

February's Garden Basket

By Kathleen Cue, Nebraska Extension Horticulture Educator in Dodge County

February, March and April are busy months for the Nebraska Extension Master Gardener program. Master Gardener Interns are participating in classes, on their way to becoming certified Master Gardeners. The classes are intensive, covering botany, plant diseases, landscape design, bug boot camp, and plant management. Once coursework is complete, Master Gardener volunteers hit the ground running, providing expertise to community and child care gardens, answering questions via the horticulture helpline and "Ask the Master Gardener" tables, and caring for plants at educational gardens.

February is also a busy seed starting month. Gardeners striving to have greater variety in their vegetable and flower choices than ready-grown 4-packs offer are prepping soil, cleaning seed flats and reading seed packets. Peppers are one of those plants that really benefit from starting seeds early. As seedlings, plant growth is slow to develop, so to have blooming-sized plants to set out in May, starting early is essential.

February is a good month to think about landscaping tasks during the coming year. February falls under the planning phase of "plan, plan, plant", which prevents overplanting, overspending, and overextending labor resources for hastily made plans. Most homeowners can execute wonderful landscapes in their own yard, after all, they know their site best. While they may lack a plantswoman's knowledge of the array of plants suitable for their zone, a call to the local Extension office or garden center can remedy that. There, the question can be asked "I'm looking for a small tree (or ornamental grass, or large tree) for this spot in my landscape, can you provide some recommendations?"

February can be an exciting opportunity to look at new plant introductions:

- All America Selection (all-america-selections.org) winners are chosen from trials across the country. For 2020, check out 'Snak Hero' pea, 'Galahad' tomato, 'Holi Pink' zinnia, and a host of other AAS flower and vegetable winners.

- "Great Plants for the Great Plains" (plantnebraska.org) is a cooperative program between the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum and Nebraska growers with introductions and plant releases of trees, shrubs and perennials well suited to Nebraska conditions.

- The Perennial Plant Association has named 'Sun King' Japanese spikenard (*Aralia cordata* 'Sun King') as the 2020 Perennial Plant of the Year. This bold (4 feet high and wide) shade-loving perennial boasts golden yellow foliage, brightening shady and part-shade areas of the yard.

No matter the skill level, February's array of garden basket possibilities can whet gardeners' appetites for the season ahead!