

# The Dirt

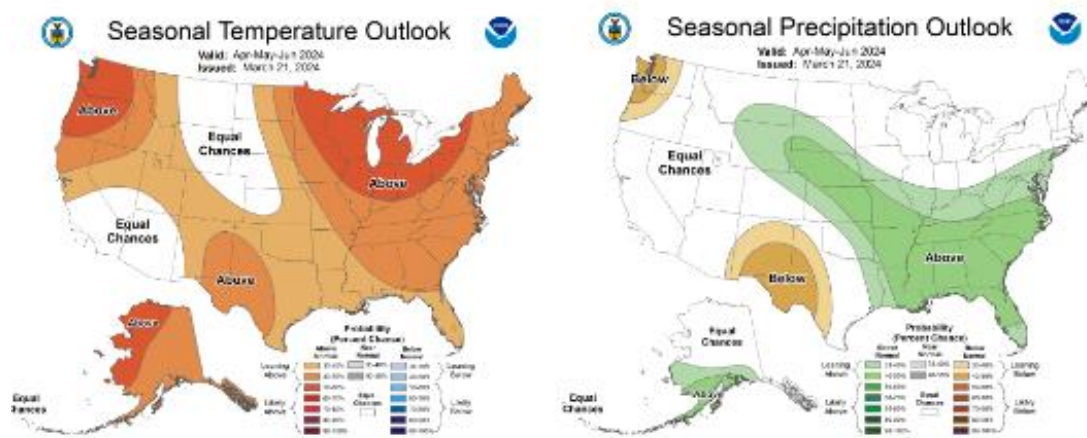
## Gardening Resources & Tips from the MMGA

April 2024

### April showers?



After the US experienced the warmest meteorological winter on record in the 48 contiguous states, it should be no surprise that signs of spring are appearing much earlier this year. But change could be coming. According to a February 2024 report from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), El Niño is weakening and La Niña is on its way! La Niña's weather pattern – drought and warmth in the summer followed by a cold winter – will redevelop sometime this spring or summer. What does this mean for our gardens in Massachusetts? Take a look below at [NOAA's Climate Prediction Center](#) forecast:



Even though spring weather is arriving early, avoid the temptation to work in your gardens if the soil is wet. Compacted soil reduces pore space, and it can take years to rebuild healthy soil structure. If you dig a trowel full of soil, squeeze it in your hand, and the soil crumbles between your fingers, the soil is ready to work. If it forms a muddy ball, wait a few days and sample again.

In this month's edition of *The Dirt*:

- Registration is open for our **Summer Gardening Know-How Series**. See below for more details.
- **How To:** Create container gardens that thrive and delight!
- **Shrub of the Month:** Our "Native Shrub of the Month" column features a fragrant spring bloomer.
- **MMGA Project Garden:** April's feature article transports readers into a historic, elegant garden filled with old and new wonders.
- **April Gardening Tip:** Learn how to plant a tree that will live long, grow strong, and regenerate your environment.

*Happy spring! See you again on May 1st.*

**Dig The Dirt? Please tell your friends!**  
They can subscribe online by clicking [HERE](#).

**REGISTER TODAY!**



## **ONLINE Summer Gardening Know-How Series**

**Wednesdays, 7:00-8:30 PM  
May 8, 15, 22 & 29, 2024**

**WHO SHOULD ATTEND:** Gardeners with all levels of experience and lots of questions, new homeowners starting from scratch, garden rehabbers, more. Everyone can benefit from some Know-How!

### **LECTURES INCLUDE:**

- Raised Bed Vegetable Gardening
- Growing Perennials
- Good Bugs, Bad Bugs
- Grow Raspberries

Virtual sessions include live Q&A time with speakers and handouts to read in advance or revisit in the future.

