



January 15 2023, Vol 14, no. 01

# In the Alcove Garden: Wild Ginger— *Asarum canadense*

Amanda Carrigan

The Alcove Garden is a wildlife-friendly and native plant garden, a joint project of the Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton (MGOC) and Kitchissippi United Church. The garden is located on the south side of the church. More information about the garden can be found on the MGOC website.



Wild ginger—*Asarum canadense*  
Photo by David J. Stang, [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Asarum_canadense_21zz.jpg) via Wikimedia Commons, [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Asarum\\_canadense\\_21zz.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Asarum_canadense_21zz.jpg)

## Contents

- ◆ Wild Ginger 1
- ◆ Ask a Master Gardener [2](#)
- ◆ Angel Wing Begonia [3](#)
- ◆ Planting for Black-capped Chickadees [4](#)
- ◆ Book Review: [6](#)
- ◆ Find us [8](#)

[Garden calendars and other information sheets](#)

## You know you're a gardener when...



**B**otanical name: *Asarum canadense*

Zones: 4-8

Growing conditions: shade, moist.

Native to: Eastern North America

Wild ginger forms a low groundcover (under 15 cm high) in shaded areas, with palm-sized, velvety, heart-shaped or kidney-shaped leaves. Its shallow rhizomes have a spicy, gingery scent, although it is completely unrelated to culinary ginger.

Its preferred soil is moist, slightly acidic and high in organic matter. It will tolerate somewhat drier conditions after it is established, but will show its dislike for drought by wilting, then dying back.

Wild ginger blooms in spring, but the flowers are easy to miss unless you are looking for them. They are reddish brown, 3-pointed, tubular, and are hidden under the leaves, almost on the ground. It is thought to be pollinated by small carrion flies, as the location and colour of the flower mimics carrion.

The plants are largely self-pollinated, however, with seeds ripening inside a dry fruit. The seeds have an attached fatty elaiosome that ants use for food. They will carry the ripe fruit to their nest, aiding seed dispersal. As well, wild ginger has become an alternate host for the pipevine swallowtail butterfly (whose usual host is *Aristolochia* spp.), enabling it to extend its range northwards.

Colonies of wild ginger spread mostly by rhizome. It is easy to dig up and divide the plant after the leaves expand in the spring. Alternatively, the ripe fruit may be collected, and the fresh seed replanted directly after cleaning. It may be slow to germinate, however. Any delay in replanting seed will decrease viability. Generally, the plants have no pest or disease problems except for the occasional slug or snail, and they are deer-resistant.

Historically, early pioneers used the root of wild ginger as a substitute for real ginger. Native Peoples used root tea for conditions including cramps, indigestion, colds, heart problems, nervous complaints and female ailments, and used the plant as a

## Ask a Master Gardener

Compiled by Amanda Carrigan

**M**aster Gardeners answer helpline questions.

*A friend offered me some bulbs (tulips, daffodils, and hyacinths) recently, and suggested I could use them for forcing indoors. Would this work?*

Most spring bulbs, like tulips, need a chilling period in order to trigger growth and bloom. Bulbs for forcing have been given an early artificial chilling, so they can be potted up and start growing indoors while it's still winter outside.

You can try doing this at home by putting them in the fridge (they need a temperature of about 4°C) in a mesh bag so they'll be well ventilated. If they're in a sealed plastic bag they could build up moisture and rot. The caveat here is that tulips and daffodils need 12-16 weeks of chilling, so starting their cold period this late means they won't be ready to grow any sooner than their compatriots outdoors.

*I was given a small clivia offset four or five years ago. I have it in my kitchen window, which gets mostly morning sun. The plant has grown bigger (it has about 10 leaves now), looks healthy and produces new leaves every so often, but it hasn't flowered. How long does it take for it to get flowers? Am I doing something wrong?*

Clivias (*Clivia miniata*, also known as kaffir lily) are slow to mature. After five years, they should be old enough to flower. Offsets may take only a year or two to reach flowering age. Your plant's growing conditions are more likely to be the problem.

Flowering season is late winter/early spring. To encourage bloom, your clivia should have a rest period. Starting in late fall, stop watering it (unless you actually see it wilting, then add a little water). Keep it in a cool place, if possible, during this time (8-10°C), with indirect light.



wound poultice. The latter use seems to be scientifically validated by the finding of antibiotic compounds in the plant. Although some people still use wild ginger as a foraged flavouring, its use is discouraged due to the presence of aristolochic acid. This has been reported to have anti-tumour activity but also to potentially cause cell mutations. There are also reports of the leaves causing skin irritation in some people. 🌿

***I like gardening – it's a place where I find myself when I need to lose myself.*— Alice Sebald, author**

## Angel Wing Begonia

Anne Price

*Begonia maculata*, also known as angel wing begonia or polka dot begonia, is a popular and easy-care houseplant. It originates from the Brazilian rain forest but has been introduced to other parts of South and Central America.



