

Trowel Talk

January 15 2022, Vol 13, no. 1

Seed Catalogues

Judith Cox

Outside it is cold, dark, and windy. Inside, the fire crackles in the woodstove and the cats lie about contentedly, basking in the warmth. I am comfortable; a sheet of fresh, lined paper, a collection of pens, highlighters, and sticky tabs beside me on one side and a pile of seed catalogues on the other. It is time to start planning the upcoming garden season.

In my opinion, seed catalogues are an undervalued resource. They have a great deal of information on many seeds and pictures so you can see what the plants will look like. I find it very exciting when the brightly coloured catalogues begin to arrive in the mail. While many people buy their seeds from an online catalogue, I prefer to hold the actual catalogue, cover it in notes and highlight areas of interest.

Don't go getting everything out of one seed catalogue! Most nurseries are online so you can see what they offer. Most will send you a seed catalogue if you ask for it. If you want further information, try **Seeds of Diversity's** Canadian Seed Catalogue Index (<https://seeds.ca/diversity/seed-catalogue-index/>). You'll find lots of interesting choices and ideas. Often, the best way to be introduced to seed catalogues is to go through one with a friend. You will find that all of your gardening

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Seed catalogues
Judith Cox



friends have a favourite catalogue.

When I get my seed catalogue, I go through it with my highlighter pen and sticky notes and write down all of the seeds that I would like to purchase. Naturally, I have a huge order that needs to be reduced until it is more reasonable.

If you have children or grandchildren, seed catalogues can be a great introduction to gardening. They also make great collage materials.

When you read your seed catalogue, you will notice that the listings for the seeds will have a lot of information: the proper botanical name of your seed will be listed along with whether it is an annual, perennial, or biennial plant. There will be a number of symbols, along with a description of the plant and growing instructions.

For example, a small sun shows whether the plant needs full or partial sunlight or is suitable for shade and a small skull will show that it is poisonous. In the vegetable section of the catalogue, the number of days to harvest should be listed, along with whether the vegetable is heirloom (heritage) or a hybrid. Heirloom plants are usually defined as those grown pre-war, or before 1945, without change. Each seed catalogue will have a key to their symbols, usually near the front or along the bottom of the page.

There are many seed catalogues to choose from and so I am listing a few good introductory catalogues that you can ask for online:

OSC (www.oscseeds.com) Ontario Seed Company is my personal favourite. I appreciate that the seeds that I am getting are grown near my area, prices are reasonable, and germination is excellent. These seeds are also available at your local nurseries. This company will sell out, so get your order in soon.

William Dam Seeds (www.damseeds.com) is a company that I use primarily because it has untreated seeds, not treated with chemicals or biological agents. I would like to switch over to untreated seed

Ask a Master Gardener

Compiled by Amanda Carrigan and Ann McQuillan

Master Gardeners answer helpline questions

I heard a mention of 'snow seeding' recently. Can you really plant seeds in snow?

Yes, you can plant seeds in snow. It may be referred to as winter sowing or snow seeding. It's not appropriate for all seeds – you won't be starting your vegetable garden in January. It's usually done with native plants and wildflowers which often need a cold period or freeze-thaw cycles to break dormancy and germinate.

Basically, you are giving them the same treatment that they have evolved to grow with in the wild. Some cool-season turfgrasses (like fescues and bluegrass) can also be snow seeded. Snow seeding involves scattering seeds on top of the snow cover in your garden. It's best done over soft, fresh snow as opposed to icy-crusting snow. Ideally, it can be done until end of February. By scattering seeds on softer snow, they are more likely to stay evenly dispersed. With some warmth from the sun, they will sink into the snow, helping to protect them from birds and rodents. As the snow melts, it will bring the seeds into contact with the soil where they can germinate.

You can use a similar idea for native wildflower seeds. Spread them on the surface of the soil in a pot or tray (with drainage holes), then place them outside in January and cover with snow.

I had a friend watering my plants while I was away recently, and some of them got overwatered. The soil is soggy and the plants don't look happy. Can they be saved? What do I do?

In most cases, you should be able to save them. First you want to get rid of the excess water, trying not to disturb the roots. If the pot has a drain hole,

exclusively someday.

