks in the last four days. Now we wait and see what germinates. I have the heater on tonight—and the temp in the greenhouse has remained in the 60-65F range, which should be ideal for onion seed germination. Let's hope the onion, leek, and shallot seeds know that.

6 March. In the afternoon I “cleaned up” the two long oval beds in the back yard. I dislike the phrase “cleaned up”: it suggests the beds were filthy, despicable, in need of human intervention. Because this is a flower garden, not a wilderness, a lot of old stems, branches, and foliage needs to be removed, but that reflects our compulsion to make the area look “civilized” and refreshed in human eyes. Certainly many of the plants and wildlife would be quite happy if I didn't intervene and would allow nature to take its course. Regardless of what phrase I use, I did spend a couple hours cutting back and removing last year's growth. I trimmed two large yarrow plants, which immediately revealed the yarrow had sent out rhizomes and baby yarrows were popping up around the mother. As for the lavenders, most of them appear quite vigorous with fresh-looking foliage. Only one lavender did I cut back. In the long east bed, I trimmed the hyssop purchased last summer at Cedar River and was pleased to see new growth at the base of all three plants. One hyssop had new, tiny leaves on one of the low-lying branches. Last summer and fall this *Agastache* had lovely, fragrant, orange blossoms that flowered for several months. I also cut back the tall verbenas. Several branches were still green, suggesting the plants may have survived the winter. In the long west bend I removed Siberian iris foliage and nearby ground litter, allowing for a clearer view of the emerging daffodils. This is the peak season for the snowdrops. I saw many blooms today but no bees: the temp was probably a bit too cold.

Elizabeth Healing [owner of the Priory garden at Kemerton] finds it difficult to attempt replanting in the spring when the borders look bare and it becomes hard to visualize what the colors were; changes to the planting are made in the fall while memories of any shortcomings are still clear in the mind.

10 March. This morning at Coe. I began the day by chopping up two pints of veggie scraps for the red wigglers. I then turned my attention to a flat with 50 flower seed blocks that I had placed on a heating pad. I found half-dozen seedlings—rudbeckias and Aronias. I watered the seed blocks, lowered the grow light, and added a three-bulb grow light so the flat would have more intense light for the next couple of weeks.

In the afternoon MVM and I canned a fourth round of our Regal Tomato soup, and I then retreated to the garden studio. Composed notes on several books for the annotated garden book blog post. It's a project I enjoy doing but it's always a slow, time-consuming exercise. I finished the day by reading a few more pages in the Tony Brooks book on the design of perennial herbaceous flower borders. The book is full of fascinating insights into the subtleties in the design of a top-end border. Brooks is far beyond my abilities or knowledge, but it's interesting to see how he reads and analyzes the gardens he's discussing—and occasionally I find a tidbit that might be useful in an Iowa garden.

11 March. Today was our grandson's birthday. We sang the birthday song to him on the phone, but he was playing with a new train, and I don't think he was very impressed with our musical gift. At least we remembered. We totally forgot our son's wedding anniversary on the 6th, 18 years after the ceremony in South Carolina. MVM sent a belated card.

As for gardening, the weather remained cold (in the 20s) and windy—thus all my gardening was inside. One exciting development: the emergence of the first seedlings in the new greenhouse. Some of the basil seeds, only sown a few days ago, have germinated. For the tray with the basil seeds, I left the soil uncovered and on the dry side. At least for some seeds, that strategy worked. As for the onion seeds, I have one Utah Yellow seed that has germinated. In preparation for more seed sowing, I drained the warm water off of two varieties of sweet peas. I had left the peas soaking in water, sitting on a heating pad. Today I sowed 20 seeds of 'Lady Gray' and 25 of a second variety called 'America.' The seeds had definitely softened and expanded—and they were easy to sow.

14 March. A beautiful day for gardening. At home this morning I sowed another flat of 50 blocks with four varieties of flower seeds: ten hollyhocks, ten calendulas, twenty marigolds, and one seed that was very tiny--and my brain can't retrieve the seed name this late at night. For the germination mix, my current recipe is 16 cups of peat, 2 cups of perlite, 2 cups of vermiculite, and 1T of lime. Once I've used up the peat, I'll switch to a recipe that uses coco noir. So far the greenhouse is working beautifully, and we're getting some good germination rates. A high % of the borage and basil have germinated (except for one variety); most of the leeks and shallots have germinated, and we finally have a few onions springing to life. It got quite warm in the greenhouse this afternoon (well over 70F) so I turned off the heater. I hope it manages to stay above 40 tonight since I did not turn the heater back on. After the seed sowing, I "refreshed" the long weigela bed, raking up leaves and removing creeping Charlie. The ground is still frozen just below the surface, but with the leaves removed, the soil will warm up much faster.