Begonia  
Anne Price

As the common names indicate, this begonia has spotted foliage shaped like wings. It is classified as a cane begonia, which refers to its bamboo-like stems with 'nodes' every few centimeters. Blooms are sprays of small white or pink flowers. However, the foliage is the real star, displaying olive green

After 12-14 weeks, you can bring the plant back to warmer temperatures. Start watering more thoroughly, but only when the top 2 cm of soil is dry. Clivias don't like wet feet. Hopefully your plant will start blooming in 6-12 weeks.

There are other considerations too. Sometimes they need more light in summer to trigger flowering, such as spending the summer outdoors in part shade. They are also more likely to flower if they are potbound, so a recently repotted plant probably won't flower. 🌿

leaves with white spots and red undersides.

Generally speaking, this begonia does well in most household environments, even during our dry winters. It prefers being root bound and can remain in a small pot for several years. Indeed, several of mine have not survived being repotted. As with many topicals, this plant benefits greatly from time outside, as it prefers humid environments. It should not be allowed to completely dry out. I keep mine outside during the summer, out of direct sunlight, and let Mother Nature do the watering.

*B. maculata* can grow to 1.2 to 1.5 m if left unpruned. However, this may result in a 'leggy' look and it will require staking. Periodic pruning is a great way to keep the plant looking its best and to acquire new plants, as it is very easy to propagate cuttings in water or soil.

My own experience rooting it in water is described below:

### Steps to water propagation:

- Gather your tools: small glass jars, clean scissors or clippers.
- A container such as an empty spice jar is a good height for these cuttings as it will accommodate the length of the wing-like foliage.

- Take a good look at the plant stems or canes; notice that along the canes there are nodes. This is where the plant can grow leaves or roots.
- Choose a spot with leaves close to the node and make a cutting approximately 7 to 10 cm long, just below the node.
- Remove all but one leaf, near the top, from the cutting. This leaf is needed to provide energy to develop roots.
- Place your new cutting in a glass jar and fill with water up to halfway, making sure the leaf does not touch the water or it will rot.
- Replace the water when cloudy or low and monitor the progress, roots will begin to develop in about a week from the bottom of the node.
- Wait for a healthy ball-like growth of roots. This may take a few weeks.



**Begonia**  
*Anne Price*

Once the roots are well developed, you can plant the cutting in a pot a few centimetres larger than the root ball. Use regular potting soil and water well.

Alternatively, you can plant several cuttings into a larger pot for a fuller plant. Again, the pot should

only be a few centimetres larger than the combined root balls. If the pot is too large, the roots will rot.

Stake the cuttings as they grow and water when dry. Place in bright, indirect light and enjoy! 🌱

## **Gardening for Birds: Planting for Black-capped Chickadees**

*Julianne Labreche*

**F**requent visitors to my backyard garden are the curious little black-capped chickadees. They are easily recognizable with their black cap and bib, white cheeks, and warm buff-tone flanks and sides.

Usually they visit my garden in small flocks for safety. Sometimes they arrive with other bird species too, such as titmice and nuthatches. Chickadees are quick to grab seed from my bird-feeder and retreat back to the shelter of my old cedar hedge for protection from predators. Often, they cache the seeds in bark crevices to eat later.

There are seven species of chickadees in North America. In Ottawa, the black-capped chickadee



**Black-capped chickadee**  
*Julianne Labreche*



with its familiar call, chick-a-dee-dee-dee, is a common sight.

Like other wild birds, chickadees depend upon native plants for survival. Native plants provide these birds with nesting spaces and food, principally seeds. These plants are also habitat for juicy insects, food for young chickadees during the nesting season. Baby birds depend on these insects, which have coevolved with native plants and provide them with soft, easily digestible food.

In nature, black-capped chickadees live in deciduous and mixed forests in many parts of Canada and the northern parts of the United States. They are non-migratory birds that remain here during the cold winter months.

Gardeners can help native birds by planting native plants, especially trees. To attract black-capped chickadees to your garden, consider growing the native plants listed. These keystone plants are critical to the food web because they support insects, including caterpillars, required for birds in their diet.

**Eastern white pine** (*Pinus strobus*) – This tall, evergreen tree provides many benefits for chickadees, including seed from its cones. It grows about 30 metres tall. It prefers full sun but will grow in partial shade. This native tree, Ontario's emblem, will grow in a variety of soil conditions including clay, loam, sand and organic soil.

