



## Gardening Resources & Tips from the MMGA

**May 2024**

### **May Flowers**



The mud is gone, mostly, and now the work begins. Most gardeners experience May as a busy time of year, and farmers are going non-stop. It is time to clean (some more), aerate, plant, and tackle those early season requirements that secure later season success. The Old Farmer's Almanac predicts final spring frost dates (always risky), and they claim it is 4/24 for Boston, 5/9 for Springfield, and 5/13 for Stockbridge. But who among us, trowels in hopeful hands, dare believe it?

Early May means spring ephemerals, tasty dandelions (for some), onions in the ground, and apple blossoms in all of their beauty (pictured above). By mid-month, the more daring gardener might be hardening off some warm weather vegetable plants, fully knowing (though resisting) that sweet basil is still a long-shot. By the end of May in New England, however, gardeners abound, free to plant with abandonment in the almost 14 hours of light!

One gentle reminder for this busy month— when you plant and transplant this season, we encourage you to consider native plants. Native plants sustain all of wildlife, and gardeners can be important stewards of nature's abundance and display.

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

- Last chance! Registration is closing soon for our **Summer Gardening Know-How Series**. See below for more details.
- **How To:** Divide those perennials! It helps the plant, beautifies the garden, teaches the gardener, and saves money.
- **Shrub of the Month:** Virginia sweetspire (*Itea virginica*) is a North American native bush perfect for those who have wetter soils and love dramatic flowers.
- **MMGA Project Garden:** "Visit" Aurelia's Garden, now in two locations, and learn how our committed volunteers feed their community.
- **May Gardening Tip:** Old sayings make best practices.

*Happy planting! See you again on June 1st.*

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

**Hurry - registration closes May 4th!**



## 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)

## Monthly "How To" from a Massachusetts Master Gardener

### DIVIDE AND CONQUER THOSE PERENNIALS!

*This month's "How To" article was co-authored by Madeline Chamberlain, Certified Master Gardener and Susan Cormier, Senior Principal Master Gardener. Madeline is the Project Manager for the Ohrenberger Native Plant Garden in West Roxbury. Susan serves as the MMGA Communications Coordinator/Board Member.*

So much of gardening feels magical, but definitely one of the most magical aspects is perennials. They do so much for a garden. During the growing season, they provide beauty for us, and food and shelter for our native insects and birds. In the fall and winter, they provide shelter for insects. *And*, they come back year after year! However, perennials have one more trick up their little green sleeves— you can literally divide them up and make more.

### Why divide

Clumping perennials grow outward and if left to their own devices, start to weaken and/or die off in the middle. While it might feel barbaric, dividing up the plant can actually reinvigorate it. Plus, who doesn't want the resultant free plants? Has your monster hosta gotten too big for its space? Divide it! Is your geranium looking a little weak in the middle? Divide it! Is your emerging ornamental grass looking kind of like a green donut? Divide it!



## When to divide

The best time to divide a plant is when it's not in bloom. Many gardeners like to divide in the fall (so long as there's still about six weeks in the season for the roots to get established) because they know exactly what the plant is going to look like. If you're completely rejigging a garden, this might be the best time to do it so you can better visualize the end result. If you go this route, cut the plant back before you divide; it's less stressful for the plant and you can see what you're doing.

However, when the plant is emerging in the spring (mid-April to mid-May) is another great time to divide. There's not a lot of growth to work around, and the weather during the establishing period is generally a bit more predictable. Even if there is a late frost, if the plant is still emerging, it will likely recover just fine.

Whenever you decide to divide, choose a cooler day, preferably overcast. If it's going to rain, that's even better. Hot, sunny weather can dry out your plant as you're dividing it, making it tougher for the divisions to settle after planting.



## How to divide

Now it's time to do some surgery. Using a spade or a garden fork, dig deeply all around, about 4-6 inches away from the parent plant. Pry underneath it and get the whole plant out of the ground. Some plants are tough — I've had to use a mattock on some hostas. Some plants are heavy— you might need a buddy to help you get that plant out.

Sometimes you need to be a little creative; if it's too big or stuck in, consider dividing it in situ. And sometimes, as pictured here, a good jab with your spade does the job.

## Plan ahead

Plan ahead and water your plants well a few days before you divide. Site preparation is key; you don't want to leave divided plants out to dry up any longer than necessary. Make sure the new location is ready and, if possible, add compost. Also, at this point, figure out exactly what kind of dividing you're going to do (read the whole article before you get to work!) so you can be prepared and have the right tools.