Stokes Seeds (www.stokeseeds.com/ca) is a long-standing seed catalogue and they have increased their offerings of heritage seeds. It is easy to get a catalogue sent out to you or you can order online.

Veseys Seeds Ltd. (<https://www.veseys.com/ca/>) has a catalogue that comes to you several times a year with its tempting offers. It is out of Prince Edward Island. I find the seed germination to be good, but roots and tubers can be fragile. I have very good luck with the bulbs. You can order online as well.

Richters Herbs (www.richters.com) is a favourite of mine and I love that you can purchase actual plants as well as seeds. So many herbs!! Every year, I try a new sage and a new scented geranium. Their stock is excellent, and germination is very good. Beware! It is hard to resist the pages of amazing herbs. I always spend way too much. (Not sorry!)

Collect some seed catalogues for these cold dark days. They are like sunshine reminders of spring. 🌱

Amaryllis: The Holiday Herald

Denise Bonomo



Amaryllis
Kelly Noel

try putting it on something absorbent (such as paper towelling) to wick the water away. Check it at intervals and replace the absorbent material when it is saturated.

You can also try to carefully remove the root ball from the pot and blot up any excess water. Certainly, you will need to do this if the pot doesn't have a drain hole. In this case, replant it into a pot with a hole.

Take this opportunity to check if any roots seem to be rotting. If so, they will be dark and mushy, possibly smelling swampy. Cut them off, disinfecting tools before and after. Cut back any stems and foliage that are dead or diseased too.

When the plant is back in its pot, try to put it in a warm location with good air circulation. Avoid too much direct sunlight that could further stress the plant. Let it dry out a bit. Before resuming watering, return your plant to normal soil texture and dampness. 🌱

When it comes to festive plants, amaryllis is second only to the poinsettias for Canadian Christmas decorating. Their flowers come in a great variety of colours: red, pink, orange, white and bi-colours. Cultivars include miniatures, singles and double blooms with two to four flowers on each stalk.

Amaryllis belongs to the genus *Hippeastrum*, the name to look for if you are searching for bulbs in a horticultural catalogue. For unusual varieties, and to force blooms for December, this is the best source. Single, red Amaryllis bulbs are widely available in department and grocery stores in December. They make nice Christmas gifts. When started that late, they won't bloom until Valentine's Day.



Amaryllis
Rob Stuart

The first-year potting of the Amaryllis bulb is quite simple. Bulbs can be planted as singles or in groupings. If growing a grouping of bulbs, use a wider container ensuring that bulbs have about 2 cm of soil between them. Put some small rocks in the base of a 15-20 cm high ceramic container with drainage holes. This is preferable to the lightweight plastic pots that often accompany the bulb because the plant grows long stalks and can tip over if not well anchored. Put soil over the rocks and then add each bulb. Fill the container with more soil. Pack it firmly and stop once the bulb is covered to half its height. Water thoroughly with tepid water and place it in a warm, indoor location (low 20-24°C). Water it about once a week to keep the soil moist, not wet.

When new growth appears, the container should be moved to a sunny location and turned daily to keep the stalk growing straight. If the stem is allowed to lean, it may be necessary to stake it. Flowering usually takes six weeks to two months. When forcing the plant for Christmas, plant it around Canadian Thanksgiving. Once the trumpets open, move the plant out of direct sunlight to prolong the blooms.

Some people choose to cut the stems and put them in a tall vase. Treated in this manner, blooms usually last about three weeks. Be careful to cut the stalk about 5 cm above the bulb, leaving the leaves intact. The foliage is important to successfully produce future blooms.

After flowering, place the leafy bulb in full sun. Water whenever the soil is dry. A water-soluble fertilizer should be added every three weeks. When the risk of frost has passed, take the potted bulb outside to acclimatize it. Initially, place it in a shady to partly sunny location for 2-3 days. Remove the bulb from the pot. Gently wash the roots and plant it in a sunny location. Water to keep the soil moist, especially in July and August. Fertilize 1-2 times a month.

In early September, the plant should be potted up again and brought inside. Forcing the bulb to flower again requires attention to light and temperature. The bulb needs to go dormant for about 2 months. This requires a temperature of 10-12°C, little light and no water.

