



### **Witch Hazel** (*Hamamelis virginiana*)

**Witch hazel** is a hardy Michigan native shrub that blooms in late fall—sometimes even while snow is falling—with bright yellow, sweetly fragrant flowers that curl and uncurl with temperature shifts to protect from frost. It thrives in moist, shaded woodlands, supports wildlife, offers medicinal bark and twigs, and brings rare color to the cold season.

Article by: Pat Grayer Wilson

## **The Oakland Gardener**

January 2026

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### **Monthly Plant Feature**

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### **Paper Birch** (*Betula papyrifera*)

Article and photos by: Joelle Calo

In Nordic traditions, the branches of Northern European birches were hung above doorways and barns to keep misfortune at bay. In Slavic countries, birch boughs were woven into midsummer festivals as symbols of renewal and healing during the brightest part of the year (Lewington, 2018). But the birches of European folklore are not the same ones we see here in Michigan. The white-barked tree

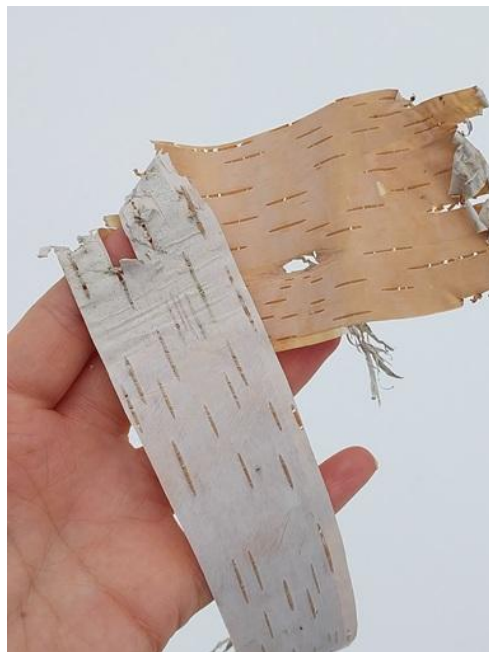


we know and love is the paper birch (*Betula papyrifera*), a North American species with its own history and cultural significance (Agricultural Research Service, USDA). Indigenous peoples of the Great Lakes, including the Ojibwe, knew it as *wiigwaas*, and it was so integral to their cultural understanding that it functions as a cultural keystone (Emery et al., 2014). Its bark became canoes, food-storage containers, shelter coverings, and the Midewiwin scrolls that preserved teachings, maps, and lineages. Harvesting birch bark required care and restraint: take only what you need, remove bark in thin sheets, and leave the tree alive to continue its work in the world (Arno and Hammerly, 2020). That ethic of reciprocity

is a lesson as relevant today as it was centuries ago.

Ecologically, paper birch is built for challenge. It is native to northern North America, stretching from Alaska across Canada and into the northern United States, including many of Michigan's forests, lakeshores, and old burn sites (Agricultural Research Service, USDA). It thrives in places recovering from disturbance. After wildfire or major clearing, paper birch is often one of the first trees to return (Uchytil, 1991). As a pioneering species, it grows quickly, casting just enough shade to create conditions for slower, longer-lived trees to establish beneath it. In this way, birch prepares the ground for the future forest. Without birch and other early successional species, many mixed hardwood forests would struggle to recover after major ecological events (Uchytil, 1991).

Despite its toughness, paper birch has a relatively short lifespan, usually between 80 and 140 years (Uchytil, 1991). What it accomplishes in that time is remarkable. One of its most recognizable features, the peeling white bark, is more than ornamental. The bark contains betulin, the compound responsible for its bright, light-reflecting color (Demets et al., 2022). In winter, this reflectivity protects the trunk from sunscald and temperature fluctuations. Betulin also slows fungal decay, allowing birch bark to remain intact long after the wood inside has broken down (Demets et al., 2022). This helps explain why birch bark artifacts (canoes, baskets, and scrolls) can still be found centuries later in good condition.



Paper birch leaves add another layer of ecological value. Oval and double-toothed, they turn a vivid yellow in fall, offering a flash of brightness before leaf drop (Arno and Hammerly, 2020). Wildlife depend on the tree year-round. Birds feed on its seeds, browse its buds, and nest in its branches. Moose and deer eat

the tender twigs. The tree functions as both stabilizer and provider within forest ecosystems (Uchytel, 1991).

