

HOMEGARDEN

Winter's Damage: All May Not Be Lost

BY GINNY SMITH

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PHILADELPHIA — This week, two things became clear.

One, spring is close — just days away. We know that because the temperature is inching up, the days are growing longer, the snow is gone.

Which brings us to Point No. 2: We have a boatload of yard work to do. As if we didn't have enough to clean up, the winter's snow drop, almost 80 inches, caused a huge amount of tree damage.

It's comparable to what occurs when we have a hurricane, says Christopher C. Palmer, director of operations and landscape management for Fairmount Park.

After one particularly wet and heavy snow last month, the city had more than 300 calls for street-tree emergencies, compared with about 10 for a typical snowstorm. "The largest storm event for trees in a lot of years," Palmer says.

Jennifer Stillabower's 25-foot cypress took a major hit, and a bunch of 6-foot junipers were totally smashed. "I have more cleanup than I ever thought possible," she says.

But Stillabower, who lives on 1 1/4 partially wooded acres in Wilmington, plans to put the destruction to constructive use. Once the ruined trees and widowed branches are cut up and removed, she'll add them to a brush pile in the woods that provides shelter and food for wildlife.

"I'm a big believer in providing habitat," says Stillabower, who was so concerned about birds during the storms, she dug a trench through the snow to her bird feeder so she could keep it filled with seeds.

That's the sort of ingenuity Drew Gilchrist likes to see.



Bob Anderson, Director of Physical Facilities, walks the grounds at the Morris Arboretum in Philadelphia, Penn., Monday, March 8, 2010. The trees and property at Morris Arboretum suffered damage from the wind and snowstorms this winter.

Turns out, Gilchrist, director of the Center for Conservation Landowners of the Natural Lands Trust in Media, Pa., has a brush pile, too. "It's a wonderful thing for wildlife," he says.

Brush piles offer cover for chipmunks, rabbits, and birds. Insects, which feed many crea-

tures, make cavities in the rotting wood, which in turn draws frogs.

Gilchrist suggests putting the pile on the edge of the woods, placing larger branches on the bottom and smaller ones on top. It's more visually appealing and "the smaller brush acts like a roof. This way, the pile won't col-

lapse on itself," he says.

And don't worry about attracting termites or large animals. "These creatures are not to be feared. These are not things that will attack you or your house," Gilchrist says.

Downed branches also make good kindling, firewood, and wood chips, which can be aged

to use later as mulch or path-covers.

For most of us, the storm's legacy is about common players in the landscape — trees that have what arborists call "sail," as in ship's sail, meaning leaves or needles, often in a horizontal growth habit, that catch wind and collect snow.

Good examples are hemlock, Southern magnolia, cypress, and especially Eastern white pine, which has weak wood and brittle branches and makes up most of what arborist Scott Lussier has been called about this winter.

"They snap easily. Anybody who has a pine will tell you every winter they see a lot of branches on the ground," says Lussier, owner of Oakwood Tree Care Professionals in Willow Street, Pa.

For trees that may be severely bent over, but haven't snapped — white birch, Japanese maple, arborvitae, Leyland cypress — Lussier suggests patience, not necessarily pruning.

"I've seen some that come back in spring. They pop right up," he says. "I've also seen some that have not. It's really hard to say."

If you see few or no intact roots, your flopper is probably a loss, Lussier says. If, however, you see a large soil mass on the roots, pull the tree back up and stake it with guy-wires for two or three growing seasons. It should grow back.

Steve Shreiner of Shreiner Tree Care in King of Prussia says many ornamental plants in home gardens — rhododendrons, azaleas, camellias, boxwood, cherry laurels — have taken a pounding this winter, too. "It's so sad. I don't even want to look," he says.

But all may not be lost. "Certain species will respond and regenerate if you cut the entire plant back in March or April," says Shreiner, who has some other advice that may prove harder for gardeners to take:

Go slow. Wait and see how your plant responds to the winter's trauma. "Mother Nature does a beautiful job," he says.