Once the plant is lifted out of the ground, it's time to divide. As mentioned above, there's a few ways to divide and they all depend on the type of root system the plant has:

- **Spreading or surface roots:** (Coreopsis, asters, beebalm, and many other common perennials) You can often tease these apart by hand or with two garden forks. I've had good success just slicing these clumps into two or three pieces with a knife. If there is a dead center, compost it.
- **Clumping:** (Astilbes, daylilies, hostas) The root system originated from one clump, but has now spread. Pry apart using two garden forks, or use a knife or even a handsaw (yes!). Make sure that each new division has several eyes or buds. Compost the dead center.
- **Rhizomes:** (Bearded irises) Remember how I said to divide in the spring or fall? Not for these guys— divide them in August. Irises have a root system that grows out horizontally near the ground level. After lifting the whole clump, use a knife to cut out any rotten, holey, or otherwise damaged rhizomes. Each new section should have at least one fan of leaves (trim these back to half). Replant the rhizomes so the top part is exposed to the sun. The picture below features a Bearded iris that could be divided in nine places.

## Post-op

You've done your plant surgery! Now, it's time for post-op. Keep your divisions in the shade so they don't dry out. If you're not going to plant them immediately, keep them cool, covered and moist. Trim any broken roots. Plant in new holes as wide as the spread-out roots will be. By all means, plant a chunk back in the original location. Firm around the plant. Even if it's raining, water the plant well.



A quick word of warning before you decide to divide your entire garden. Not every perennial likes to be divided—for example, *Baptisia* (false indigo). It's worth doing a quick Internet search to make sure your perennial will respond well to division. Finally, if you think you have jumping worms (or other pests), do not share with other gardeners or donate to plant sales. For a list of when and how to divide 125 common perennials, click on University of Minnesota Extension list found [here](#).

It's so wonderful that one of the kindest things you can do to keep your perennials vigorous is also kind to your pocketbook. So get out there and divide, conquer, and fill in those gaps!

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## Native Shrub of the Month

### VIRGINIA SWEETSPIRE



With a profusion of fragrant blooms in early summer and vibrant fall color, Virginia sweetspire (*Itea virginica*) is a durable native shrub that offers many seasons of interest.

*Itea virginica* is native to stream banks in the eastern United States from southern New Jersey to Florida. Although it is typically found in moist areas and prefers moist, acidic soil, this native shrub is adaptable to a variety of soil types and is drought tolerant once established. While not native to New England, the shrub performs well to zone five.

Virginia sweetspire features graceful, arching branches and a rounded but loose form. The shrub flowers in June, with masses of four-inch white

bottlebrush flowers that attract butterflies, hummingbirds, and other pollinators. Flowers start at the base and move to the tip, extending the bloom time as much as three weeks.

*Itea virginica*'s oval, dark green leaves turn brilliant shades of orange to red to purple in fall, with leaves persisting until early winter. While the shrub can grow in full shade, its flowers and fall color are intensified with more sun exposure. Virginia sweetspire tends to sucker to form dense colonies and can be used for erosion control.



While the straight species can grow up to five feet tall, there are two widely available cultivars that are more compact. Growing three to four feet in height, 'Henry's Garnet' (see above) is one of the most reliable cultivars and features young stems with a deep red color. 'Little Henry' is more compact, staying under three feet tall. *Itea virginica* has the added benefit of being avoided by both deer and rabbits, making it a welcome addition to many landscapes.

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**April Newsletter Correction: Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*)** The flowers of the northern spicebush appear in April before the leaves and are dioecious, meaning there are separate male and female plants. If you want the female to produce berries, you should have one of each. While both the male and female have the yellow flowers, only the female plant's flowers give way to a red berry.

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## **Visit a MMGA Project Garden**

**A food pantry garden that practices cohabitating with nature**

### **Aurelia's Garden**

Medway and Wayland, MA

[aureliaspanttrygarden@gmail.com](mailto:aureliaspanttrygarden@gmail.com)

*This month's Project Garden authors are Mary Sodbinow and Theresa Smith. Mary, Lifetime Master Gardener, is the Project Co-manager of Aurelia's Garden in Medway. Mary has volunteered at several gardens that welcome Master Gardeners but is especially interested in growing vegetables for the local food pantry at Aurelia's in Medway. Theresa Smith was certified in 2019. Theresa transferred to the Western Massachusetts Master Gardener program in 2022 but continues to volunteer in Aurelia's Garden in Medway and also Fisher House Hospice in Amherst, a WMMGA project garden.*

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### **Our mission**

Aurelia's Garden is a community of passionate and dedicated volunteers growing fresh and nutritious produce to donate to people in need to address local food insecurity.