Still, paper birch is sensitive to heat. When planted too far south or in increasingly warm climates, heat stress becomes a primary cause of decline (Uchytel, 1991). Warmer conditions can also increase pest and pathogen pressure, particularly from the bronze birch borer (Jones et al., 1993). In Michigan, where summers are warming and droughts are more frequent, gardeners and foresters are paying closer attention to where birch grows best and how to support it.

To stand beneath a paper birch is to stand with a species shaped by cold, recovery, and relationship. It grows quickly, gives generously, and asks only for cool roots and clear light. Perhaps that is why so many cultures, across continents, have woven birch into their stories. Here in the Great Lakes, the paper birch continues that tradition, not just as a symbol but as a living teacher in our forests, shorelines, and backyards.

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## Gardening Tips and Tricks

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### 2026 Resolve to Garden

Article and photo by: Louise Sloan

The new year is upon us, and after sitting in the disbelief that 2026 is here, it's a good time to think about those New Year's Resolutions. Gardening resolutions are far more palatable than either a gym membership or a high-protein diet, but are also just as likely to improve your well-being. Being outdoors is a well-documented way to lower stress levels, so including garden resolutions to the list of must-dos in 2026 is more than reasonable—and far less painful than waking at 6 am to head to the gym.



**1. Make a Garden Plan** - With the cold temps, blowing winds, and slippery ground, cozying up with a cup of coffee or tea and looking out the window is a fine way to start the year. Take stock of what worked last year, but more importantly, think about the things that failed. How can you improve upon those lessons? Start a list of those projects you'd like to complete throughout 2026 and set yourself up for success. Once the weather warms, you'll be able to tackle that list and turn those spots of disappointment into gardening joys.

**2. Sign Up for Learning Activities** - MSU's Extension offers a multitude of learning experiences throughout the year—many of which are advertised right here in the newsletter. Take advantage of the information experts in horticulture are sharing. Seasoned gardeners know that there are always new developments in plants, techniques, and research to help improve your corner of the

world. Don't discount a trip to the library, either. Besides hosting speaking events, local libraries contain many books on a wide range of gardening techniques. A foray down the gardening section may even help you accomplish your planning resolution!

**3. Plan a Garden Trip** - Visiting other gardens is a great way to gain inspiration for your own space. We are lucky in SE Michigan to have many open spaces and inviting gardens to feast your eyes upon. Michigan State's perennial garden, arboretum, and 4-H Children's Gardens are a great place to start your exploration. These gardens offer a variety of settings, display a varied planting scheme, and showcase the effective use of annuals. Pro tip: plan your visit around the MSU Dairy's hours, and you can top off the trip with an ice cream treat.

**4. Take Time to Enjoy** - Gardeners, present company included, focus on the work that needs doing. That work is truly never-ending and can be a joy in and of itself. Gardens, though, are places of wonder. Even in this cold weather, our yards can become frozen statues that glisten in the sun or a place where you can watch squirrels hide nuts. Spring's arrival is common, but watching buds set or robin's eggs hatch is a delight. Thinking about how a seed germinates and can grow into huge sunflowers or into a multitude of cucumbers is mind-blowing. Take a minute to consider why you garden and bask in the glory of it all.

No matter your resolutions for the year, the turning of the calendar brings us ever closer to longer days and hours spent in the garden. Here's to the anticipation of all that is to grow in 2026!

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## Gardening Deep Dive

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### Adding Winter Interest to the Garden

Article by: Liz Will

January can feel like a little bit of a letdown in the garden. Most plants are dormant, beds are bare, and everything just looks... brown. Here in Michigan, winter tends to be long, which makes it hard for gardeners who

love to be out there, creating beauty.

But January is actually one of the best times to really look at your garden. When flowers and foliage are gone, it becomes obvious which areas are still pleasing to the eye and which spots feel bare or unfinished. In summer, it's easy to overlook those gaps because everything is growing and filling in. In winter, there's nowhere to hide.

This is why winter is such a helpful season for planning.

When we talk about adding winter interest, we're not talking about blooms. Winter interest comes from structure, texture, and subtle details that stick around after

the growing season ends.

Shrubs and small trees do a lot of heavy lifting during the coldest season. Plants with interesting branching, seed heads, or bark stand out once everything else dies back. Leaving some perennials standing through winter can also add texture and give birds a food source. Ornamental grasses, especially, add movement and height, even after a light snowfall.