Edible Gardens Sprouting Up All Over

BY FRED ORTLIP

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ST. LOUIS — People are eating up the idea of growing their own food. Economic hard times have sent millions of Americans foraging for ways to eat more economically, and they're doing it by growing their own edibles.

A survey by the Garden Writers Association Foundation found the growing of edibles boomed last year, with more than 7 million of the 41 million U.S. households new to vegetable gardening. The survey found 37 percent of households planned to increase their edible gardens this year.

"Last year it was huge, a 50 percent increase over the year before," said Steffie Littlefield, garden designer and assistant manager at Garden Heights Nursery in Richmond Heights, Mo.

Nurseries are responding to the demand by boosting not only their vegetable, fruit and herb inventory but also their related products, such as seeds and seed starting kits and organic soil amendments, fertilizers and insect control products.

Residents are finding creative ways to grow their own, not only by building raised garden beds but also by using containers to make the most of small spaces in apartments and condos.

"Growing your own herbs is a huge savings, and people are growing them in containers because they're cooking more at home and are more cognizant of what they need," Littlefield said. "People are looking for those unusual things they can't buy in the grocery store but enjoy in a restaurant."

Decks and patios are becoming popular places to put containers to grow fruit, such as blueberries and raspberries. Another alternative to traditional beds is square foot gardening, in which vegetable plants are massed tightly in a small space.

Ellen Barredo, horticultural manager at Bowood Farms in St. Louis, said among vegetables, tomato growing is most popular while basil is the most popular herb. She said emerging trends are gardening under lights, food preservation and home gardening for brewers.

Jennifer Schamber, general manager at Greenscape Gardens in West County, Mo., says a new gourmet cherry tomato, Tomaccio — called sweet raisin tomato — should be in demand because of its taste and high yield.

Meanwhile, nurseries are responding to the interest in edibles by providing additional support in the form of handouts, books and on-site classes.

FIND A SUNNY SPOT

So about that garden. Where to start?

—Identify an area with plenty of sun, preferably at least six hours — and less may be OK in afternoon exposure.

—Raised bed gardening is popular and can boost yield because amending the native, clay-based soil with organic matter improves the growing environment.

—Pressure-treated lumber is often used to build the borders. This rot-resistant product no longer contains arsenic, but gardeners concerned about leaching of the chemical content can play it safe by using an impervious liner to wrap the wood. More expensive natural wood options are redwood, cypress and red cedar, which are rot-resistant.

—A typical raised bed kit might contain a plastic composite that resembles cedar. Some gardeners even get a rise out of using stones as a border.

BUILDING A NEW BED

Roxanne and Dave Oesch dismantled several smaller raised beds in the backyard of their Kirkwood home and built a 32-by-13-foot bed surrounded by fencing to deter critters.

Like a lot of St. Louisans who live in established areas where trees provide some shade, the Oesches finesse some of their plantings.

"Even if you have part sun, you can still sort of cheat on some things because not all plants want the heat," Roxanne Oesch said. "I was able to grow some wonderful arugula in the fall of last year, and I put it back in a shadier spot because it wants it cooler."

Plants grown in less sun may not perform at their peak, but "as long as they have enough energy to flower and you have pollination, part sun's OK," she said, adding experimentation often produces at least one byproduct — discouragement.

Experienced gardeners emphasize the importance of soil for growing success. This means incorporating broken down plant material, which feeds microbes that produce nutrients in the soil. Compost "helps retain water because of the texture that broken-down material gets — it really helps hold on to water so the soil doesn't dry out as quick, which is important in the summer, and it's easier for roots to grow deeper."

Soil amendments are sold in bags and by the cubic yard. Or they can be homemade.

"We have a giant compost pile, and we've been known to collect other people's lawn and leaf bags on Sunday night," Oesch said. "That's what we did for this garden — stole other people's leaves and grass clippings. So A, we get free lawn bags and B we had a 2-foot pile of organic matter when we started our big bed."

BY MARY BETH BRECKENRIDGE

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SHARON TOWNSHIP, Ohio — To say Jim May built his own house doesn't quite do the project justice.