### **A brief history**

Aurelia's Garden was founded in early 2020 just as the Covid-19 pandemic was beginning to severely impact the world. Four women recognized the impact the pandemic was having on food security, and set out to create a 100% volunteer-run, organically-grown farm that donates its produce to local food relief

organizations. In June, 2020, Aurelia's Garden was granted 501(c)(3) nonprofit status.

The first year saw a tiny team of volunteers breaking ground on two plots in the greater Boston area — one in Wayland on privately owned land and one at the Medway Community Farm. To the south, volunteers in Medway began growing on a 35x50' plot (now 45x75'). To the north, we worked on a 100x100' plot on a 2 acre field in Wayland, the use of which was donated to us by its owner. That first year, the organization donated over 2,000 pounds of food and raised over \$25,000 to support the fledgling organization.

### **Our name**

Before Aurelia's Garden was founded, many of the current members worked together at a different organization growing food and learning about sustainability. Hannah Traggis had a work golf cart decorated with dried flowers, and a praying mantis took up residence in the cart for the whole of a summer. She was named Aurelia after a basil variety that the group was trialing that year for downy mildew resistance. The mantis became the mascot for the group that summer, representing the way that humans can support nature in ecologically minded farming, and how nature can help farmers combat pests without chemicals. Aurelia sparked many conversations about sustainability, integrated pest management, ecologically minded farming, and growing in concert with the

natural world. We decided to honor what Aurelia taught us about cohabitating with nature by naming our project Aurelia's Garden.

### **Where we are in 2024**

In the four years since its founding, Aurelia's Garden has expanded tremendously.

In Medway, Aurelia's Garden has partnered with the Medway Community Farm (MCF) which has generously provided Aurelia's Garden with growing space, tools, vegetable washing facilities and refrigerated storage space. The Medway volunteer team has been primarily Massachusetts Master Gardeners but is also open to volunteers from the community. The team practices no-till gardening and strives to continuously improve the soil's fertility with good gardening practices. In 2023, Aurelia's Garden received a grant from MMGA for a bunny fence, which was an enormous help in keeping growing veggies safe from critter nibbling. In 2024, the plan is to build on experiences from prior years by improving planting and harvesting strategies, and trying out new or improved seed varieties. We are grateful to Hannah Traggis, Aurelia's Garden President and Agricultural Director, to Todd Sandstrom, MCF Farmer Manager, and to Laura Bonitatibus, MCF Operations Manager for all their horticultural advice and assistance. From spring seed starting to the last fall harvest, we are all working together to grow gorgeous vegetables for our neighbors in need.



In Wayland, the growing space has expanded from 0.25 acres to over 1.5 acres on privately owned and donated land. The agroecological farming practices give back to the land more than we take, building soil health and fostering greater stewardship of the land in harmony with nature. We have built an electric deer fence, a storage shed, a shade pavilion, and a wash-pack station with a solar powered water filtration system. Our volunteer team has grown to a core group of 15 people, with many more people volunteering through the Massachusetts Master Gardeners. We are grateful to Mike Patterson for his generous donation of his land for us to grow produce for our local communities in need.



### **Where we donate our harvest**

In Medway, Aurelia's Garden donates to the Medway Food Pantry at Mahan Circle, the Medway Village Church and the Medway House Family Shelter. The Medway Food Pantry at Mahan Circle serves 75-100 people a week, The Village Church Pantry serves over 100 families a week, and the Medway House Family Shelter provides care for twelve families at all times.

In Wayland, Aurelia's Garden partners with Open Table of Maynard, MA, a strategic partner of the Greater Boston Food Bank, and with the Sudbury Food Pantry. Through these organizations, we donate to Middlesex County residents in need. Open Table serves 250 households a week through distributions and mobile programs, and the Sudbury Food pantry serves over 60 people weekly. In 2023, Aurelia's Garden began a partnership with La Collaborativa Food Pantry, and they distribute to over 3,000 families in Chelsea and the surrounding areas.

Both sites work closely with key organizations to grow crops that meet the needs of their clients. In Medway, with more limited growing space, we are focusing on maximizing production of the most popular vegetables requested by our Food Pantry partners. In Wayland, we grow and experiment with a diversity of crops. Many – such as African flint corn, Brazilian Jilo, papalo, lemon grass, ginger, turmeric, gongura (*Roselle hibiscus*), huacatay, and gandules – are usually not available in fresh markets but are highly valued by the various groups we serve.

It is our belief that everyone in the Commonwealth should have access to nutritious and locally grown food, and we embrace hope, community, volunteerism, gratitude, sovereignty, sustainability, and passion as we pursue our mission.