If you have one, the summer beer fridge can be repurposed into a plant nursery. Cut off the dried foliage when it has turned brown. Once the dormancy phase has been completed, bring the bulb container out into the light and care for it in the same manner you did when you originally got the bulb.

Amaryllis are a little fussy when it comes to seasonal light and temperature requirements but with fairly easy tending, they can gift you with fabulous bloom for the holidays year after year. 🌱

Understanding Soil

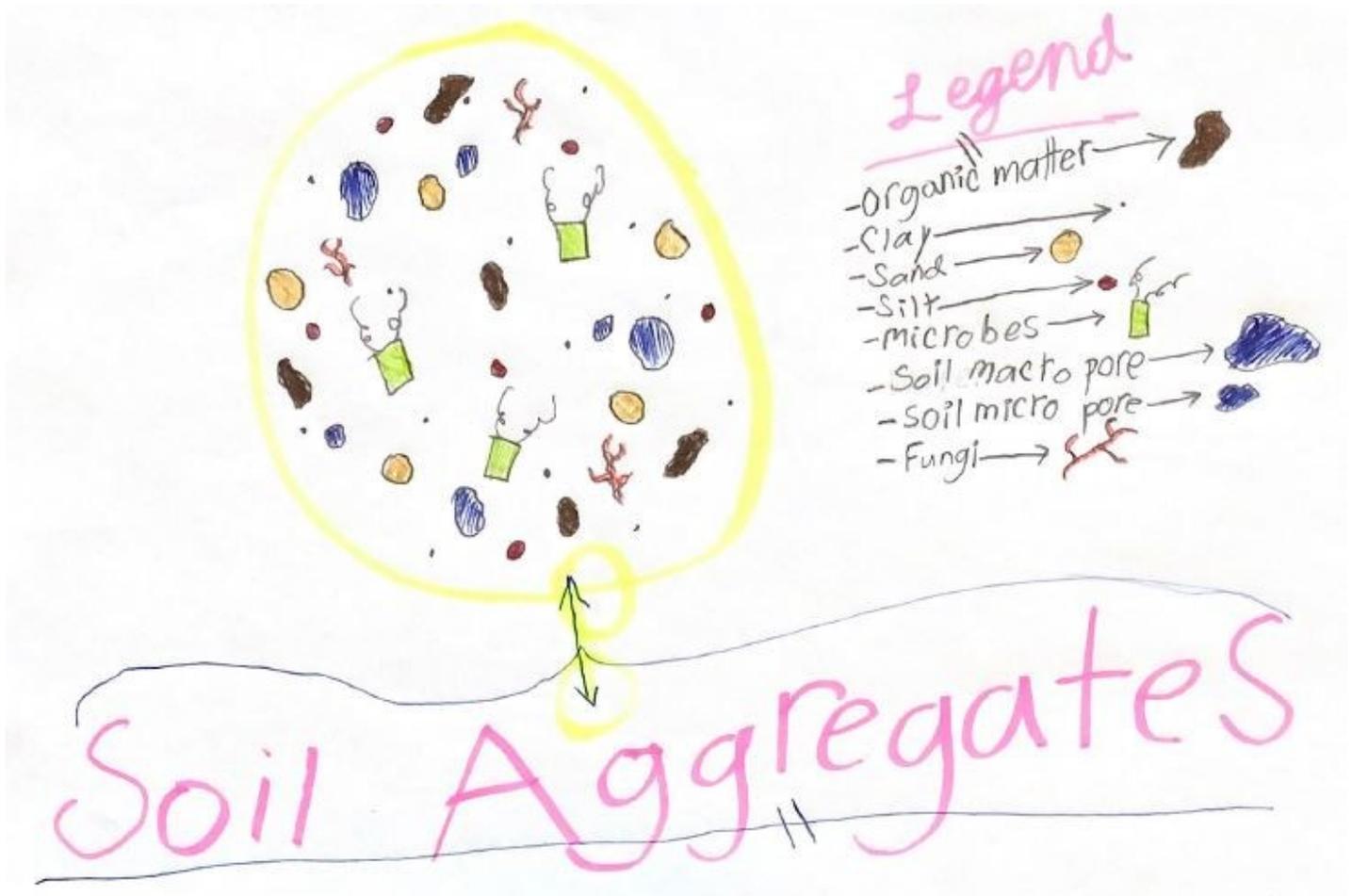
Barbara Long, illustrations Sloane F. Brookes, aged 8



We begin our study of what lies beneath our feet by looking at the five soil layers, also called horizons. From top to bottom we have: organic (leaf litter and humus), topsoil (minerals with humus), the leaching layer (sand and silt with very little minerals), subsoil (clay and minerals) and parent/bedrock material. Understanding more about these layers can help us grow healthy food and beautiful plants.