**Paper birch** (*Betula papyrifera*) – This medium-sized tree grows about 25 metres in height. It requires full sun and grows in many kinds of soil, including clay, loam, and sandy soil but prefers a well-drained soil.

**Black spruce** (*Picea mariana*) – This tree grows about 20 metres high in sun or partial shade. It prefers well-drained soil but will grow in dry or moist conditions too. This tree benefits chickadees during many stages of its growth, including after it dies. A dead tree, called a 'snag', provides nesting spaces in its cavities, as well as habitat for a variety of insects.



Paper birch  
Julianne Labreche



New England asters  
Julianne Labreche

In addition, consider growing....

**New England aster** (*Symphyotrichum novae-angliae*) – This is a lovely fall blooming flower that is easy to grow. A tall native herb, it prefers full sun. It grows best in moist, slightly acidic soil but is tough and tolerates many soil conditions. Chickadees are attracted to insects that visit this plant in fall. Its seed heads are eaten by adult birds during winter months.



#### **Bird Tip of the Month:**

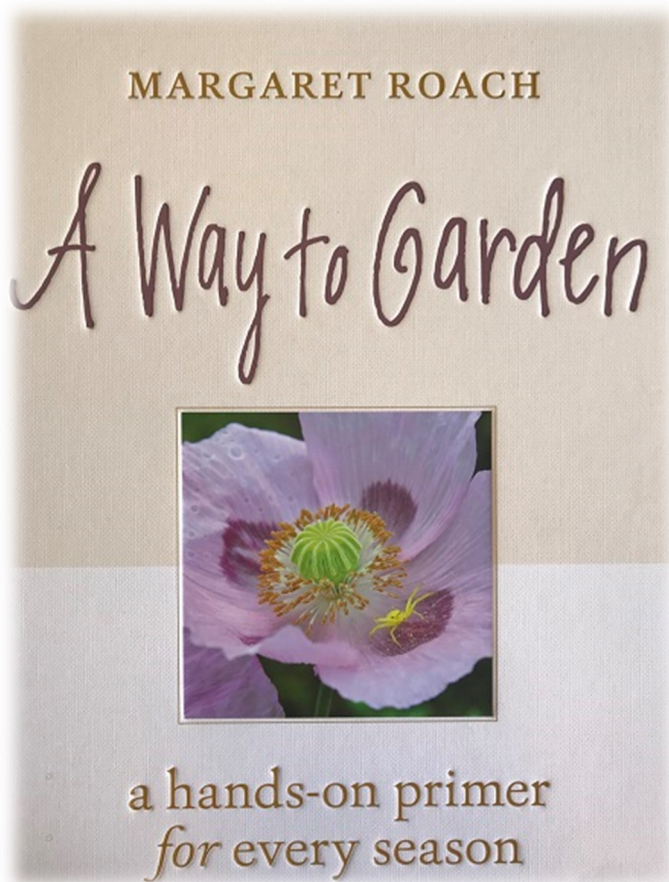
*Ever wonder what to do if you find an injured, ill or orphaned bird? Contact the Ottawa Valley Wild Bird Care Centre whose staff and volunteers work to rehabilitate and release injured birds back into the wild. Check out the website for further information: [wildbirdcarecentre.org](http://wildbirdcarecentre.org)*

This new series about birds in the garden will continue to run in Trowel Talk as a monthly column.

## **Book Review:**

### **A Way to Garden, by Margaret Roach**

Lee Ann Smith



A Way to Garden cover

Lee Ann Smith

**Timber Press, Inc., 2019**

**ISBN: 978-1-60409-877-0**

**Hard cover, 319 pages**

**M**argaret Roach's *A Way to Garden* is the 20-year anniversary rewrite of her award-winning book of the same name. Roach, who is equal parts expert gardener and accomplished writer, brings all her talents together here.

The book is rightly subtitled “*a hands-on primer for every season.*” Most gardeners, with the possible exception of the very experienced, will learn something. All gardeners, regardless of knowledge level, will find something in these pages to reflect upon.

Roach's motto for years has been “*horticultural how-to and woo-woo*” gleaned from decades of gardening, studying plants and contemplating what she observes in nature. She describes her approach as “*a fusion of science lab and Buddhist retreat... stuff you have to memorize and what you just feel or surrender to.*” Her three books, her website, weekly gardening newsletter and podcasts all deliver this blend of science and wonder.

Roach gardens on a two-acre property in Copake Falls, New York, in US Zone 5B, roughly equivalent to Canadian Zone 6B. While not all of what she grows will work in Ottawa or Lanark, how she grows applies to all zones.