Evergreens can help too, but they don't need to be everywhere. A few well-placed evergreens near an entryway, along a path, or as a backdrop in a bed can make a space feel more grounded without overwhelming the garden.

Winter is also when garden structures really stand out. Trellises, arbors, fences, raised beds, and even garden paths become much more noticeable when plants aren't competing for attention. These features give the garden shape year-round and are worth considering when a space feels empty in winter.

One of the simplest things you can do right now is take a slow walk through your garden. No tools needed. Just observe. Notice where your eye goes and where it doesn't. Pay attention to areas that completely disappear in winter. Taking a few photos or jotting down notes can make spring planning much easier.

The goal isn't to redesign your entire garden at once. Small changes add up. Adding one shrub, leaving more perennials standing, or incorporating a simple structure can make a big difference over time.

Winter may feel quiet, but it's not wasted time. It's a season for noticing, learning, and planning. And what you notice now can help you build a garden that looks better. A garden that pleases the eye not just in summer, but all year long.

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## Gardening for Health and Wellness

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### **Mindful Eating Through Gardening: How Growing Your Own Boosts Awareness, Health & Connection**

Article and photo by: Sophia Speroff, MPH, RD

Gardening is more than a hobby — it can nourish both body and mind. When you grow your own food, you naturally become more aware of what you eat, where it comes from, and how it makes you feel. This blend of gardening and mindful eating creates a pathway toward better health,

more intentional choices, and a deeper connection to each meal. As both a Master Gardener and a Registered Dietitian, I've seen how planting even a small seed can lead to meaningful improvements in eating habits and overall wellness.

### **How Gardening Encourages Healthier Eating**

Research consistently shows that people who garden tend to eat more fruits and vegetables. Harvard Health reports that adults who begin gardening increase their daily fiber intake and improve diet quality, even within the first growing season. Gardening also supports regular movement and reduces stress -- both factors strongly tied to healthier eating behaviors and improved mood in winter.

Eating from your own garden, even if you're using canned tomatoes, winter squash, frozen herbs, or root crops from fall, makes produce more appealing and intentional. Harvard's Nutrition Source notes that when food is flavorful and visually appealing, people are more likely to slow down and savor it — a key part of mindful eating.

### **What Mindful Eating Really Means**

Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health defines mindful eating as paying attention to the full eating experience — noticing hunger, flavor, texture, aroma, and fullness without distraction. Instead of eating from habit or distraction, mindful eating encourages slowing down, noticing the moment, and appreciating the food on your plate.

In winter, when boredom or stress eating can increase, mindful eating becomes especially helpful. Seasonal routines are quieter, meals are heartier, and comfort foods are common. Mindfulness helps shift habits from automatic eating to purposeful nourishment.

### **How Gardening Naturally Builds Mindfulness**

Even when the ground is frozen, gardening remains a mindful practice in Michigan. Planning seed purchases, sketching garden layouts, growing microgreens, and tending indoor herbs all create sensory connection and intention. The Stanford Center on Longevity emphasizes that fiber-rich, plant-forward eating supports healthy aging and chronic disease prevention. Winter is a great time to set up habits that pay off once planting season begins.

Spending time with plants, even indoors, reduces stress hormones, supports mood, and encourages slower, more thoughtful eating behaviors. Simple winter garden activities include:

- Growing basil, parsley, or cilantro under a grow light
- Growing sprouts or microgreens in jars or trays
- Reviewing seed catalogs and selecting new varieties to try
- Preserving and rotating stored produce like squash, potatoes, and onions

### **Gardening and Mindful Eating: A Natural Pairing**

Combining gardening with mindful eating deepens your relationship with food:

- **You notice food more.** Take the first bite slowly, noticing flavor, crunch, aroma, and texture. Watching tomatoes grow from seedling to fruit makes you more aware when you slice or taste it.
- **You savor flavors.** Pause before eating to appreciate the effort behind each ingredient. Homegrown produce often tastes richer and fresher, encouraging slower, more appreciative bites.
- **You tune in to hunger.** Mindful eating helps separate true hunger from habit or stress. Use smaller, intentional portions and check in with your hunger halfway through the meal.
- **You cook more intentionally.** Harvesting herbs or greens often inspires meals built around fresh ingredients instead of convenience foods.