Think about a kitchen sponge; it is a flexible block of plastic with holes of various sizes that hold water. When garden soil has a structure like a sponge it can hold air, water and nutrients that plant roots can absorb over time as needed, and roots can move through it readily.

Aggregates and soil pores are terms we use when talking about soil structure and texture. A well-



aggregated soil is one that has lots of clumps (aggregates), composed of sand, silt, clay, organic material, fungi, mycorrhizae (more on this later), bacteria, water and air. Organic matter helps to form soil particles into aggregates. Aggregates have soil pores within them and between them. Large soil pores are called macropores that allow water to drain through the soil and provide air exchange; smaller ones, called micropores, hold water.

From gophers, snakes and mice to ants, beetles and earthworms, right down to tiny mites, springtails and amoeba, soil is teeming with a variety of animal life. Some aerate the soil by moving through it, improving drainage, while some digest and excrete waste that fertilizes the soil.

Microorganisms such as bacteria and fungi in the soil provide nutrients important to plants, such as nitrogen and phosphorous, by breaking down organic matter through decomposition.

Roots, mosses, algae, and mushrooms are types of soil flora that decompose over time as well, contributing to the nutrient mix.

As mentioned earlier, many types of fungi are present in soil. When plant roots absorb nutrients from the soil, some are aided in their work by these fungi. Beneficial fungi attach to the root hairs and create an additional web of threads out into the soil to collect water and nutrients for the plant. In return, the plant roots provide nourishment in the form of sugars to the fungi that don't have chlorophyll and so cannot make their own food through photosynthesis. This symbiotic relationship between roots and fungi is referred to as a mycorrhizal association.

To sum up, there is a lot going on down there!

No-Dig Gardening

Now that we understand more about the value of the intricate web of interconnectedness beneath our feet, we can make good decisions on how to main-

tain it when we garden. If we leave the soil undisturbed, the roots of the plants we grow will absorb more water and nutrients.

We are accustomed to practices such as tilling the soil and double-digging techniques for our gardens. Rethinking these practices to embrace a technique called 'No-dig gardening' is a huge topic that I will touch on briefly.

Basically, no-dig gardening means planting on top of the existing soil, lawn or garden. One technique is to place multiple layers of newspaper over the area and then cover it with several inches of organic matter such as wood chips, leaves and compost. Over a period of time, depending on a variety of factors, the newspaper layer will decompose and you can then plant directly into the organic matter. The roots of your plants will grow downwards through the newspaper layer into the undisturbed soil where it can benefit from the well-aggregated soil with its nutrients and mycorrhizal networks.

No-dig gardening takes more time at the front end of the process but is easier in successive years

since cultivating the soil each year before planting is not needed. When more organic matter is added each year, the layers below become richer with nutrients as rain carries them down by gravity.

The wide variety of fauna (worms, etc.) in the soil travel up to the organic matter and bring it down into the undisturbed soil to consume and excrete, thus releasing nutrients. This process also loosens up soils that may be heavy with clay (which can become waterlogged) and bulks up soils that are sandy (which drain water too quickly).

Another benefit of no-dig gardening is that the seed bank remains dormant. Millions of seeds exist in soil, some for decades. When they are exposed, germination can be triggered by moisture, air and sunlight. Many of these seeds are weeds, unwanted in our gardens. Using the no-dig gardening method saves time weeding.

I encourage you to look into how you could garden using the no-dig method to grow healthier plants, reduce your workload and keep the soil beneath our feet the way nature intended. 🌱

Charming a Snake Plant

Marion Runstedler

Dracaena trifasciata 'Laurentii', commonly known as snake plant or mother-in-law's tongue, is one of the most popular, easy-to-grow houseplants. It is an excellent choice for the beginner gardener because they are virtually indestructible.

