



Gardening Resources & Tips from the MMGA

May 2026 *Queen of Months*



Gardeners burst into the month of May like children liberated by an afternoon school bell! Boots, gloves, hats, trowels ...we are surrounded by tools and dirt and plants and couldn't be happier. That light green in the trees, those prized seedlings, that warmer sun...they are the chorus that introduces May, **queen of months**, who declares that the time is young and our gardens are



full of promise. In this issue, we explore the promise in school gardens and new generations, and how old favorites like hollyhock (*Alcea rosea*) keeps us connected to a rich botanical history. Speaking of history, take note of our new book feature, where we introduce a classic meant for every gardener's bookshelf.

In this month's issue of *The Dirt*...

- Featured Garden: Worcester School Gardens teach students about horticulture and provide for a community!
- Featured How-To: Want a majestic garden? Add hollyhock!
- New Feature, the Dirt Book Review: Stroll down a delightful garden path with Beverly Nichols!

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2026 Massachusetts Gardening Symposium

Presented by the Massachusetts Master Gardener Association

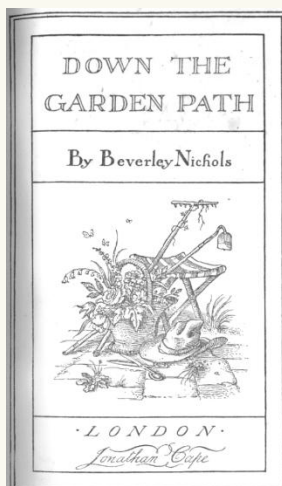
Celebrate 10 Years of Growing Together!

Join us for the MMGA's 10th Anniversary Massachusetts Gardening Symposium—a special milestone event you won't want to miss!

The Symposium will be held on **September 26, 2026** at Bentley University (Waltham, MA), from 8am to 4pm. This year's theme, "Reimagining the Garden from the Ground Up," invites gardeners, designers, and nature enthusiasts alike to explore fresh ideas shaping the future of our landscapes, large and small. Our selection of speakers will highlight areas of soil science, adaptability and sustainability, and elements of design, promising new knowledge, meaningful connections, and plenty of inspiration:

- Kirsten Kurtz, "The Science Behind Healthy Soil"
- Stephen Orr, "The Gardener's Mindset: Lessons Learned from Four Gardens"
- Page Dickey, "Garden Design with an Ecological Slant"
- Panel discussion featuring all three speakers with your curated questions!

Please save the date and look for the registration announcement opening June 1, 2026.



New Dirt Feature: Gardening Book Reviews

The editorial team at the Dirt is excited to introduce our new feature— gardening book reviews! Our plan is to share beloved, informative, and unique texts on a wide range of garden topics.

After a day (or an hour or a minute) of garden toil, what better way to reward oneself than to sit among your hard-earned botanical wonders, iced tea in one hand and fascinating book in another! We hope you love it!

Down the Garden Path by Beverly Nichols Reviewed by Madeline Chamberlain, SPMG

This 1932 classic is a cozy delight from a much simpler time. Join Nichols as he navigates the planning of his first country garden, purchased by telegram during a stormy night at sea.

Long an appreciator of gardens, Nichols had yet to garden on his own on a large scale until his purchase of the Tudor-era house named Thatch Cottage (though, he refers to it as Allways in the book). His enthusiasm for plants is charming and he has a knack for looking in a new way at the botany that we all take for granted. He is positively wide-eyed at the notion of vegetative propagation: “Do you not realize that the whole thing is miraculous? It is exactly as though you were to cut off your wife’s leg, stick it in the lawn, and be greeted on the following day by an entirely new woman, sprung from the leg, advancing across the lawn to meet you” (147-148). Sure, we do cuttings all the time, but he’s right; it is kind of magical.



Thatched Cottage. The house that Nichols bought in 1928 in the village of Glaston. <http://sawtry.co.uk>



Nichols has big garden plans— and the money to pull it off— but of course, it doesn't all come to fruition. Every gardener will see a part of themselves as Nichols buys a cartload of mushroom spawn to unsuccessfully cultivate in his fields, only to find them growing most successfully on the brick floor of his garage. And every gardener will see themselves as Nichols delights in the discovery that Mrs. M of the maddeningly always-perfect garden has secretly been planting hothouse-grown flowers.