This afternoon at Coe I discovered that I screwed up and didn't keep one of the seed block trays sufficiently moist. The result will be a low germination rate in that tray, though a few rudbeckia seeds have germinated. I spent most of the afternoon cleaning up the crevice garden.

I hooked up the leaf vacuum and removed most of the oak leaves where the reticulated iris are emerging. I trimmed the old sedum, the myrtle spurge, and a large chunk of the thyme bush in the rock garden. I made new zinc labels for two hen and chicks and two stonecrops--the first time in over a year that I've made new labels for any plants in the garden. I had trouble remembering where the labeler materials were stored but finally found them under the work bench.

15 March. My first day using my new reading glasses. While they probably won't make me a better writer, the page and words in the journal are much sharper and clearer--and none of the double shadows I was frequently seeing when reading. So far, so good.

Today was a great day for gardening. This morning at home, I re-organized the greenhouse. Mixed up a new potting soil--using the vermiculite I had ordered on Amazon. It's much finer than what I had been using. Moved five bags of organic top soil into the greenhouse, part of my potting soil mix. Watered seedlings. The basil and borage (100% germination) look good, and a good % of leeks and shallots have germinated. Spent an hour in the studio, composing the first draft of an MMGR and assembled garden tools in preparation for the first trip of the year to the Wickiup garden. Before lunch, I broke down cardboard boxes to use for covering Wickiup paths.

After lunch I picked up my glasses from the optometrist. By 1:30 I was at the garden and didn't leave until after 6:00. The weather was perfect, and it felt great being in the garden again. I have a huge amount of preparation since I didn't do much last fall because of my absorption in Elmhurst projects. Today's tasks included:

- Pulled up eggplants and peppers and dumped them on the big compost pile. The old cucumber, squash, and tomato plants went into the back of the pickup; they'll go to the city compost.
- Pulled up the tomato and pepper wire cages and stacked them on the poles outside the garden.
- Removed old bean and pea vines from trellises.
- Cut down old asparagus stalks and placed on compost pile.
- Prepared two 8' raised beds for seed sowing.

Still many hours of work remaining, but the garden already looks much better in appearance. While the soil is muddy, it's not soggy; the soil I uncovered today should be ready for planting in a couple days. The "J5" bed had a lot of quack grass to be removed. I had to dig quite deep into the bed to pull out the roots. Only time will tell if I found them all.

*[On the long mixed border at Christopher Lloyd's garden at Great Dixter]
Plant associations are worked out by considering what would combine well
with a cardinal plant. . . . The effect is unintentionally episodic,
not a Bruckner symphony in plants conceived as a monumental unified whole,
but a series of incidents. This is perhaps why Christopher Lloyd so enjoys the view
at right angles to the border, showing clearly each individual association,
rather than diagonally along the whole, when some of the key plants in each group
disappear behind their neighbors, and colors that are deliberately placed
away from each other seem startlingly (or, perhaps worse, ineffectively) juxtaposed.*

Garden Kalendar: Winter 2023

17 March. Although today was overcast and drizzly at times, I managed to get in a full day of outdoor gardening. This morning at home, I prepared one of the vegetable beds in the back yard. After removing the weeds and grass, I repaired the stone border around the bed and fertilized the soil with Territorial organic and some agricultural vermiculite. I used the broadfork to loosen the soil, added a bucket of compost from the rotating composter, and raked it semi-smooth. Sowed the following seeds, two 3' rows of each variety:

- Winter Density Romaine (Territorial)
- Flashy Trout Back (Territorial)
- De 18 Jours Radish (Baker Creek)
- Purple Plum Radish (J. Scheepers)
- Early #7 Spinach (Victory)
- Giant Winter Spinach (High Mowing)

I alternated rows of greens and radishes, leaving three rows for future radish sowing. Used a mixture of potting soil and fine vermiculite to cover the seeds. While I'm not sure this soil/vermiculite mix enhances the % of successful seed germination and seedling survival, it does help keep track of where seeds are planted. It's been over 30 years since I've tried growing any vegetables in the back yard, but I'm thinking it may be convenient to have fresh greens and radishes just a few steps away from our back door—instead of the 15-minute drive to Wickiup. *[This small back yard vegetable garden was not as successful as I had hoped. For whatever reason, the germination rates were low for both radish varieties and the Giant Winter spinach. Much to my surprise, many of the Purple Plum radish seeds did not germinate until late August after a summer rain—which did provide us with an unexpected fall radish crop.]*

After my seed sowing spree, my next task was preparing a second bed for future planting, but on that project I ran into an unforeseen challenge. As I was preparing the soil, I hit a piece of what turned out to be a 4x4" post, buried in the ground, the corner of an old grape arbor post broken off by the August '20 derecho. It took over an hour of digging before I managed to remove this post, just a few minutes before it was time for lunch.

