Gardening Resolutions for the New Year

Photos and Article Submitted by Autumn Zander, Minnesota River Valley Master Gardener

For novice and experienced gardeners alike, the New Year brings seed catalogues and gardening advertisements to our mailboxes. And with the anticipation of beautiful flower beds and bountiful vegetable gardens in the back of our mind, a gardener’s ambitions grow uncontrollably despite several more snowy, cold months until spring. While thinking about all the vast plans for the new growing season, why not consider seasonal resolutions for the new gardening year? Unlike traditional New Year’s resolutions that are expected to last the entire calendar year—but rarely do—seasonal resolutions offer the promise of new, shorter goals to work towards, continued learning opportunities and stronger community ties.

Seasonal Resolution No. 1—Share seeds in the springtime with neighbors and friends.
At harvest time many lucky gardeners have a surplus of tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini and other delicious produce items to share with neighbors and friends, yet it is easy to forget about sharing seeds with many of these same neighbors and friends in the springtime. For those needing an extra nudge into gardening, a few hardy squash or green bean seeds in the spring may be just the encouragement they need to try gardening on their own.

Seasonal Resolution No. 2—Try a new plant.
Each year I make it a goal to try something new in my flower or vegetable gardens. Rather than thinking of my garden as the one from 2018 or 2019, I refer to it as the year I tried growing ornamental corn or the year I grew purple carrots. By trying something new, the gardening adventures continues. Who wouldn’t want to remember 2009 as the year when my 6 habanero pepper plants produced 40 peppers each! At our home, 2018 was the year of the clematis. With three different varieties—Cezanne, Lady Betty Balfour & Sunset— it was the Cezanne that produced the very first flower in 2019!
Seasonal Resolution No. 3 — Step out of your comfort zone.
Raised beds, lasagna gardening, square foot gardening, straw bales—gardeners are always developing new ideas and strategies to enhance growing conditions and harvest yields. While converting an entire garden into raised beds or straw bales may be too drastic of a change, how about trying a small section of the garden in this new manner? Winter is the perfect time to read up on new gardening approaches and explore the resources necessary to make it happen.

Seasonal Resolution No. 4—Keep a garden journal.
Whether reporting growing conditions, plant locations, planting dates or just daily thoughts, a journal is an invaluable resource. Even those with strong memories will admit that the saying, “paper remember or the mind will forget” often rings true. Traditional paper notebooks work well, but the ease of technology makes maintaining a digital garden journal easy and convenient. The opportunity to record pests, produce, foliage & flowers is just a click away.

Seasonal Resolution No. 5—Invite a friend to weed & harvest.
All too often I catch myself saying, “I have to weed the garden today.” rather than “I get to weed the garden today!” What a luxury it is to have a space to grow food and flowers, to relax in nature and to disconnect from the demands of work & other responsibilities. Consider sharing that same luxury of time and space with a friend or neighbor who lives in an apartment or does not have access to their own gardening space.

Seasonal Resolution No. 6—Share surplus harvest with someone new.
In a neighborhood full of gardeners, it is easy to know who had great luck with tomatoes or sweet corn. Often a bumper crop of tomatoes and sweet corn for one gardener means tomatoes and sweet corn for the neighborhood. This year try sharing some of those extra vegetables with someone new. Whether sharing with someone at your library, clinic, school or workplace this little gesture goes a long way in building community and fostering friendships.
Seasonal Resolution No. 7—Try saving new seeds this year.
Saving seeds from the end of the growing season is both economical, practical and fun. Squash, zinnia and green bean seeds are easy to collect and are very durable. How about selecting a variety of flower or vegetable to save and grow each year? Flowers such as four o’clocks have graced the east side of my house for the past 8 years. Each fall the plant drops black seeds and they are promptly collected. After letting them dry out, they are stored over the winter and planted each spring. The beautiful, long lasting, colorful flowers bloom for several months.

Seasonal Resolution No. 8—Success & Sorrow List.
Gardeners (and farmers!) are some of the most optimistic people around. Each year we set out with the goal of trying to create areas of beauty and nutrition from these tiny, hard specs that get buried in the ground. Even with great care and attention there is no guarantee that anything will result from our efforts. Yet, year after year we try and try again. At harvest time reflect upon the gardening year and create a “success & sorrow” list. Whether it was a specific plant that thrived, a new tool that didn’t work as well as planned or a new gardening technique that was useful, take time to reflect and make a list to help with future gardening plans.