Nichols's book is full of hope and humor, and a little snark to liven it all up. Bucolic illustrations by Rex Whistler round out the package.

During his life, **Beverley Nichols** was famous for his plays and his weekly magazine columns in *Woman's Own* and the *Sunday Chronicle*. Today, he's more famous for his numerous (14!) garden books...and every one I've read is a delight.

This book is perfect spring reading, and we recommend it for your garden book collection. Curious? Learn more about Nichols and *Down the Garden Path* [here](#).





Massachusetts Master
Gardener Association Presents

Summer Gardening Know-How

Topics Include

- Good Bugs and Bad Bugs
- Vegetables for Everyone
- Establishing a Home Herb Garden
- Landscaping Basics

Join us ONLINE

May 6th, 13th and 27th and June 3rd

7-8:30 PM

Registration closes May 3rd, 2026

To learn more and sign up, click to
visit our website. Questions? Email us
at knowhow@massmastergardeners.org

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Featured Monthly Garden

**Growing Together:
Inside Worcester's School Gardens**

Regional Environmental Council

108 Beacon Street
Worcester, MA 01608

<https://www.recworchester.org/school-gardens>

Contributing authors include Tracy Andryc (REC), and Massachusetts Master Gardeners Lisa Bruce (CMG), Ellen Ferrante (LMG), Ken Gillon (PMG), Glenn Hong (PMG), and Jennifer Rowe-Mitchell (LMG).

During the 2023 spring semester, the Massachusetts Master Gardener Association (MMGA) in the Central Massachusetts Region launched a pilot program with the **Regional Environmental Council (REC)**, supporting two Worcester Public School sites. By April 2026, the collaboration has expanded to five schools and engages students in grades 2–12. In addition to the students, the project welcomes staff, families, and neighbors in growing vegetables, herbs, fruit, and flowers.



This partnership grew from earlier conversations that revealed a shared vision. While a MMGA student in 2022, Ellen Ferrante met Worcester Mayor Joseph Petty to explore ways to expand access to community gardens. After visiting sites across the city, she connected with REC, an organization already committed to addressing food insecurity. REC and MMGA had each considered collaboration prior to the pandemic, and the timing was right. By combining REC’s relationships

with Worcester Public Schools and MMGA’s horticultural expertise, we created a model that brings educators, students, and community members together to grow and learn.

Founded in 1972, REC has become a leader in food justice, working to ensure equitable access to healthy food and green spaces. Its UGROW Community and School Gardens Network now supports more than 85 gardens citywide, serving as outdoor classrooms and sources of fresh, culturally relevant food. Additional initiatives - including Youth GROW and mobile farmers markets - expand food access, empower young people, and strengthen community connections across Worcester.



MMGA and REC have established a working relationship in a formal agreement which is renewed annually. It includes not only Master Gardeners volunteering in designated public-school gardens but also MMGA Speaker Bureau presentations, AAMG tables at public events, REC grant applications to MMGA, and winter fruit tree pruning in REC gardens.



The Master Gardeners volunteering at the school gardens have recognized the challenge across school gardens of aligning harvest time with the academic calendar. Often crops planted in spring are ready during summer, when students are not in school. To address this, five MG project managers are focusing on early-season crops harvested before June, followed by late-season plantings for September. This approach requires summer

maintenance such as planting, watering, and weeding which is carried out by MG volunteers.

Each MG gardening session begins with a short, research-based lesson aligned with the day's activities. Topics include plant growth, life cycles, soil health, composting, mulching, insect identification, invasive species management, seed saving, and seasonal preparation. Volunteers may teach from lesson plans, support student teams, develop materials, or help maintain gardens during summer months.

Students develop observation, research, and teamwork skills while exploring connections between gardening and broader issues such as climate change, pollinator health, composting, and food systems. The program aims to inspire a lifelong appreciation for gardening.





North High School Garden – Ken Gillon, PM

For the past three years, Master Gardeners have worked with 20–30 students twice weekly at North High School, supporting juniors and seniors in Urban Agriculture and Life Skills classes. The MG project features ten raised beds, a pollinator garden, fruit trees, a composting system, and an area of invasive knotweed that students manage through removal and solarization. Recently added outdoor learning tables provide space for collaboration.

