



Everything I knew about gardening I learned...

... was wrong from my Master Gardener Spouse!

by Mike Hillman
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Probably one of the hardest things I've learned about being a Master Gardener from my Master Gardener wife is correcting common gardening misconceptions drilled into just about all non-gardeners over our lifetimes.

Growing up in suburbia, I learned quickly that affluence was measured by the amount of lawn one had and how short it was manicured. I learned that everyone stopped in front of gardens full of newly planted annuals, which gave immediate gratification, and no one stopped in front of homes with perennials. I learned that if you wanted shade around your house, you picked the fasted growing trees. I learned that gardens were supposed to be sterile, and if you wanted to get rid of bugs, pesticide in large doses was the answer.

When I first meet my Master Gardener wife the mention of terms like Native Plants, Integrated Plant Management, Beneficial Insects, Xeroscaping would have drawn a blank stair. Organic gardening was something people with long hair who had dropped out of society did, not respectful homeowners. A wildflower meadow was something you saw while driving through the countryside, not something you would consider for your front yard. Warning about invasive species sounded like a sci-fi movie plot. And telling someone that the long grass in your yard was ornamental would have brought wise cracks, and lets not even mention the response you would have received had you had the courage to tell them you were growing native 'weeds!'

Thankfully, gardening techniques and gardeners have come a long way since then. But the real payoff for our environment will come when non-gardeners homeowners and weekend warrior gardeners start to emulate Master Gardeners.

Winter is when most Master Gardeners sit back and enjoy time off from their garden and my wife is no exception. Even so, every day we contribute to her garden. On our kitchen counter top is a decorative plastic bucket labeled appropriately 'compost.' In it my wife throws just about everything biodegradable, things I grew up throwing away to be carted off to a landfill. Used coffee grounds, tea bags, uneaten vegetables, and trimmings from the lucky garden plants that get to come in for the winter, all end up in the compost bucket. Once full, it's emptied into one of three compost bins.

In the spring she puts me put to work turning and sifting through them. Every year I'm awed at the deep dark richness I uncover at the bottom of each bin, and every year her plants reward her by giving blooms of un-imagined splendor that store bought compost can't even touch.

While I was aware of birds in my mother's gardens, I never gave them more then a passing thought. For my wife, birds are an integral part of her garden and with it, her Integrated Pest Management Plan. Bagworms, Webworms, and Japanese Beetles make tasty meals for the birds

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that call her garden home. The more winged allies she can attract to her garden, the freer her garden is of these pests, and the lusher and richer they look.

To help support her flock, when the fall native foliage is spent, the dead flowers and the seeds they contain are left for the birds to pick. Deadheading is a spring chore, not fall, nor winter. The Native birds protect the native plants from insects, and in return, the native plants feed the native birds with winter seeds ... Mother Nature at her very best.

But winter is a hard time for her winged garden allies. Many of the native plants they depend upon for winter forage are fighting for their very survival from an onslaught of invasive non-native plants. To help her birds survive the winter, after the first hard frost of the season, out come bird feeders of every shape and size to support the dietary needs and feeding behavior of local native birds. Thistle feeders for the Goldfinches. Suet feeders for the Woodpeckers. Black Oil Sunflower feeders for Fiches, Chickadees, Nuthatches, and Cardinals. Whole peanut feeders for the Blue Jays, Nuthatches, and Chickadees. Two feeders are always filled with everyone's favorite mixture of Black Oil Sunflower, Millet, Milo, fruit and berries, peanut hearts, and safflower.

Winter bird feeding is my most favorite time to be in my wife's garden - as it is my wife's. I guess the way she looks at it - the worst I can do is overfeed everyone, which is a lot more forgivable than pulling out a prize plant while trying to help weed! I may never be a gardener, but as I fill the feeders surrounded by happy chirping birds, I feel good, like I'm doing my part and am reminded of an old English poem by Alfred Crowquill called "Scatter out the Crumbs":

Amidst the freezing sleet and snow,
The timid robin comes;
In pity drive him not away,
But scatter out your crumbs.

And leave your door upon the latch
For whosoever comes;
The poorer they, more welcome give,
And scatter out your crumbs.

All have to spare, none are too poor,
When want with winter comes;
The loaf is never all your own,
Then scatter out the crumbs.

Soon winter falls upon your life,
The day of reckoning comes:
Against your sins, by high decree,
Are weighed those scattered crumbs.

Until the spring!
Mike

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