

# Plant Wise

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY  
University Extension

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## The Prairie in Winter

By Jan Faraci  
ISU Master Gardener  
Mills County



While most of the Iowa landscape in winter is drab, it is the time of year when the native prairie continues to be interesting and functional. A prairie can easily be identified in winter by its rich colors and upright stand. The dormant prairie is beautiful and useful for numerous reasons.

Most plants turn pale brown or grey during their dormant stage. The prairie retains rich colors that easily distinguish it from the surrounding landscape. A prairie as a whole is a deep russet red largely because of the presence of little bluestem and the stalks of wildflowers. However, upon close examination, other interesting colors become evident. Especially against a backdrop of snow, the buff of side oats grama, the reddish-purple of big bluestem, the reddish-yellow of Indian grass, and the orange-yellow of switch grass, create an outstanding view to brighten cold winter days.

Prairie plants remain upright, even with the strong winds and heavy snow that often occur in Midwestern winters. The warm season grasses and native forbes have evolved over the centuries to stand tall, when trees and less hardy plants break and flatten under the weight of snow and the blasts of winter winds.

These hardy stalks, strong seed heads, and insect-galled stems not only provide texture to the landscape, but also a snow stop to prevent drifting when growing along driveways, lanes, and even highways. Through the Iowa Living Roadways program, many prairies have been reestablished along highways. It has been recorded that these highways require less snow plowing than those that are not bordered by prairie plants.

The upright prairie plants also provide cover for insects and wildlife that is often not available elsewhere. Many butterflies over-winter in Iowa. Some as adults, like the fritillary and mourning cloak. Others survive in chrysalis form, such as the swallowtail and the orange sulfur. Still others winter over as caterpillars, such as the viceroy and checkerspot. All of these beautiful creatures utilize the protection and cover provided by the sturdy prairie plants. Grass and flower seed heads standing above a blanket of snow provide food for birds. The snow blanket and thick covering of plant material provide protection for hibernating wildlife and hiding places for active wildlife such as rabbits.

Through education and awareness, many people are learning to appreciate the advantages of native plants in their yards and on their acreages. These plants are best suited for the soils and environmental conditions of a given area.

The prairie is a year-round joy to those who have learned to appreciate it and have taken the time to preserve or reestablish a landscape linked to our past and our future. The prairie in winter is a rare jewel!

## Forcing Branches

By Nancy Gingrich Shenk  
Adapted from an article in  
Fine Gardening magazine

Most ornamental trees and shrubs set their flower buds during the previous growing season. These buds must experience a period of dormancy before they will open. After six weeks of cold temperatures, buds will usually come out of dormancy after two to three weeks of being exposed to warmth and moisture. Depending on your location, usually by the time February arrives, most species suitable for forcing have experienced the required period of dormancy.



Wait for a mild winter day when the temperature is above freezing to head outdoors with pruners in hand. Branches and buds are softer and more pliable and will be better able to make the transition from cold outdoor temperatures to warm indoor temperatures. Coincidentally, late winter is the best time to prune deciduous trees and large shrubs. Prune trees and shrubs for shape and to remove crossing branches and old or diseased wood. From the branches cut when pruning, select branches for forcing that are less than ½ inch in diameter, or simply cut branches for forcing that are of that size. Choose branches with lots of plump flower buds. Flower buds are round and fat, whereas leaf buds are smaller and pointed. If unsure of what type of bud you are looking at, do a little bud surgery. When cut open, a flower bud will reveal miniature flower parts inside.

The method for processing the cut branches is pretty straightforward; cut and gather the branches and bring them inside. Add floral preservative to a bucket of warm (100° to 110°F) water and set it aside. The preservative will promote hydration and retard bacterial growth, keeping the water clear for up to a week.

Next, fill a sink with very warm water. Holding the stems underwater, recut them at a severe angle an inch or two above the original cut. For larger branches - around ½ inch diameter - split the end of the stem in half for a distance of about an inch to allow more of the interior of the stem to be available to take up water.