[Learn more and register](#)

### **QUESTIONS?**

Email us at [KnowHow@MassMasterGardeners.org](mailto:KnowHow@MassMasterGardeners.org)

## ***Dishing the Dirt: "How To" from a Massachusetts Master Gardener***

### **CREATING CONTAINER GARDENS**

**Author:** *A Certified Massachusetts Master Gardener, Class of 2022, Jonathan D. Stein has been an avid gardener for most of his adult life and has many different plants in his container gardens. Jonathan grows vegetables, herbs, annuals, and many tropical plants in containers. He also has a newfound interest in dwarf Japanese maples as well as dwarf conifers. Professionally, Jonathan is celebrating his 45th year as a practicing chiropractor and is now semi-retired.*

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Container gardening is simply growing any plant normally grown in a garden bed in a container. If you have ever grown a house plant, you have container gardened. Virtually any type of plant can be grown in an outdoor container, including vegetables, herbs, perennials, annuals, shrubs, and even trees — think bonsai. Container gardening allows you to grow plants if you have limited garden space because the containers can be placed on balconies, porches, decks, and even along the side of a driveway. The containers can also be moved from one spot to another to maximize the amount of sun they receive, or to remove them when the season ends. Consideration should be given to the type of material the container is made of, the planting media, watering, and fertilizing — all important elements for successful container gardening.

## Types of Containers

There are many different types of materials that can be used as outdoor plant containers. You can choose from clay, terra cotta, wood, cement, plastic, metal, and even fabric grow pots. Each of these materials has its advantages and disadvantages. Regardless of the material, the pots must always have drainage holes. Placing pebbles or other materials in the bottom of a pot without drainage is not adequate.



When you are growing any type of edible, you must make sure that the container is nontoxic and has not been used to hold any material that is toxic to either plants or humans. When using wood, the best choices are cedar and redwood, since they are the most rot and decay resistant. Pressure-treated wood should never be used for growing any type of edibles, as it historically contained elements of arsenic. If the containers are going to be kept outdoors over the winter, avoid using clay or terra cotta pots, as they are prone to cracking from freezing and thawing temperatures.



If you have large and heavy planters, you may want to place them on platforms with wheels so they can be easily moved. With large planters, there is no need to fill the entire planter with planting soil; instead you can fill the bottom third with sticks, wood chips, and even upside-down pots. By doing this, you keep the planter from becoming excessively heavy and save some money on planting soil.

Planting up instead of across the ground is called vertical gardening or wall gardening. The elevated position of a vertical gardens (pictured above before planting) makes them easily accessible to water, weed, feed, and harvest.

## Container Media

The choice of planting medium is extremely important for successful container gardening. The soil must be fairly lightweight to allow for proper root development and provide good drainage. Garden soil or loam – whether it is taken directly from your garden or purchased in bags – is not a proper soil for container gardening unless the soil is fairly sandy. These types of soils are too heavy and will not allow for proper root development of plants growing in containers.



Prepackaged container mixes as well as potting mixes are available at local garden centers. These types of soil mixes are specifically formulated for containers to hold moisture and provide good drainage, which is necessary for healthy root growth. Some of these prepackaged mixes have fertilizer already mixed in with them, so be sure to read the label on the package to know whether or not additional fertilization of your plants will be necessary.

You can also create a homemade mix, which will generally be less expensive than buying bagged container mixes. A simple mix consists of one part sterilized loam (known as garden soil), one part moist, coarse sphagnum peat moss or coconut coir, and one part coarse sand, perlite, or vermiculite.



## Watering

Container plants can dry out much more quickly than garden beds; therefore, you should pay close attention to whether or not the containers need watering. In the heat of the summer, it may be necessary to water some of your container plants on a daily basis or even twice a day.

To check to see if your container plants need watering, simply place your index finger into the soil about an inch deep; if the soil feels moist, watering is not needed.

When watering is necessary, you should water your containers thoroughly, making sure that some water is draining out the bottom of the container. If the soil in the container has become completely dry, the soil may have become hydrophobic and when you water, the water will simply quickly drain through the container without actually moistening the soil.



You may need to carefully submerge a container into a larger container filled with water and soak for a short time; if it is a large container, you may need to place a saucer under it and leave the container sitting in the saucer to absorb the water. If you do place a saucer under the container, remove the saucer if rain is predicted. Otherwise, the container can sit in the saucer filled with water and you will have over-saturated the soil.