The book's structure reflects her perspective on



growth, both in the garden and in life. “*I imagine the garden year as roughly parallel to the six seasons of my own life,*” she says, “*from conception through birth and on to youth, adulthood, senescence and finally death and afterlife.*” Each chapter covers two months of the year, themed according to these seasons. Enhanced with photos from Roach’s property, each section opens with an insightful essay that sets up the practical tips, charts and information that follow, specific to each time of the year.

The extensive practical tips include an introduction to botanical nomenclature, a seed viability chart, a seed starting calculator, Roach’s regimen for opening and closing her pond and water gardens, and even a recipe for freezer tomato sauce. She lists 13 things about growing tomatoes and 18 seed starting tips. She highlights many specific plants and describes them in detail, including hellebores, ferns, potatoes, squash, and viburnums. The References and Sources section contains field guides, websites, and mail order sources including Canadian ones. All of this information is vital to newer gardeners, and a good refresher for those who have gardened for many seasons.

She also details a few of her trademark practises that may be “*ah-hah moments*” for many gardeners. For example, she contends that “*home garden design is an inside-out exercise.*” Look out the window, she urges, before you determine what goes where, or what needs to go away. Plan to look out the window at the garden, not at a car or a shed.

She also strongly advocates for a “*living mulch*” of non-invasive groundcovers planted under trees and shrubs to reduce weeding chores and conserve moisture. Sometimes she uses a mass planting of a single variety such as bigroot geranium (*Geranium macrorrhizum*). In high profile areas near the house, she makes “mosaics” of several layered, intermingling plants providing visual interest over the longest possible season. This does not mean “*polka-dot onesies*” (a look that horrifies her) but “*sweeps and drifts and deliberate repetition of said sweeps and drifts.*” One striking groundcover

combination is Canadian wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*) with Japanese forest grass (*Hakonechloa macra* ‘All Gold’) and *Hosta* ‘June.’ To make the mosaic look more natural, she recommends planting all the way under trees to near the trunks, avoiding circles under driplines.

Beyond the specific how-tos presented in this book are the essays that open each chapter. Sometimes funny, often poignant, the essays are what lift this book up and make it much more than another gardening manual. Of particular note is the essay about senescence. This is a season and indeed, a phase of life that is not typically celebrated. Roach does just that, making a surprising link to the cherry blossom festival. Cherry blossoms are beautiful but fleeting, she says, so “*celebrate the passings: not just the full bloom but the pink puddle of fallen petals.*” Also, “*the garden reminds us of why we mustn’t wait. It’s a vivid, perishable embodiment of how things live, and die. Nothing lasts,*” she reminds us, “*which makes it all the more precious, no?*”

On almost every page, readers will detect Roach’s sense of botanical wonder, what she refers to as “*woo-woo*”. “*It is this natural curiosity, coupled with the need to touch and smell and otherwise get to know these living things,*” she declares, “*that counts first and foremost, all manner of scientific degrees notwithstanding.*”

A Way to Garden is a coffee-table book with gorgeous photos to inspire and delight, a reference manual for new to intermediate gardeners, and — quite unique in the horticulture genre — a book of essays by an accomplished writer, offering thoughtful reflections about the seasons of life linked to the annual garden cycle. 🌿

**Tip:** To flush out excess salts from potted plants place on a drainer in a sink or bath, water gently from the top and allow the water to drain through the pot. Repeat 2 or 3 times before allowing the pot to sit until there are very few drips. Afterwards, when returned to location, empty any water that accumulates in the plant saucer.

## Find us:



### On the Web

#### Lanark County Master Gardeners



Blog



Helpline



Calendar



Facebook

#### Ottawa-Carleton Master Gardeners



Website



Helpline



Calendar



Facebook

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 <https://mgottawa.ca/>



### Clinics

Closed

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

## 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:

Amanda Carrigan, Judith Cox, Andrea Knight, Julianne Labreche, Kelly Noel, Dale Odorizzi, Josie Pazdzior, Anne Price, Lee Ann Smith, Rob Stuart, Belinda Boekhoven, Mary Reid, Margaret Ryan, Heather Clemenson, Mary Crawford

Letters to editor: [newsletter@mgottawa.ca](mailto:newsletter@mgottawa.ca)

*Banner Photograph: African violets— Streptocarpus sect. Saintpaulia. Julianne Labreche*



### Talks and Events

Talks given by Master Gardeners for garden clubs and horticultural societies. If you wish to attend please contact the host organization to confirm venue. Zoom or other virtual meeting software is still in use by some societies.

Tuesday, February 7, 7:00 pm  
Candace Dressler  
**Colour through the Seasons**  
[Barrie Garden Club](#)