Combining winter gardening habits with mindful eating offers a full-circle approach to wellness: planning food, growing it intentionally, preserving summer flavors, and enjoying each bite with awareness. Even in January, when Michigan gardens rest, mindful gardening and mindful eating continue to nourish body, mind, and connection — one small seed and one mindful meal at a time.

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## Winter is Waiting for You!

Article and photos by: Jamiel Dado

January can be a bleak time in Michigan. After the holiday celebrations die down, all we are left with is the realization that the next few months will be cruelly cold. Gardeners tend to gravitate their affections towards the warmer months, when the landscape is alive with shades of green and a seemingly endless parade of technicolor splendor. It surely is easy to succumb to these feelings and pseudo-hibernate until the spring. You *could* focus all of your attentions towards your houseplants and seed catalogs. There is, however, a viable alternative to shutting yourself inside. Embrace the elements and explore your favorite gardens and trails as they exist this time of year.



A famous saying, often attributed to author **Alfred Wainwright** (but also by every Scandinavian country and Germany), says that, “There’s no such thing as bad weather, only unsuitable clothing.” Whoever truly deserves the credit for the saying is not as important as the sentiment itself. It is easy to forget that as schoolchildren, we were forced out onto the playground every day, regardless of ideal circumstances, and most of

us could not wait to get back outside when school was done for the day. So, put on your warmest coat, grab your gloves and hat, and throw on those boots and get out there!

You might think that visiting your favorite garden this time of year would be a dreary slog around an unforgiving tundra, but that is far from the reality. There is an otherworldly stillness to a winter garden that is almost as inviting as any warmer month might be. The term “**winter interest**” is often brought up while picking various perennials for planting and now is the time of year to really understand what that means. When planted correctly, a winter garden can offer quite a lot of greens and reds. In fact, native plantings that are left for winter wildlife add to the structural enjoyment of the snowy landscape. In addition to all the organic beauty, there is of course all the hardscaping elements that are every bit as aesthetically pleasing as they ever are.

Getting out of the structured gardens and onto some trails is a sure-fire way to fully appreciate the wintery environment that we find ourselves in. **Forest bathing** is no less effective in the wintertime. The sound of your boots crunching through the snow pairs beautifully with the otherwise quiet emptiness that you might



encounter. Certainly, you are less likely to encounter others on your winter hike, affording you an opportunity for contemplation and restfulness.

If the idea of scraping off your car and unnecessarily traveling anywhere sounds inhibitive, then simply rediscover your own garden. Sure, we all glance out the window every so often at our yards and dream of the growing season to come, but when was the last time you got out there and really spent some time? This is a great opportunity to see what your garden is up to this time of year. It might surprise you! Also, if you find that you are lacking in winter interest, now is a great time to make some plans so that next winter your garden is more enjoyable in the cold months.



There is no doubt that sitting under a cozy blanket with a hot cup of whatever you like is the default enjoyment in January, but why not mix it up a little, throw on some suitable clothing, and go and explore all the nature that is out there waiting for you!



Smart Gardening is MSU Extension's campaign using earth-friendly messages to help gardeners make smart choices in their own backyards. The goal is to equip gardeners with a "tool kit" of research-based knowledge to use immediately at home. Whether choosing plants, using garden chemicals, fertilizer or applying water, gardeners need to understand the long-term impacts on their communities. For more Smart Gardening information click [here](#).



### Ask Extension

Call the MSU Extension Lawn and Garden Hotline at 1-888-678-3464 (Monday, Wednesday and Friday 9am to noon)

## Upcoming Events

**The Meadow Brook Garden Club**

Friday, January 23, 2026, at Meadow Brook Hall, 350 Estate Dr., Rochester MI 48309-1904.



Coffee and refreshments will be served at 9:15 a.m. with program to follow at 10:00 a.m. featuring guest speaker, Marilyn Trent, Founder of Rochester Pollinators. Marilyn's topic is Petals, Pollinators & Pocket Forests. Michigan native plants, shrubs and trees nourish hundreds of local species, including butterflies, pollinators and songbirds. Discover how easy it is to grow natives and to create restorative natural landscapes that bring beauty, resilience and joy to any garden.

Please enter through the De Carlo Visitor Center. Guests are welcome and reservations are not required. There is a \$5 non-member fee. For more information, call 248-364-6210, email MBGC@Oakland.edu.