Immediately place the stems in the bucket of water. At this point you can either store all of the stems in this bucket of water and set it aside in a cool place, like a protected porch or garage, where the temperature is 45°

to 55°F, then arrange the branches for display when the first buds begin to show color. Or you can immediately create an arrangement, put the masterpiece in a place of prominence, and watch as the buds slowly swell and spring into bloom. In either case, keep the branches healthy by changing the water and adding new preservative each week, or when the water starts to discolor. Keep the branches away from bright, direct sunlight and away from any direct heat source, which will dry out the buds and branches and reduce overall bloom color and quality.

Branches won't flower until they've had a proper cold period, usually about six weeks. If you try to force a particular plant into bloom and it doesn't work, it may be too early. Try it again in a couple of weeks.

Top choices for forcing:

### **Earliest cutting time**

#### **January**

Cornelian cherry (*Cornus mas*)  
Filberts - for catkins (*Corylus* spp.)  
Forsythias  
Fothergillas  
Witch hazels (*Hamamelis* spp. and cvs.)



#### **Late January/early February**

Bradford pear (*Pyrus calleryana* 'Bradford')  
Cherries (*Prunus* spp. and cvs.)

#### **Mid to late February**

Birches – for catkins (*Betula* spp. and cvs.)  
Eastern redbud (*Cercis canadensis*)  
Lilacs (*Syringa* spp. and cvs.)  
Magnolias  
PJM Rhododendron  
Quinces (*Chaenomeles* spp. and cvs.)  
Red maple (*Acer rubrum*)  
Pussywillow

## New Iowa Firewood Regulations

By Rich Pope  
Harrison County Extension Program Coordinator  
Iowa State University Extension

On January 1, 2011, a new regulation went into effect in Iowa requiring that anyone who sells or distributes firewood in the state must have it labeled with the county and state of origin. The county of origin means where the wood was harvested and not the mailing address of the seller. The labeling requirement applies to both packaged firewood and bulk firewood. The bulk firewood harvest location can be included on the delivery ticket. This rule applies to any length of tree that has been cut and intended for burning.

## Dogwoods for Iowa Landscapes

Iowa firewood labeling requirements now include the following:

- the identity of the wood, whether all one species or mixed (i.e., 50% ash, 50% oak)
- the net quantity in cubic feet or cubic meters (a cord is 128 cu. ft.)
- the name and address of the manufacturer or distributor
- the unit price
- the county and state where the wood was harvested.

Details of the labeling requirements are available from the Iowa Dept of Agriculture & Land Stewardship Entomology & Plant Science Bureau (515) 725 -1470 and the [ISU Extension Pest Management website](#).

The new labeling requirement is one of many ongoing efforts to limit or stop the spread of several bad, and some very bad tree pests. For example, emerald ash borer (EAB) is an invasive species that readily infests and kills ash trees, and is a significant threat to the millions of ash trees in Iowa. The long distance spread of EAB has been through transport of infested firewood, landscape trees, and ash logs and wood products. Along with the new firewood labeling requirement other activities to slow the spread of EAB include campground and park regulations prohibiting firewood brought in from outside and voluntary citizen compliance with the "Buy Local, Burn Local" and "Buy It Where You Burn It!" campaigns.

EAB adults and other injurious insect pests and diseases can move very few miles on their own each year. However, transport of logs, firewood and wood products can easily carry pests and diseases into new areas in the time it takes to drive across the state. Other invasive insect pests that can be transported in firewood include Sirex wood wasp, Asian long-horned beetle, gypsy moth, as well as plant pathogens causing beech bark disease, sudden oak death, thousand cankers disease of walnut, and oak wilt.

The Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources staff will be checking firewood bundles at retail sales outlets for the new labeling. In the meantime, please do your part: do not carry firewood from place to place, buy it where you burn it, and burn firewood as soon as possible.

By Richard Jauron  
Horticulture Department  
Iowa State University



There are about 45 species of dogwoods. Most are shrubs or small trees. Several dogwoods are valuable additions to home landscapes. A list of suggested dogwoods for Iowa, along with a brief description of each, is provided below.