In the afternoon, I drove to Wickiup and worked for over five hours on the following tasks:

- In the "B2" bed, I trimmed the raspberry and blackberry cane, both totally out of hand. All of these berries need to be moved to the berry beds on the other side of the garden, allowing me to move into that area the white currants. The red raspberries are aggressive expansionists, and the currants need some distance from their more rambunctious cousins.
- Finished removing all the old asparagus foliage and most of the unwanted weeds and grass from those two beds. Tightened the wire supports for the asparagus.
- Removed weeds and grass from the rhubarb bed.
- Loaded the pickup with tomato vines and other old material (such as raspberry canes) I don't want in the compost bins.
- Cleaned up two "J" beds and two of the new wooden raised beds.
- Added a lot of material to the compost piles.

I still have a huge job cleaning up along the east and south side fences. The iris and daylilies along those two fence lines need to be dug up and replanted, once I have managed to remove the quack grass and other weeds/grass.

19 March. A lovely gardening day after yesterday's wet, windy, sleety, late-winter "I ain't done yet" petulant behavior. It started out quite chilly, but by the afternoon it was fine for working in the back yard. Today I concentrated on completing the wooden panels surrounding the three big compost bins next to the greenhouse. My first task was attaching the two west side panels to each other. I originally intended to hold those panels together with steel plates, but today I made some changes in the design and decided to use pieces of scrap lumber. Once the panels were attached to each other, MVM helped me set the panels in place and we attached them to the north side panel already installed. We also tied these panels to three of the bin's immortal hedge posts that my Dad brought from our farm 40 years ago. My next step was constructing a fourth panel for the south side. By this time I was running out of long cedar planks, so I used my power saw to create several pieces from joists salvaged from the old shed. I then put this panel in place and attached it to the west-side panels. It ain't perfect, but it looks okay: much better than when I began this project. My next task was constructing one of the two movable panels that will serve as the compost bins gates. To clear some space, I turned over one pile of existing compost and discovered the pile had produced some lovely, black compost at the bottom—a welcome sign. The first gate I constructed is a funny amalgam of boards from various sources, but it's heavy, strong, and functional. Tomorrow I'll finish the second gate and the compost bins will be "done"—18 months after their predecessors were destroyed in the derecho.

20 March. Began the day by attending Buffalo and read the lectionary scripture, which included Jesus in the Gospel of Luke telling the parable of the gardener who convinces the owner not to cut down the fig tree that had not been bearing fruit. Interesting to consider who is the key figure in the parable: the owner, the gardener, or the fig tree. As usual in Jesus' parables, we are given a puzzling text rich in ambiguities. Of course I want the hero to be the gardener. Before reading the passage, I reminded the congregation that in the resurrection story in the Gospel of John when Mary Magdalene meets Jesus, she thinks he is a gardener.

After lunch, I worked in the back yard until 5:00 p.m. It was a beautiful day, gorgeous sunshine, one of those days that you would die for in July. Theo and K were here for a couple hours. He drove his dump truck around the wood chip paths for over an hour. We did spend a few minutes pulling up weeds, depositing them in his yellow dump truck, and carting the weeds to a compost bin. By the time Theo arrived, I had finished constructing the second compost gate. The biggest challenge was removing from the garage two long boards that were saved when the sun room was constructed in 1986. The old roof had some great boards that I've been preserving for over 30 years and were perfect for my new gate. The new 3-bin compost pile is now complete. Probably quite ugly in most people's eyes, but I think it looks pretty good, reflecting a primitive "folk" aesthetic. Now we can do some serious composting.

Another job this afternoon was repairing the old creamery cart. One wooden side was rotting away, so my first step was removing the small bolts holding it on to the cart. Several were so badly rusted I had to cut them off with a hack saw. I used the old panel as a model and cut out a new side panel using a chunk of plywood salvaged from the old shed. Once I have purchased and installed the three new bolts, my creamery cart should be ready for action.

My final task for the day was installing green, vinyl-covered wire around the red raspberry bed. The leaf buds of those raspberries are just beginning to open up. The crocus in the front

yard are also waking up: we already have several dozen bright yellow blooms and the light purple crocus are just starting to bloom in the back yard. Spring is here!