Basil with yellowing leaves from nitrogen deficiency

### **Fertilization**

Special consideration must be given when fertilizing container plants that have not been planted in a potting medium that already contains fertilizer. Many container plants benefit from frequent and light fertilization. Container plants generally need to be watered much more frequently than plants in garden beds, and because of this, frequent watering can cause many of the nutrients in the containers to get washed out.

There are two good remedies for this problem. One method is to mix a time-release granular fertilizer into your potting medium. The second option is to use a diluted water-soluble fertilizer on a more frequent basis. Follow the directions with the water-soluble fertilizer, and if the recommendation is to use the fertilizer at a given rate every two weeks, cut that rate in half and fertilize weekly, or dilute even more and fertilize your plants twice a week.

### **Be Creative**

When planting decorative containers, if you use the “thriller, filler, spiller” method, you can create spectacular eye-catching designs rather than just plain plantings. In this method, the thriller is generally a taller plant with eye-catching color and form; the filler plants are used around the thriller to cover the soil; and finally the spiller plant is a plant that will drape over the edge of the container. (It is important to make sure plants in a given container have similar sun and watering needs.) Pictured above are elevated window boxes I use to grow lettuce, herbs, and other low growing vegetables.



Elevated window boxes to grow herbs & vegetables

Instead of planting shade-loving annuals such as coleus and begonias directly in the garden bed, you can keep them potted in containers that are artistically placed within a shade garden. At the end of the season, the containers can be brought inside as house plants.

Containers offer many creative options for any garden, and experimenting is part of the fun!

## ***Native Shrub of the Month*** **Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*)**

With its early lemon yellow blooms that are a harbinger of spring and its crucial support of pollinators and birds, northern spicebush offers an alternative to the non-native forsythia that dominate the landscape.



Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*) is a lovely understory shrub native to moist forests and swamps in the Eastern United States. The shrub has a graceful rounded habit, growing to six to eight feet tall. It tolerates full sun to part shade and prefers a slightly acidic soil. The common name spicebush derives from the spicy scent all parts of the plant – including its leaves, bark, berries, and flowers – emit when crushed. Native Americans and early colonists made tea from all parts of the plant, used it to treat various ailments, and as an insect repellent. The aromatic nature of this shrub has the added benefit of discouraging browsing by most herbivores, including deer.



The flowers of the northern spicebush appear in April before the leaves and are dioecious, meaning there are both male and female flowers on the same plant. While both the male and female have the yellow flowers, the female flowers give way to a red berry. The berries are favored by several bird species, including the American robin, eastern bluebird, and gray catbird.

Spicebush is valuable to early pollinators by providing both pollen and nectar. The flowers are pollinated by flies and early bees and attract numerous butterflies. It is a host plant for several butterfly species, including the spicebush swallowtail. The beautiful bright green caterpillars of this butterfly are distinctive, resembling a tiny snake with black snake-eye markings that scare off birds.



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### ***Visit an MMGA Project Garden:*** **A Historic Garden Climbs to the Top!**

**Long Hill**  
**[576 Essex Street](https://thetrustees.org/place/long-hill/)**  
**[Beverly, MA 01915](https://thetrustees.org/place/long-hill/)**  
**<https://thetrustees.org/place/long-hill/>**

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*Author: After retiring from an engineering career, Mary Krull graduated with the MMGA class of 2017 and recently achieved Lifetime status. She has been Project Manager at Long Hill in Beverly since 2019 but in 2024 will focus on St. John's Memorial garden in Saugus. Mary is a member of the MMGA North Region Committee and gardens at several North Shore sites including Castle Hill, PEM, and Maudslay State Park, when there is no poison ivy around! Mary is also Garden Advisor with the Marblehead Garden Club's 1768-era Jeremiah Lee Mansion garden and works with the Marblehead Conservancy on the Lead Mills pollinator corridor.*

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As recently as 2020, Long Hill was not on many people's radar. That year, the property did not even make it to the Trustees of Reservations' "Top 24" list, based on web traffic. Fast forward to 2023, and Long Hill is #11. The word is out!