The **Tatarian dogwood** (*Cornus alba*) is an 8- to 10-foot-tall shrub. Plants produce small, yellowish white flowers in spring followed by bluish white, berry-like fruit. The Tatarian dogwood is grown chiefly for its red-colored stems in winter. (Plants should be pruned frequently as young stems possess the most vivid red color. As a general rule, prune out a few of the oldest stems each year in late winter.) Plants perform best in moist, well-drained soils in full sun. 'Argenteo-marginata' and Ivory Halo® are two cultivars that produce green leaves with creamy white margins.

The **pagoda dogwood** (*Cornus alternifolia*) is a large shrub or small tree. Its mature height and spread is 15 to 25 feet. The pagoda dogwood is native to northeastern Iowa. It is typically found at woodland edges and forest openings. Ornamental characteristics include a horizontal branching habit, yellowish white flowers in late spring, and reddish purple fall foliage. The pagoda dogwood performs best in moist, well-drained soils in partial shade. Protected locations and eastern exposures are generally the best planting sites. The cultivar Golden Shadows® possesses green leaves with golden yellow margins. Alternate-leaved dogwood is another common name for *Cornus alternifolia*.

**Silky dogwood** (*Cornus amomum*) is a native shrub commonly found along streambanks, wet prairies, and woodland edges. Silky dogwood produces flat-topped clusters of yellowish white flowers in spring. Its fruit is bluish with white blotches. Silky dogwood is a rounded shrub which grows approximately 6 to 10 feet tall with a

similar spread. It is a good choice for moist to wet sites.

The **corneliancherry dogwood** (*Cornus mas*) is a large shrub or small tree. Plants commonly grow 20 to 25 feet tall and 15 to 20 feet wide. The corneliancherry dogwood produces small, yellow flowers in round, three-quarter-inch-wide clusters in early spring. When selecting a planting site, choose a location with a dark-colored background, such as a building or row of pine trees, to highlight the yellow flowers. See photo below. After flowering, oblong one-half- to one-inch-long, berry-like fruit develop. The fruit turn cherry red in late summer and are edible. The foliage of the corneliancherry dogwood is dark green in summer. Fall leaf color is inconsistent, occasionally an attractive purplish red. 'Golden Glory' is a profuse blooming, upright cultivar. The corneliancherry dogwood can be grown in full sun to part shade.

The **gray dogwood** (*Cornus racemosa*) is native to Iowa. It is an adaptable shrub which tolerates wet or dry soils, shade or sun. Gray dogwood reaches a height of 8 to 10 feet. It produces whitish flowers in late spring which are followed by small white berries. The fruit are produced on reddish pink stalks. The colorful stalks become noticeable after the fruit have been eaten by birds or fallen to the ground. The gray dogwood is a good choice for naturalizing as it spreads by suckers.

The bright red twigs of the **redosier dogwood** (*Cornus sericea*) set against a backdrop of newly fallen snow is a beautiful sight in winter. Native to Iowa, redosier dogwood grows 6 to 10 feet tall. Several colorful varieties are available. 'Cardinal' has bright, cherry red stems. 'Alleman's Compact' is a compact (grows four to five feet tall), red-stemmed variety. 'Flaviramea' has yellow stems. 'Silver and Gold' has green leaves with creamy white margins and yellow stems. Like the Tatarian dogwood, the redosier dogwood should be pruned frequently as the young shoots possess the best color.

A notable dogwood that is absent from the above list is the flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*). The flowering dogwood is a beautiful tree that is widely planted in the

southern United States. Unfortunately, the flowering dogwood is not reliably winter hardy in most parts of Iowa.

## Ask the ISU Extension Gardening Expert

### When should I sow geranium seeds indoors?



Geraniums are relatively easy to grow from seeds. However, geranium seedlings are slow growing. Geranium seeds should be sown in early to mid-February to produce flowering plants for spring. Flowering occurs approximately 13 to 15 weeks after sowing. Suggested seed-grown geraniums for Iowa include varieties in the Elite, Orbit, Maverick, and Multibloom Series. (A series is a group of closely related varieties with uniform characteristics, such as height, spread and flowering habit. Generally, the only characteristic that varies within a series is flower color.)