With help from his family, May built the whole house, right down to milling the oak woodwork, building the paneled doors and casting the concrete pavers for the walkway and front porch. The only exceptions were a few jobs he either didn't have the credentials to perform or for which he couldn't get the necessary equipment or supplies.

May, 58, is not a home builder by trade. He's a retired NASA electrical engineer with a handy streak and a voracious curiosity. He managed to earn a master's and doctorate in structural engineering at the same time he was building the house, just because he had an interest in the subject.

His wife, Sharon, said he has more perseverance than anyone she knows. That's a useful trait when you spend more than a decade on a project, most of the time while you're living in it.

For May, building the house was just a drive.

"You get this bug," he said. "For some reason, building a house was a challenge I wanted. It's like going mountain climbing. At least he knew what he was getting into. He'd already built a house in Dayton, Ohio, while he was working at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base.

The project began with May designing the structure, based on a set of architectural plans he modified to include ideas gathered from a number of places. Ground was broken in July 1998.

The house still isn't complete — "Is a house ever finished?" Sharon May asked rhetorically — but any unfinished elements in the main living quarters are unnoticeable to anyone but her husband.

The 2,500-square-foot house is a modified New England saltbox, clad in sugar maple that Jim May ordered from a sawmill in Vermont. He and his sons, Kyle and Ryan, primed both sides of every board before installing them — 1 1/2 miles' worth of clapboards, he noted.

The house sits on 1 1/2 wooded acres and has a cozy, traditional feel. The floors are covered in gleaming oak and the Vermont slate that Sharon May amassed in bits and pieces from sources



Jim, right, and Sharon May, pictured March 1, 2010, stand in the doorway of the master bedroom in the saltbox house that May, a retired electrical engineer, built by himself with the help of his two sons, Kyle and Ryan in Sharon Twp., Ohio.

throughout Ohio. The walls are adorned with deep oak baseboards and dentil crown molding, all of which Jim May fashioned. A central chimney rises through the structure, its brick face forming a wall of the winding staircase.

The heart of the house is the kitchen, warmed by a wood stove and the oak cabinets Jim May built with his usual attention to detail. He lined the bottom of every drawer and cupboard with Formica to make them easier to wipe clean, and he even measured the spice containers so they would fit precisely in a nook in the kitchen island.

The island's Corian top was one of the few elements he couldn't fabricate himself. The materials aren't available to do-it-yourselfers, he explained.

The only other jobs he subcontracted were the installation of the septic system (he changed his mind about getting licensed for the work after the codes were changed while he was preparing for the test), the punching of a hole in the ground for the well and the installation of the casing (he and his sons installed the

rest) and the installation of a Nature Stone floor in the basement workout area (he couldn't get the materials).

He also had a contractor spray a waterproofing membrane on the outside of the foundation, but it leaked. That chapter ended with his having to dig all the dirt away from the foundation walls so the work could be redone.

Those subcontracted jobs were rare exceptions to what was overwhelmingly a do-it-yourself project. Jim May and his sons even rebuilt an old backhoe to use during construction and constructed a freestanding workshop. A sign next to the door reads, "Boys (No Girls Allowed)."

It wasn't an all-male project, however. "I carried my share of block and mixed my share of mortar," said Sharon May, 49.

And it was her patience that made the project possible, her husband was quick to note. When the family moved in, about 3 1/2 years into the construction in February 2002, the kitchen was a shell and the house had only one working bathroom. The family cooked with a microwave and a

toaster oven and did dishes in a tub in the basement.

Some of the skills Jim May needed for the project were picked up from his handy father and from decades of building things, starting with clubhouse when he was a kid. Others he learned by studying and doing.

"It required a lot of reading — and a lot of trial and error and redos," he said with a laugh. The project wasn't without its trials. One of the biggest was when everyone broke out in severe rashes after coming into contact with poison ivy roots while digging a trench for the gas and electric lines.

Flexibility was another challenge, Jim May said. He often found himself having to shift priorities, dropping one project to pick up another that needed to be done faster.

But he said the hardest parts were staying motivated and trying to keep from feeling overwhelmed.

He learned to focus on the task at hand and not get distracted by everything that lay ahead. And he forced himself to press on, even on the days he didn't want to.

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