As noted in **2023 Top 25 Properties - The Trustees of Reservations**, "Visitors delight in the beauty of Long Hill's structured and

naturalistic gardens as well as a network of woodland trails. A diverse collection of trees, shrubs, and distinctive perennial plants provide color during the growing season." While an accurate statement, especially for the casual visitor, it doesn't capture the thrill a gardener encounters when drifting from outdoor room to outdoor room. Around every corner is another beautiful example of native plants in their glory, or a mature, exotic import perfectly situated to display its charms.

The property known as Long Hill, located in Beverly, Massachusetts, dates back to 1916, when it was purchased as the site of a summer home by Ellery and Mabel Cabot Sedgwick. At 114 acres, the estate is mostly wooded, criss-crossed by trails that are an inviting walk. The historic Sedgwick Gardens, dating from 1917, surround the main house, beginning with the iconic copper beech (*Fagus sylvatica* 'Atropunicea') at the front door of the mansion, then on to terraces, several pools for lotuses and other water plants, ancient tree peonies, and groves of mountain laurel and azalea. Several specimens planted by the "first Mrs. Sedgwick," Mabel, remain from the early 1900s. Mabel was an accomplished horticulturist and author of the book *The Garden Month by Month*. The "second Mrs. Sedgwick," Marjorie, was also a distinguished gardener and propagator of rare plants. Marjorie worked with the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University to establish many rare species at Long Hill that we still enjoy today.



Since the property was given to the Trustees in 1979, many more interesting specimens have been added. Scattered among the garden rooms are trees such as *Stewartia rostrata* (beaked stewartia) and *S. monadelphica* (tall stewartia), *Magnolia salicifolia* (anise magnolia), *Thujaopsis dolabrata* (hiba arborvitae), *Davidia involucrata* (dove tree), and the unusual *Tsuga canadensis* 'Hussii' (twiggy hemlock), and *Cercis chinensis* (Chinese Redbud). Shrubs include *Chimonanthus praecox* (wintersweet), *Stewartia ovata* 'Grandiflora' (mountain stewartia), *Clematis stans* (fall bush clematis), native *Pieris floribunda* (mountain andromeda – such a different energy than the Japanese andromeda!), *Dirca palustris* (leatherwood), and *Mahonia bealei* (leatherleaf mahonia).



Recent significant plantings – some created in collaboration with award-winning author and landscape designer Julie Moir Messervy – extend the original garden footprint and include a new hedge of native *Carpinus caroliniana* (American hornbeam) adjacent to a summer garden of striking natives and other perennials. This new garden incorporates some of the original existing trees, such as native *Juniperus virginiana* (Eastern red cedar) and *Oxydendrum aboreum* (sourwood), as well as a pair of dramatic weeping spruce. The new garden, in turn, borders a young meadow before the landscape returns to forest.

The planted gardens cover about eight acres of land. The extensive grounds mean that volunteers rarely garden in the same area more than two or three times per season. The tasks are varied and have included planting a native tree bordering a meadow (and years later, pruning those now-established trees), pruning the lilac and crabapple allee leading to the mansion, designing and executing container plantings to decorate the house terraces, repotting and labeling nursery stock, pruning the many azalea and mountain laurel groves, clipping formal hedges and rose gardens, sprucing up the children's garden, and helping to prepare for the annual plant sale (perhaps the most educational task of the season). Once (only once!) MMGA volunteers helped to weed a first-season meadow.



As fascinating as the plants are and as beautiful as the landscape is, the people at Long Hill are just as strong a draw. Senior Horticulturist Dan Bouchard and Assistant Horticulturist Melissa Burke have been steadfast partners for the Master Gardeners for over ten years. Dan has been master of the Long Hill garden for over twenty-five years and has planted many of the impressive specimens himself. In addition to the learning opportunities Dan and Melissa afford us, they are interesting people off-site as well. The volunteer group sometimes goes to see Dan's band, "Loudmouth Soup," perform at local venues.