21 March. Vernal equinox—and the sun was out so I shot several photos of the seasonal sundial recording the noon shadows. I arrived at the Coe garden by 7:15, fed the red wigglers, and watered the two rosemary and a half-dozen seed blocks with seedlings. Most of the seed blocks got too dry, and I doubt we'll see any more germination. In the garden three notable flowers in bloom: yellow & white crocus, snowdrops, and in the crevice garden many reticulated iris with their exotic blossoms. At the other end of the garden I checked out the hellebores. They have a good number of emerging buds; we'll have blooms in a few days.

As for garden work, I focused on the "I" bed. Cut back and removed tall stuff: asters, *Baptisia*, hyssop. Cut to the ground peonies, rose campion, coreopsis, mums, big bluestem, etc. Cleaned up the area round the glass flowers. Uncovered two volunteer roses hidden among the mass of taller plants. I had to dig deep with the shovel to reach the roses' roots, and I'm sure some broken bits were left behind—which means more roses appearing this summer. I also discovered mixed in the *Baptisia* a large New England aster that needs to be dug out.

In the afternoon to Wickiup. My first task was removing mulch and weeds from several raised beds and the surrounding walkways. Turning my attention to the "U2" bed of Flavorfest strawberries, I removed grass and old strawberry plants. I added a bucket of fresh compost mixed with agricultural vermiculite to fill in a few holes and refresh the soil. Finished off the bed by adding about three cups of Territorial organic fertilizer. It's supposed to rain tomorrow so these strawberries should benefit from the spring rain activating the fertilizer.

I dug up a batch of garlic in the "B1" bed, garlic that should have been separated and replanted last fall. The cloves were generating new white roots and they appeared to be in good shape/size/condition. I dug up about ten bulbs, separated the cloves, and replanted them in the "J14" bed, which had been previously rejuvenated with fresh compost, Territorial fertilizer, and agricultural vermiculite. The soil worked up very nicely, and the replanted garlic fit the bed perfectly. I think these are Bogatyr Garlic purchased from the Garlic Store.

After the garlic, I weeded around two of the honeyberry plants, both surrounded by quack grass. This was slow going, trying to remove the grass roots without disturbing the shallow honeyberry roots. The attractive leaves of the bushes are starting to emerge from their buds. My last job of the day was filling with soil, compost, and vermiculite the empty steel "U3" raised bed assembled last summer.

22 March. While it was raining at Coe, I did some research on myrtle spurge (*Euphorbia myrsinites*), one of the prominent plants in the crevice garden. Although classified as a noxious weed in a few western states (e.g., Utah), it's been a good citizen in the Coe garden, producing a few progeny each year but they're easy to pull up and throw in the compost pile. I knew its sap was an irritant to some people's skin, but this afternoon I read an article by someone who got the sap on his fingers and then touched his eyes, creating major eye pain. The crevice garden is next to the NW gate, and I'm concerned that a child might end up with the spurge's sap in an eye. It's time to remove the spurge from the crevice garden. [*In the summer I did remove the spurge from the front of the crevice garden and transplanted several pieces to the back of a bed on the south side of the patio. I decided it was not likely than any children—or adults—would ever be*

messing with the spurge leaves in those areas. Perhaps I will eventually eliminate it from the garden, but it's such a classic British garden plant, I hate to banish it totally.]

25 March. I left for Wickiup after lunch, though I stopped at Walmart to purchase an insect spray with DEET to repel ticks—which are already on the move this spring. At Wickiup the temp was about 40, according to the thermometer I installed on the gate two years ago, but it was quite windy, out of the NW, and several times clouds raced overhead, bringing brief snow/sleet showers. No accumulation, but it was not the most pleasant working conditions. I spent two hours working on the “W2” bed on the south side of the garden. Last spring this bed had the great looking pea plants that were decimated by mice. I didn’t do any work in this bed in the summer or fall, so I had a lot of weeds and quack grass roots to remove. The bed is now usable, but the area along the fence remains untouched. While working on the bed, I noticed a large hole in the fence, though I’m not sure any rabbits can get through there because of the outside wire fence. But I unrolled a section of my chicken wire and placed it inside the fence to make sure no rabbit would use this as an entrance.

I saw on the TV news at noon that we are in an area with moderate drought. Working in the garden today, I didn’t feel like the soil had a shortage of moisture. The soil was consistently damp but not muddy: it seemed just right after the rain earlier this week. Because of the continued threat of serious freezing temperatures, I still have not set up a rain gauge at the Wickiup or Coe gardens. Tonight’s forecast is for temps into the low 20s.