Snake plants grows well in a container on a tabletop display or even on the floor. Its gorgeous long, stiff, swordlike leaves give it a unique appearance and character, adding a highlight to any room where it is placed.

Native to tropical Africa, it belongs to the asparagus family (Asparagaceae) and, until 2017, was classified as *Sansevieria trifasciata*. Using improved

DNA analysis, botanists found more commonality with the *Dracaena* genus, and have reclassified it as *Dracaena trifasciata*.

This particular cultivar (*Dracaena trifasciata* 'Laurentii') has horizontal bands of lighter gray-green pattern on its fleshy leaves with pale yellow bands along the edges and a leaf shape which gives the plant a snake-like appearance. This plant grows in a rosette from a thick rhizome root and can grow up to 90 cm in height.

It tolerates some shade but also thrives in bright light. It is a fairly slow growing indoor plant, so it does not often require repotting.



Dracaena trifasciata 'Laurentii',
Marion Runstedler

In your home or office, select a spot near a sunny window where the plant will receive mostly indirect bright light, with possibly an hour or two of direct sunlight. Ensure it is planted in a heavy pot since the plant has very thick and fleshy leaves and requires fairly dry soil, making it top heavy as it grows. If planted in a light-weight pot, its tendency would be to tip over more frequently, possibly damaging it.

Overall, the snake plant requires minimal care and is very hardy.

The best way I have found to propagate this plant is by dividing it rather than taking a leaf cutting. The soil should be a loose, well-drained potting mix, low in peat content. A cactus potting soil is ideal. A general fertilizer can be added to the soil once a month.

Any potential health problems for the plant center around watering it. Water only when the soil dries out. The best way to tell when your plant needs watering is to touch the soil every week. When the top 2-3 cm of the soil feels dry, then it is time to water. In the winter months, depending on the dryness in your house/office, it may not need to be watered for a month or two.

Be aware that the leaves of the snake plant are mildly toxic to dogs and cats in that it contains saponins which may cause gastrointestinal upset if consumed by your pet.

I have three snake plants in my kitchen that enjoy the morning sunshine streaming through my patio door. After every watering, I rotate the pot just slightly so the plant will grow more evenly over time and stay well centered in the pot. This classic houseplant grows slowly, is long-lived and very easy to care for. Why not consider growing one for yourself? 🌿

Letter from a reader

Re: "Gardeners Beware: Winter Creeper (*Euonymus fortunei*)" Dec 2021

I would like to thank Gail Labrosse for her excellent articles on invasive plants. We need to increase awareness of these plants because they have a major impact on natural areas. It is often difficult to discuss the subject of invasive plants with a general gardening audience, especially when a plant, like the wintercreeper euonymus, is already widely distributed in gardens.

Beaux Arbres Native Plants carries two of the alter-

native ground cover suggestions, Virginia waterleaf, which thrives on neutral and clayey soils, and foam flower, which loves looser soils. The third suggestion, *Euonymus obovata*, is not present in the wild in the Ottawa Valley. I have grown it in a Toronto garden and liked it very much. I expect it would be hardy in the Ottawa area and I might try to add it to the Beaux Arbres list if Ottawa gardeners are interested .

Trish Murphy
naturalgarden@xplornet.ca
Beaux Arbres Native Plants www.beauxarbres.ca



Gardener Beware: Reed Canary Grass - *Phalaris arundinacea*

Gail Labrosse



This variegated variety, *P. arundinacea* var. *picta*, often called ribbon grass, is also an aggressive spreader - not a good choice for a garden

Kelly Noel



All grass beyond mowed area is reed canary grass. Layers of cardboard, newsprint, cedar mulch and tarps failed to eliminate this grass

Dale Odorizzi

This tall perennial is a bunch grass characterized by tufted growth from a single root system. It forms extensive single-species stands around lakes, streams and in open, wet areas. It is commonly found in North America, as well as in Asia, Europe and North Africa.

Reed canary grass has both a native species and an invasive subspecies that are difficult to tell apart. The European variety is especially aggressive but crossbred varieties are known to exist which adds to the confusion. The native species is *Phalaris arundinacea* and the invasive subspecies is *P. arundinacea* subsp. *arundinacea* (commonly shortened to *P. arundinacea* - even more confusing). These grasses are tall, rigid and erect with stems that have a purplish-brown inflorescence that turns beige during the summer. They spread by seed as well as rhizomes, forming dense monocultures in wet areas.