This article has barely scratched the surface of what Long Hill has to offer. Please be sure to visit in the 2024 season!

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## Monthly Gardening Tip: Spring into Tree Planting



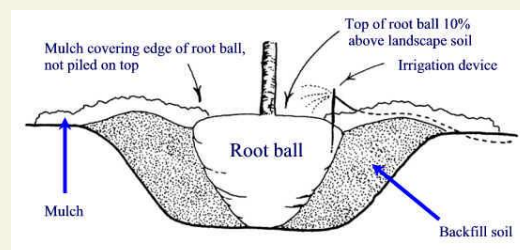
In April, we celebrate nature with Earth Day on April 22nd and Arbor Day on April 26th (in Massachusetts, it's celebrated on the fourth Friday of the month). It's the perfect time to plant your own native tree, for you and for nature!

### Selection, Location

Pick a tree that will fit the area chosen when matured. Although they look small when in a container or balled and burlapped, they will grow many times their purchased size. Planting them far enough away from the house, overhead wires, underground pipes, and utility lines is imperative. If planting in the front or nearest to the street, contact [Dig Safe](#) to make sure the planting hole and root systems are not in the way.

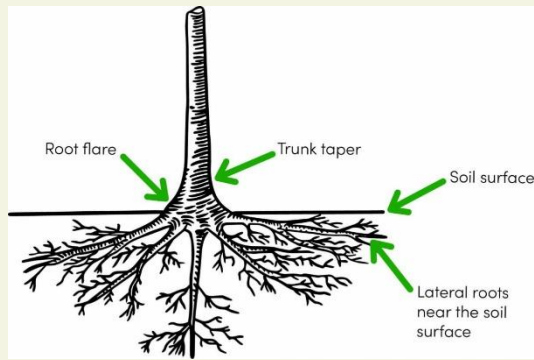
### Planting Hole

Once the tree has been decided upon and the location chosen, it's time to dig the planting hole. In the past, the advice was to dig a hole with straight sides, then add compost and fertilizer to give the tree a robust start, but this method of planting did very little to encourage a strong horizontal root system. Now the proper planting hole looks more like a large saucer. The hole the tree is planted in has the original, native soil placed back in. The material covering the root ball needs to be taken off because it is often made from a synthetic material and will not degrade. If there is a wire cage, it must be removed to allow the roots, which will get larger in diameter than some of the tree's branches, the room to grow freely.



## Root Flare

The root flare of the tree must remain uncovered by soil. The root flare is the point that distinguishes the trunk of the tree from the root system below. Often in the nursery, the soil is mounded up around the trunk of the tree. If the trunk is planted and the root flare is below the soil level, the tree will die a slow death. The tree will develop adventitious roots, meaning the roots will grow above the root flare level. Trees are not meant to look like telephone poles coming straight out of the soil.



Place the root ball directly on the low point of the planting depression/hole. One way to be sure that the tree will be at the correct depth is to place a long-handled shovel across the planting hole; it will give you the correct level for planting. The root flare of the tree will be level with the soil of the surrounding area. Fill in the hole with only the soil taken out of the hole. The roots need good contact with the soil; watering and lightly firming the soil surrounding the root ball will help to give the roots a good start.

## Staking

At this point, determine if you need to stake the tree. Most evergreens do not need to be staked but bare-root trees and trees with small root balls do need staking. If you do stake the tree, place one long stake at a 45-degree angle and face the stake into the prevailing wind. Attach the tree to the stake with a soft material like canvas strapping. Secure it so that the stake and the tree will not rub. Wrap the strapping around the tree and stake in a figure eight to help prevent rubbing or damaging of the young tree. Tie once around the tree, knot it, then tie it to the stake. The stake can be removed the following growing season.

## Mulch

Mulch should be placed around the tree. Mulch suppresses weeds, retains moisture, and depending on the material used, adds nutrients to the soil. Mulch needs to be no more than a couple of inches thick; if it is deeper, it could allow adventitious roots to form. The roots growing in the mulch could be damaged by freezing temperatures over the winter, thus injuring the tree.