### Will a fluorescent light fixture provide sufficient light for seedlings?

A standard fluorescent shop fixture containing two 40-watt tubes will provide sufficient light to grow seedlings indoors. For best results, place one cool white and one warm white tube in each fixture. Place the fluorescent lights no more than four to six inches above the seedlings. The lights should be on for 12 to 14 hours each day.

### What type of germination medium should I use to start seedlings indoors?

The germination medium should be lightweight, porous and free of pathogens. Excellent seed-starting media are commercially prepared soilless mixes, such as Jiffy Mix. Use a high quality, well-drained potting mix when transplanting seedlings into individual pots or cell packs.

### Do I need to purchase a heat mat to successfully germinate seeds indoors?

Most seeds germinate best when the medium temperature is consistently 70 to 75 F. Placing containers in a warm location in the house, such as on top of a radiator or near a heat register, usually works fine. In cool environments, electric heating cables or mats can be used to ensure warm medium temperatures.

## Upcoming Horticulture Events of Interest:

### Spring into Spring Seminar Series Presented by the Mills County Master Gardeners

#### ***“Preserving Rare & Endangered Plants”***

**Date:** Monday, February 21  
**Time:** 7:00 – 8:00 PM  
**Place:** Glenwood Resource Center (711 S. Vine)  
Visitor’s Center Conference Room  
**Cost:** \$2.00

Marge From, Director of Plant Conservation at Omaha’s Henry Doorly Zoo, will present a program highlighting her efforts to research, propagate, and reintroduce more than 200 plant species from threatened habitats. Her work includes research on the Western prairie fringed orchid, a beautiful native to our local prairies which has been extremely difficult to germinate and reintroduce.

#### ***“Home Composting”***

**Date:** Monday, March 7  
**Time:** 7:00 – 8:00 PM  
**Place:** Glenwood Resource Center (711 S. Vine)  
Visitor’s Center Conference Room  
**Cost:** \$2.00

Mills County Master Gardener, Tracey Fikes, will show you how to make black gold (compost), and improve the soil in your flower and vegetable gardens. The basics of backyard composting will be covered, as well as a discussion on the different types of backyard composters available to home gardeners.

#### ***“Growing Grapes & Making Wine”***

**Date:** Monday, March 21  
**Time:** 7:00 – 8:00 PM  
**Place:** Glenwood Resource Center (711 S. Vine)  
Visitor’s Center Conference Room  
**Cost:** \$2.00

Doug Grave is a native of Iowa and the owner of Victorian Vineyards, one of the largest vineyards in western Iowa. He is also co-owner of Vine Street Cellars in Glenwood. Doug will share his knowledge of how to successfully grow grapes in our area and will cover the basics of wine making. Whether you are interested in having fresh table grapes or making wine, you’ll learn what it takes! Sure to be a fun evening!

#### ***“Solutions to Common Vegetable Garden Problems”***

**Date:** Monday, April 4  
**Time:** 7:00 – 8:00 PM  
**Place:** Glenwood Resource Center (711 S. Vine)  
Visitor’s Center Conference Room  
**Cost:** \$2.00

Were you discouraged by insects, diseases, and poor performance from your vegetable garden last year? You can arm yourself with the knowledge and information you need for this year when Dawn Epperson, from Dallas Johnson Greenhouses, presents this program covering some of the most common problems affecting the most popular vegetable crops. She will give you both organic and chemical treatment options and tell you what to look for *before* problems get out of hand!

#### ***“Invasion of the Exotics”***

**Date:** Monday, April 4  
**Time:** 7:00 – 8:00 PM  
**Place:** Glenwood Resource Center (711 S. Vine)  
Visitor’s Center Conference Room  
**Cost:** FREE!

The series will conclude with this program by Rich Pope, Harrison County Extension Program Director. Invasions by exotic plants is now considered one of the most serious problems facing native plant and wildlife populations. Rich will talk about which species are considered invasive in our area, and will answer questions such as “What makes a plant invasive?” “Why should I be concerned about invasives?” and “What can I do about them?” Come to learn how you can be part of the solution to this serious problem!