Seasonal Resolution No. 9—Pictures!
When the bitter cold keeps us indoors, the colors and memories of the spring, summer & fall keep the flame alive for the new growing season. Pictures of triumphant vegetables and glorious flowers as well as pictures of pests, blighting tomatoes and other unexpected issues or critters are not only a helpful resource for next year’s garden, but they serve as a valuable reminder that no matter how we may try, Mother Nature always has the final word!
NATIVE POINSETTIA IN MINNESOTA

Winter time is peak poinsettia season, with garden centers trying to fit as many fiery-headed plants as possible onto shelves. All of these are the species *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, a shrub native to Central America. While we enjoy displaying them for the holidays, the plant itself is quite a wimp when it comes to cold, and would be doomed growing in a Midwest backyard. However, its close relative the wild poinsettia (*Euphorbia cyathophora*) does manage to eke out a living in southern Minnesota.

Wild poinsettia fall into my “somewhat fussy” category of plants who like moisture but prefer well drained locations. Wild poinsettia also can tolerate a decent amount of shade. For example, one I observed a few years ago happened to be on a forest edge in a sandy silt soil. If you are considering planting some, note that it is not great at competing with established neighbors. A fertile, heavily vegetated area would be a challenge for a wild poinsettia’s survival, as it thrives on disturbed areas. While not a huge issue in the US, in Pacific countries such as Guam, wild poinsettia can be an invasive weed in farms and pastures.

Wild poinsettias grow to about 1-3 feet and have unique, variable leaves. Some may look more thin and narrow while others can take an oak or fiddle-like appearance. Nowhere near as flashy as its store-bought counterpart, wild poinsettia still has that unique flower with several bright red “petals” that emerge once the night length increases. How big and eye catching these can be is up to the plant’s genetics and environment. These “petals” are actually a type of leaf—called a bract—masquerading as a flower.

The reason members of the poinsettia genus *Euphorbia* evolved this trait is not currently known. How poinsettias are pollinated is also a mystery. Poinsettias are generally not self-compatible, and require some help to reproduce. Many of these plants’ bracts end up being on the reddish side of the color spectrum, which could give some—but by no means all—insects some trouble seeing the tiny flowers the bracts surround. Wild poinsettia seems to keep its pollination a secret, as few observations exist regarding its insect visitors.
Mammals such as deer and rabbits tend to stay away from wild poinsettia. This may be due to its gooey, itchy, foul tasting latex it secretes when damaged, common to members of the Spurge Family (Euphorbiaceae). Rumors of wild poinsettia and its more famous relative’s toxicity are grossly overstated. It would take an impressive amount of stupidity and ingenuity to hurt yourself through eating poinsettias. However, you can leverage its bad tasting foliage to keep four legged critters away from hosta or other sensitive plants in your garden.

Next time you stroll in Rasmussen Woods, Glenwood Gardens, or near a gravelly lot during late summer, keep an eye out for bright red. You may be seeing a wild poinsettia, a unique plant with a famous family.

![Wild Poinsettia type with “fiddle” leaves. Photo by: M. R. Spiegelman](image)

**Works Cited:**

FARMER-TO-FARMER REGIONAL GATHERINGS FOR FRUIT AND VEGETABLE PRODUCERS

Come and connect with fellow fruit and vegetable growers to build relationships, reflect on the 2019 growing season, share insights and new ideas, learn about ongoing research in fruit and vegetables, and build future collaborations.

February 12: Nicollet County Human Services Building, St. Peter
February 14: Floodwood Event Center, Floodwood
March 14: Dassel History Center, Dassel*

Please RSVP so that we can account for enough food: z.umn.edu/FruitAndVegRetreats

These are pilot events - if they go well we hope to hold similar events in more locations next year.

- Floodwood & St. Peter events: 9:30 - 1:30, lunch provided
- Dassel event: 9:00-2:00, potluck lunch. This event will be held in conjunction with the Crow River SFA annual gathering, but non-members are encouraged to attend.