Clark Street Community School – Jennifer Rowe-Mitchell, PM

At Clark Street Community School, Master Gardeners support a weekly after-school Garden Club of 10–12 students in grades 4–6. Students participate in planting, maintaining, and harvesting crops across raised beds and melon and gourd patches, as well as maintaining a pollinator garden, fruit trees, and raspberry canes. Perennials and bulbs are also planted at the school entrance. Over the summer, MG volunteers maintain the garden and donate produce to local food banks.

Dual Language Magnet School – Lisa Bruce and Glenn Hong, PMs

The Dual Language Magnet School program takes place at the teaching garden at Worcester State University. The site includes 24 raised beds, in-ground plots, fruit trees, flowers, a raspberry patch, a hoop house, compost systems, and water sources. This program serves 4th–6th grade students through collaboration between MMGA, WSU, and REC. Lessons have included plant structure, leaf changes, annuals versus perennials, and scavenger hunts. In fall 2025, students helped plant a native species garden. The 2026 theme, “up and out,” will emphasize vertical growing and sharing produce before summer break.

Goddard School of Science and Technology and New Citizen Center – Ellen Ferrante, PM

At the Goddard School, MG volunteers recently helped revitalize a raised bed garden with 5th graders and will expand programming this spring to include 2nd graders. The newest site, the New Citizen Center, serves newly arrived students in Worcester who are building language and cultural skills before transitioning to neighborhood schools.

MG volunteer hours take place on Tuesdays and Thursdays, with three gardens scheduled each day. Participants may rotate among sites, contributing up to five hours on Tuesdays and six on Thursdays. Opportunities are available for both Certified Master Gardeners and current students. We invite community members to join us in supporting Worcester students through school gardens—helping to grow food, knowledge, and connections throughout the year.



Featured How-To **Hollyhocks: Joy and Heartbreak**

Author Rick Charnes (PMG) graduated from the MMGA program in 2016. He maintains a garden filled with hardy chrysanthemums that bloom beautifully in October. He works professionally as a gardener and lately has been learning the fine craft of whole-grain sourdough baking. He solicits comments and discussion about this article at rick.thedirt@icloud.com



What, besides tall delphiniums, are as glorious and statuesque as hollyhocks? In late summer, especially when they are growing together in a small patch, when they spread their flower stalks tall and wide, opening their large blooms of red and pink and white, there is not a more magnificent sight. I've been growing hollyhocks (*Alcea* sp.) for ten years, and when they're doing well, they bring the majesty of your garden to another level. They've been an

iconic feature of English cottage gardens for hundreds of years, though they're native to China and Central Asia and came to the west in the 15th and 16th centuries via the Middle East and Turkey. There's disagreement about the origin of the name; some accounts say it's derived from "holy" and "hock" from the Anglo-Saxon hoc relating to their association with the Holy Land and their use in treating the "hocks" of horses, possibly by crusaders coming home. But others say that it's from the Old English hoc/hocke, meaning mallow, since it's a member of the mallow family (*Malvaceae*).

Whatever their origin, a large hollyhock in full bloom can be breathtaking. There are several different species: The most common is *Althea rosea*, but *A. ficifolia* (fig-leaved) and *A. rugosa* (wrinkled), the Russian Yellow Hollyhock, are grown as well (see above).

Hollyhock is technically a biennial, putting up a beautiful rosette of large palmate leaves the first year, going dormant at the end of the season, returning the second year to put up its flower stalk, and then dying after the second season. Breeders, however, have found a way to turn some cultivars into 'short-lived perennials', and I've gladly gotten a second and even third year of flowering from some of those, and even from some plants grown from seeds. I grow most of my hollyhocks from seed which I start indoors in February or March, but plants are commonly available at nurseries which can be put in the garden either in May or early fall.



I have had some real success with hollyhock, an incredibly satisfying experience. They are among the most beautiful plants I've ever grown, maybe—dare I say it?—on a par with tall delphiniums. The colors are magnificent, and the form is architectural. They bloom over a long season, and in an irregular and somewhat

random growth pattern, which is interesting to watch. It's also fun to guess where the next flower will emerge!

The first hollyhock I ever grew, in 2018, is one of the oldest cultivars, called 'Nigra', with deep burgundy flowers. You can see from the picture what made me initially fall in love with them.