## *Garden Tip of the Month* **OLD SAYINGS MAKE BEST PRACTICES**

Gardening has many old sayings: “You don’t stop gardening when you get old; you get old when you stop gardening”...or...“A society grows great when old men (and women) plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in”...and...“The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second-best time is now” are just a few. While one might be tempted to dismiss these as merely “old sayings”, there are deeper roots involved. Are there some sayings that gardeners should follow that have scientific reasoning behind them? Yes.

### **First they sleep...**

When transplanting perennials, the saying goes, “the first year they sleep, the second year they creep and the third year they leap.” Not all plants follow this precisely, but there is a reason for the saying.



- The first year the perennial is planted, roots need to be established, water needs to be taken up, and the leaves go through the process of photosynthesis. The plant may bloom and leaf out a bit. The plant grows slowly; it “sleeps.”
- The second year the plant has overwintered, and the root system has developed more fully. The plant leafs out at the proper time, and buds and flowers develop at the proper time as opposed to growing in a greenhouse and being placed out for sale. The plants have begun to establish and are starting to grow into their full size. Thus, in the second year, they “creep” along.
- The third-year, plants tend to “leap.” The root system is established, their flowering is at its full potential, and the plant is achieving their expected growth. The small 4” pot of Shasta Daisy planted three years ago is now 18-24’ in diameter and has dozens of blooms. The third year– it “leaps.”

This old saying reminds gardeners to have patience, allow for growth when planting, and understand that root systems take time to establish.

### **Water the hole three times when planting**

When planting, watering is imperative. The saying goes “Water the Pot” and this is to make sure the plant’s root system is wet. This is especially important in mid-summer planting. Soaking the pot allows the roots to take up plenty of water.

“Water the Hole” means watering the planting hole to help the dampened root area maintain the moisture. In dry conditions, the moisture can be wicked away and into the surrounding soil. Watering allows the small feeder roots to easily start to grow into the surrounding area and establish the plant.



“Water the Planted Plant”: The final watering, when planting, is about watering in and settling the soil. Roots cannot grow in voids; this watering helps with better soil-to-root contact.

This “old saying” reminds gardeners to remember the importance of watering when trying to help roots establish.

### Pinch back three times by the fourth of July

Tall, late season herbaceous perennials often get leggy and some will even flop. “Pinching back” means you remove the soft growing tips of the plants, which encourages a short, bushy plant not prone to flopping. It also produces more flowers. Many small growing tips are “pinched out” three times before the beginning of July, producing later blooming and a stocky plant.



There is another one-chop method, known as the “Chelsea Chop”. The Chelsea Chop is a one-time cut of tall or floppy perennials at the end of May, just after the Chelsea Flower Show in England. *Symphyotrichum* (New England asters), *Helenium*, *Helianthus* (perennial sunflowers), *Hylotelephium* (formerly known as Sedum), *Achillea* (Yarrow), *Monarda* (Bee Balm), *Solidago* (Goldenrod), *Phlox paniculata*

(Summer Garden Phlox) are all plants that can benefit from such a chop. Both methods produce the same results— shorter, multi-branched, and multi-budded plants later in the season...and they don't flop!

Extra tip: The *Hylotelephium* (formerly known as Sedum) cuttings can be used to make more plants if using the “Chelsea Chop” method. Stick the tips into moist, warm soil and you will soon have new roots.

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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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## 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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## **Credits**

### **Featured Articles & Columns**

- "How To" by Madeline Chamberlain, Certified Master Gardener and Susan Cormier, Senior Principal Master Gardener
- "Native Shrub of the Month" by Hadley Berkowitz, Principal Master Gardener
- Featured MMGA Garden by Mary Sodbinow, Lifetime Master Gardener
- "Monthly Gardening Tip" by Kathi Gariepy, Lifetime Master Gardener, lecturer and writer on gardening topics.

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

- Apple blossoms, Lynne Larson, PMG
- Green donut hole, Fine Gardening, Mark Dwyer
- Spade in perennial, nboldblog.files.wordpress
- Iris clump, Lorna Kring
- Virginia sweetspire, both pictures, North Carolina State Univ. Extension
- Watering Hole, Royal City Nursery
- Chelsea chop, Gardener's World
- Aurelia's Garden, three pictures from Aurelia's garden staff
- Echinacea, Lynne Larson, PMG
- 2024 Earth Day AAMGA table, Carol Collier, CMG
- Native columbine, Old Farmer's Almanac

### **Editorial Staff:**

- Executive Editor: Susan Cormier, SPMG
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- Circulation: Nancy Kedersha, PMG and Brenda Yaffe, CMG.



## 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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