“Volcano mulching” – piling up mulch against the trunk of the tree – is inadvisable at any time in the life of the tree. Tree roots need oxygen. Most tree roots are within the first 12-18” of the ground; they will be deprived of oxygen if many inches of mulch are placed on top of the soil. Volcano mulching also provides the perfect place for insects to invade the trunk, and for rodents to live in and munch on the bark over the winter, potentially girdling the tree.



*Properly mulched tree*



*A mulch 'volcano'*

## Watering

Watering during the first few weeks after planting is crucial to the tree's survival. Watering daily for the first couple of weeks is essential, and after the third week watering can be done every two to three days. The first year the tree is planted, consistent watering will help the tree to establish a good root system.

Congratulations! You've planted a native tree that will grow for years to come!

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## *Year-round MMGA Learning Resources*



**Have a plant problem?** Email our volunteers your questions...and they'll get back to you. Please include your name, phone number, and as much detail as possible, including photos.

- **Massachusetts Horticultural Society:**  
[MHSHelpline@MassMasterGardeners.org](mailto:MHSHelpline@MassMasterGardeners.org)
- **New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill (Formerly Tower Hill Botanic Garden):** [Hortline@NEBG.org](mailto:Hortline@NEBG.org)

**Speaker's Bureau:** If you're a member of a garden club or other organization, check out our lecture topics [here](#). If you need information on how to schedule a talk for your group, contact our Speakers Bureau Manager at [Speakers@MassMasterGardeners.org](mailto:Speakers@MassMasterGardeners.org).

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## *Seasonal MMGA Learning Resources*

**Ask us your questions in person!** Trained volunteers staff **Ask-a-Master-Gardener (AAMG)** tables at dozens of events this spring.

- The AAMGA is coming to a community near you this spring-check our [AAMG Calendar](#) calendar for dates and times.
- Belong to a local organization that would like to host an AAMG? Contact [Outreach@MassMasterGardeners.org](mailto:Outreach@MassMasterGardeners.org).

**Why guess? Test!** Get your soil pH tested - for free!

- Currently, there are several soil testing clinics scheduled, to find out where and when, check our [Soil Testing Calendar](#).
  - To request an MMGA Soil Testing event for your organization's event, contact [SoilTesting@MassMasterGardeners.org](mailto:SoilTesting@MassMasterGardeners.org).
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## *Credits*

### **Featured Articles & Columns**

- How To: "Creating Container Gardens" by Certified Master Gardener Jonathan D. Stein
- "Native Shrub of the Month" by Hadley Berkowitz, Principal Master Gardener
- Visit a MMGA Project Garden: "An Historic Garden Climbs to the Top!" by Mary Krull, Lifetime Master Gardener
- "Monthly Gardening Tip" by Kathi Gariepy, Lifetime Master Gardener and lecturer, and writer on gardening topics.

### **Photos** (in order of appearance)

- Temperature & Precipitation Charts: NOAA Climate Prediction Center
  - Fabric grow pot, vertical garden, unplanted: Jonathan D. Stein, CMG
  - Watering images: The Spruce
  - Fertilization, basil: University of Minnesota Extension
  - Multi-container garden: Jonathan D. Stein
  - Spicebush berries: Mt. Cuba Center
  - Larva of spicebush swallowtail: University of Florida
  - Long Hill: The Trustees of the Reservation
  - Long Hill gardens: Mary Krull, LMG
  - Oak tree: Arbor Day Foundation
  - Root hole: University of Florida
  - Root flare: Royal Botanical Gardens CDA
  - Mulching: University of Maryland Extension
  - Tulips: Lynne Larson, PMG
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## Who We Are

The Massachusetts Master Gardener Association is an independent non-profit organization whose mission is to share research-based horticultural knowledge and experience with the public. We meet that goal through Master Gardener Certification, outreach, education, volunteering, and public gardening programs for the advancement of best practices in sustainable, regenerative horticulture.



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