When I got home, I worked in the garden studio for an hour, writing the first draft of a review of Thompson *Sceptical Gardener*, an excellent collection of informative essays. I also began a review of Ziegler’s book *Vegetables Love Flowers*, a book that will have a real impact on the Wickiup garden. The challenge at Wickiup is to clean up the perimeter so I could have a garden surrounded by sweet peas growing on the fence. I sowed 40 blocks with two varieties of sweet peas a couple weeks ago but so far zero germination. *[Cleaning up the fence area was a major job that never got done. While nearly all the peas did germinate, they were never transplanted to Wickiup. Unfortunately, the fence issue became more complicated with the encroachment of crown vetch that migrated from a ditch and invaded into the large “A1” raspberry bed, which means I need to dig up that entire bed and attempt to remove the vetch roots. Combined with the need to remove the quack grass along that fence, this will be a major undertaking requiring several days of intense labor.]*

26 March. A day of pure sunshine, but a steady NW wind and temp in the 30s convinced me to confine my gardening to the greenhouse. One major accomplishment was sowing seeds in 120 seed blocks, including 40 cabbage (10 blocks each of Tendersweet, Caraflex F1, Katarina F1, & Bobcat F1), 10 eggplant (Poamoho Dark Long Purple), 55 flowers (10 African foxglove & Marigold ‘Burning Embers’ and 15 Tithonia & Glove Thistle ‘Blue Glow’), and 20 blocks of Yellow Lupin from Victory seeds. The lupins had been soaking in water for about eight hours to soften up their shells. I dream of a swath of lupines here at home and at Coe, a reminder of those wonderful lupines we saw when hiking in Scotland three years ago.

Tomorrow I’ll start sowing peppers and tomatoes—which means that I need more space in the greenhouse here at home because I’m running out of room. It’s time to move most of the flowers to the Coe greenhouse. I currently have flats with seedlings of foxglove, sea holly, Ozark coneflowers, violas, cardinal flowers (very tiny), jasmine tobacco, maltese cross, Frances’

Garden Kalendar: Winter 2023

Choice marigold, calendula orange king, 2 varieties of dahlia, lemon bergamot, black-eyed Susan, snapdragons, and balsam.

One notable event today. Received in the mail a death certificate for my Dad's father. We gained some real information because the document includes the name of his father (John) and his mother's maiden name (Harriet Swethers). It would appear that my Dad's sister Harriet was named after her grandmother. The death certificate also confirms that William J. Marrs died of an accident, falling from a wagon about 11:30 a.m. on a March morning. He was born in Mississippi before the Civil War. One wonders what it was like for him growing up in Mississippi in the 1860s? How was he and his family affected by the War? What did he see?

[Quoting George Smith, gardener of the Manor House in Hesington]

Every time we plant something, we have to improve the soil; penny for the plant, pound for the hole.

27 March. After church, MVM and I purchased at Home Depot a small outdoor shed for the storage of K's garden tools. Following a quick lunch, we drove to Iowa City. MVM helped P with his Lutheran pipe organ repair project while K & I assembled the storage unit—which was reasonably simple to put together, perhaps 45 minutes. The rest of the afternoon I did some back yard work for K: cleaned out leaves from Theo's sandbox, picked up deer turds, raked the back yard, raked and cleaned up several raised flower beds, trimmed old coreopsis, dumped two loads of leaves in compost bins, etc. I was short of breath a couple times when carrying bags of soil up her steep back yard, but otherwise I could keep plugging along. Although it was chilly, I was out of the wind most of the time, and it was a pleasure seeing her back yard and sandbox looking much better.

29 March. Another cold, windy day so I skipped Wickiup and worked at home and at Coe, where I moved three trays of flowers, 50 seedlings per tray. I got them into the greenhouse and they are now under the lights. I will need to visit Coe every day to make sure they remain in good shape. Tomorrow I'll start running the fan on them, helping them gear up for the challenges of the great outdoors. In the Elmhurst greenhouse, I prepared two trays with 50 blocks each for tomatoes and sowed 5 blocks per variety, two seeds/block. I alphabetized my tomato seed packets, a total of 30 varieties. Today I did the A's and B's, beginning with Abe Lincoln and Amish Orange. Tomorrow I'll finish sowing the rest of that tray before driving to the airport to pick up A & MJT, who are visiting for a few days before they do some research at the Hoover Library. If their flights are on schedule, we might eat lunch in the Amanas, where we have not eaten since before the pandemic.

George Smith has built up the planting of these borders as he would create a flower arrangement: starting with the roses, other plants have been added to provide contrasting texture and complementary color one by one until there are just enough. The perils of plantsmanship—adding too many different and discordant varieties—have been avoided. This approach is different from that of garden designers, who so often decide on the mix of colors and textures, then set down the whole design at once, a method that frequently gives a less successful result than a more evolutionary process.