Refreshments served and Door Prizes  
drawn for at each session!

[The 55th Annual ISU Shade Tree Short Course  
and Iowa Nursery & Landscape Association  
Conference and Trade Show](#)

**Date:** February 23-25, 2011  
**Location:** Scheman Building-ISU Campus

Iowa State’s annual Shade Tree Short Course has teamed up with the INLA again in 2011! The program highlights the best of both worlds incorporating INLA’s long-standing trade show into the traditional Shade Tree Short Course educational sessions.

### Siouxland Garden Show

**Date:** Friday, March 18, 9am – 8pm  
Saturday, March 19, 9am – 6pm  
**Place:** Marina Center, S. Sioux City, NE  
**Cost:** \$5/day or \$9/two-day pass  
[www.extension.iastate.edu/woodbury](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/woodbury)

### Atlantic Garden Seminar

**Date:** Saturday, March 19  
**Time:** 8:00am – 5:00pm  
**Place:** Atlantic High School  
Call (712) 243-6606 for more information

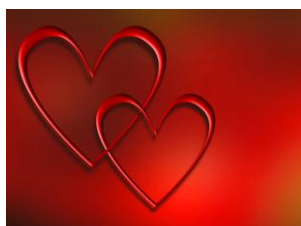
### West Pottawattamie Spring Gardening Conference

**Date:** Saturday, March 26  
**Time:** 8:30am – 4:00pm  
**Place:** Senior Citizen Center  
**Cost:** \$30  
[www.extension.iastate.edu/westpottawattamie](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/westpottawattamie)

geranium, petunia, snapdragon, pansy, impatiens, and salvia.

- Take pictures of your garden in winter.
- Browning of needles on evergreens is an indication of desiccation injury. This is common on newly planted evergreens in windy and sunny sites. To prevent injury, water these newly planted evergreens lightly once or twice during the winter, especially on warmer days.
- Keep monitoring stored fruits and vegetables. Remove any that have rotted.
- Check stored bulbs for sign of rot and disease. Discard infested bulbs immediately.
- Keep bird feeders filled. Remember to periodically clean feeders and water containers.
- Perennials can be started indoors much like annuals. Some seeds need to be stratified (a cold treatment) for weeks, soaked in tepid water overnight, or scarified (the seed coat scratched) prior to planting. Check label directions for seed treatment, timing, and planting directions.
- Do not shake or brush *frozen* snow off shrubs. This can cause more damage than if the snow is left in place.
- Rotate houseplants to prevent one-sided growth.
- Inspect young trees and shrubs for rabbit damage. Replace or repair protective coverings.

## FEBRUARY GARDENING TO DO LIST



- Prepare or repair lawn and garden tools for the upcoming season.
- Do not use softened water on houseplants as the salts are damaging to them.
- Check for “frost heaving”. Frost heaving is caused by alternate freezing and thawing of the soil. This can lift plants out of the soil, exposing roots and crowns. Position plants back into the ground and mulch to moderate the changes in soil temperatures.
- February is one of the best months to prune woody plants. Fruit trees, shade trees, raspberries, grapevines, and many shrubs can be pruned successfully while they are dormant. Dormant pruning is easier too, since you can see the branch structure because there are no leaves!
- Late this month start seeds of broccoli, cauliflower, and cabbage for planting outdoors in April. Some of the flowers to start include

### Resources for Horticulture information

ISU’s Hortline at (515) 294-3108

(Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-noon, 1-4:30 p.m)

### Iowa State University Publications

PM 874	Starting Garden Transplants at Home (free)
PM 683	Composting Yard Waste
PM 820	Garden Soil Management
RG 318	Early Spring Blooming Perennials
PM 1795	Common Butterflies of Iowa
RG 601	Gardening for Butterflies (free)
SUL 18	Introduction to Iowa Native Prairie Plants
SUL 20	References and Resources for Prairies and Native Plantings

### Horticulture Publications on-line

<https://www.extension.iastate.edu/store/ListCategories>

*Extension programs are available to all without regard to race, color, national origin, religion, sex, or disability.*