Here's a beauty called "Crème de Cassis". The name refers to a deep purple liqueur made from black currants.



I could only fall on my knees before this white cultivar I grew in 2021. The deeply palmate leaves tell you it's *A. ficifolia*.



Note the elegance of this pink...

...and the irregularity of the bloom placement on this red.

But I've also had bad years, and last year was the nadir for my suffering. In the spring I was brimming with enthusiasm and envisioned filling half of my largest garden bed with hollyhock plants. The seedlings I started inside looked excellent and I planted them out. In May and June, they were coming along nicely—in fact the rabbits in my neighborhood seemed to like them as much as I did. Since my garlic-and-rotten-eggs rabbit repellent sprays seemed to be losing their effectiveness, I learned very quickly how to make chicken-wire cloches which worked well. Then a greater enemy appeared, one that I had never learned to conquer: rust.

Beautiful hollyhocks dance gracefully into your life with one danger that anyone who has attempted to grow them quickly learns about: a fungus called **Hollyhock Rust (*Puccinia malvacearum*)**. The rust is specific to members of the Mallow family (Malvaceae), so it won't spread to plants of any other family. *A. ficifolia* and *A. rugosa* are said to be more resistant to rust, but I've seen rust on both of those species.



When it strikes, you begin to understand that for all their beauty, hollyhocks present a facade of composure and grandeur that sometimes masks a disease lurking beneath the surface. The rust is pernicious, difficult to avoid, and often deadly. It starts out as yellow spots on the upper leaf surface and orange-brown

pustules on the underneath. The lants start off beautifully, looking healthy in June and early July. Then one day the rust appears on their bottom leaves, and soon more leaves are covered, and then everything you do to rescue the plant only leaves you gasping with dismay.

The usual recommendation is to remove those bottom leaves and toss them in the trash (not the compost pile). Sometimes that works and puts an end to the problem, and at other times, a week later, the rust shows up on a leaf above. Various measures are recommended to avoid this: ensure airflow between plants; remove all infected debris on the surface of the soil; water only at ground level; spray early with fungicides such as sulfur and copper-based sprays; and more. I can't say that any of these remedial measures has consistently worked for me.



I'd like to be able to say I found something that worked last year, but a successful resolution of the struggle against rust eluded me. Roughly two-thirds of my plants succumbed to the fungus. Reflecting on the season, I still can't say I know why last year's flowers did so poorly compared to any previous years. My cultural practices were the same as seasons when I had no or little rust. After all this, I've developed a very unscientific and un-gardenerlike attitude in believing that

either the hollyhocks goddesses favor you or they don't.

I do have three or four plants that are currently coming back for their second or third season of flowering, i.e. their third and fourth year of growth. I'll carefully nurture these and will celebrate where I can, but I will wait until next year to start any new plantings. Hope lives on!

Seasonal MMGA Learning Resources

Ask us your questions in person! Trained volunteers staff Ask-a-Master-Gardener (AAMG) tables at dozens of events throughout the growing season.

- The AAMGA is coming to a community near you, so check our [AAMG Calendar](#) for dates and times.
- Belong to a local organization that would like to host an AAMG? Contact

Outreach@MassMasterGardeners.org

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



- Visit a soil testing clinic near you: [Soil Testing Calendar](#).
- To request an MMGA Soil Testing event for your organization's event, contact SoilTesting@MassMasterGardeners.org

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 at MHSHelpline@MassMasterGardeners.org
- New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill 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.

Credits

Featured Articles & Columns

- Featured Book Review: Madeline Chamberlain, SPMG
- Featured Garden: Tracy Andryc (REC), and Massachusetts Master Gardeners Lisa Bruce PMG, Ellen Ferrante LMG, Ken Gillon SPMG, Glenn Hong PMG, and Jennifer Rowe-Mitchell LMG
- Featured How-To: Rick Charnes, CMG

Pictures (in order of appearance)

- Books, Apple Blossom: Lynne Larson, PMG
- Worcester School pictures: Ellen Ferrante LMG, Ken Gillon, SPMG
- Hollyhocks: Rick Charnes, CMG
- Rust on hollyhock: Missouri Botanical Garden
- Apple Blossom: 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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