This grass has invasive traits that enable it to spread aggressively in some areas. It is a major threat to wetlands where it outcompetes most native species including its native cousin. Do not plant *P. arundinacea* near natural areas. Consider planting the following plants instead.

Indian Grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*):

A tall ornamental grass. Mixes well with wildflowers in prairie, meadow or rooftop gardens. Rich golden-purple flower sprays and seeds in the autumn.

Feather Reed Grass (*Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster'):

One of the first spring grasses and also an early bloomer in June-July. Remains erect under a heavy snowfall. It has few pests and diseases.

Major source: [Reed canary grass – Ontario Invasive Plant Council](#) 

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Helplines - are monitored daily
Send questions and photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for Identification.

Trowel Talk can be found on the [Lanark County Master Gardener's blogsite](#) and [Ottawa Carleton Master Gardener's Website](#)



Clinics

Closed



Talks and Events

For information on gardening in and around the Ottawa valley:
<https://gardeningcalendar.ca/>

Talks given by Master Gardeners for garden clubs and horticultural societies using Zoom or other virtual meeting software. If you wish to attend please contact the host organization.

Article suggestions box

This is your chance, as a reader, to suggest an idea for an article you would like to see in Trowel Talk. Click on the button.



Trowel Talk team:

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Letters to editor: mgottawaeditor@gmail.com

Banner Photograph: .Willow, Red curls, S. R. Bicket

Tuesday, January 18, 7 pm

Candace Dressler

Gardening with Native Plants

[Stittsville Goulbourn Horticultural Society](#)

Thursday, January 20, 7:30 pm

Heather Clemenson

2019 Chelsea Flower Show

[Nepean Horticultural Society](#)



THE FRIENDS OF THE FARM PRESENTS



LECTURES BY MASTER GARDENERS OF OTTAWA-CARLETON

PLEASE JOIN US FROM 7 PM TO 8 PM VIA ZOOM!

Tuesday March 8, 2022 “Getting a head start on the summer growing season”

This presentation will show you how to grow your own vegetables, annuals, and some quick growing perennials, from seed. Master Gardener Rob Stuart will talk you through seed-sowing, types of soil, pots, watering, light and temperatures and growing and hardening off your seedlings. As a bonus topic, he'll also talk about starting plants from tubers and rhizomes.

Tuesday, April 19, 2022 “Gardening with native plants in Ontario”

Master Gardeners Candace Dressler and Fran Dennett will discuss how different plants are native to different parts of the planet. They will give examples of the different biomes on the planet and the ecoregions and districts in North America and explain how to use plant nomenclature and plant tags to help determine if a plant is native to the Ottawa area. They will finish off with an overview of some of their favourite native plants.

Tuesday, May 3, 2022 “Biodiversity at the crossroads”

Habitat loss, climate change and the threat of invasive plant and animal species pose a significant risk to biodiversity in North America. This lecture will offer some encouraging words of hope, and a personal story documenting how Master Gardener Julianne Labreche, working in partnership with other like-minded local gardeners, is making a difference.

Tuesday May 17, 2022 “Paint with blooms”

There's nothing quite as exciting to a gardener as seeing colourful blooms in the garden throughout the season. We truly can paint with blooms whether we prefer a riot of colour or a more subdued palette. Master Gardener Nancy McDonald will provide tips for using garden design principles to ensure continuous colour in your garden, concentrating on perennials that live up to the expectations of Ottawa gardeners.

Tuesday September 13 “Another gardening year behind us”

Come fall, there is still plenty to do in your garden: planting, planning, cutting, trimming, composting and more. So many tasks to enjoy as you wrap up all things gardening for another rewarding season! Master Gardener Mary Shearman Reid will guide you through putting your garden to bed.

\$8 for Friends of the Farm Members and Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton (series of 5 for \$35)

\$10 for Non-Member (series of 5 for \$45)

TO REGISTER AND OBTAIN MORE DETAILS

<https://friendsofthefarm.ca/fcef-annual-events/master-gardener-lectures/>