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JOIN US ONLINE!  
**INTRODUCTION  
TO LAKES**  
6 WEEK COURSE  
STARTS IN JANUARY!  
[canr.msu.edu/lakesonline](http://canr.msu.edu/lakesonline)

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension

## Learn about Michigan's inland lakes online from MSU Extension

Registration is now open for the award-winning *Introduction to Lakes Online* course from Michigan State University Extension! Offered once a year, this six-week self-paced introductory class is perfect for anyone looking to deepen their understanding of Michigan's inland lakes—from lakefront property owners and concerned residents, to local leaders and decision-makers.

Led by MSU Extension experts and state agency professionals, the course explores a variety of topics including lake ecology, watershed management, shoreline protection, aquatic plants, Michigan water law, and community engagement. Participants learn about these topics through video lectures, interactive activities, and lively discussion forums. Additional resources are also provided for those looking to dive deeper. The course also features biweekly "Ask-an-Expert" webinars with guest speakers from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy. A certificate of completion is awarded to those who complete the class.

Registration is open now through January 27, 2026. The cost of the course is \$115 per person. Register by January 5 for an early bird price of \$95 per person. A limited number of scholarships are available. Current individual members of the Michigan Lakes and Streams Association are eligible to receive a \$95 reimbursement upon their first successful completion of the course.

Participants also can receive continuing education credits including 16 Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Pesticide Applicator Re-Certification credits (8 commercial core and 8 aquatic) and educational hours in the MSU Extension Master Gardener, Master Citizen Planner, and Michigan Naturalist programs.

Ready to dive in? Learn more and register at [www.canr.msu.edu/lakesonline](http://www.canr.msu.edu/lakesonline).

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## **PLANT QUEST 2026**

This four-part winter webinar series is a perfect holiday gift for yourself or a friend! Register and pay by January 4th to receive a \$10 early-bird discount. Just click on this link [PLANT QUEST 2026](#) to learn more and register for PLANT QUEST 2026!

*Give the gift of PLANT QUEST!*



# Plant Quest



January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2026  
***Tempting Tropicals  
for Temperate Gardens***  
with Marc Hachadourian



January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2026  
***Working Together to  
Protect and Preserve  
Trees for the Future***  
with Kim Shearer



January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2026  
***Gravel Gardens: Gardens  
for our Changing Climate***  
with Jeff Epping



January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2026  
***Adventure in  
Ecological Horticulture***  
with Rebecca McMackin





# Foundations of GARDENING



Start your  
gardening  
journey!

Take the Foundations of Gardening course to learn the science behind a great garden, or to apply to become an MSU Extension Master Gardener

**Winter class: February 12- April 16, 2026**  
**Registration opens December 2, 2025**

<https://www.canr.msu.edu/courses/foundations-of-gardening>



Visit our Website

## Indian Springs Metropark Second Annual Seed Swap & Sale

January 31, 2026 from 11am-2pm

# Seed SWAP & SALE

Free! All ages! You do not need to bring seeds to attend!

**When:** Saturday, January 31, 2026  
11am to 2pm

**Where:** Indian Springs Metropark  
Environmental Discovery Center  
5200 Indian Trail, White Lake MI 48386

**What:** Bring seeds to swap.  
Stock up on seeds for spring.  
Connect with fellow plant and nature lovers.

**Who:** All are welcome!

**How:** Vendors register for free at [metroparks.com](http://metroparks.com)  
or email [Leah.Soles@metroparks.com](mailto:Leah.Soles@metroparks.com)

Questions? contact us at 248.625.6640



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## Hardy Plant Society (Great Lakes) Meeting

**Date:** February 2nd, 2026

**Time:** 7 PM

**Location:** Oudolf Gardens on Belle Isle

**Visit Our Facebook Page for More Info**

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# 2026 SMART GARDENING CONFERENCE

March 28, 2028  
WCCCD Ted Scott Campus  
Belleville, MI

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension

**Registration will open SOON!!**

[View Our Event](#)

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**OAKLAND  
COUNTY PARKS**



*Please Join Us for a*  
**STAKEHOLDER  
ENGAGEMENT SESSION**

**We invite you to be among the first to learn about Mission 26, a strategic plan to take Oakland County Parks into the next era.**

**Wednesday, Jan. 14 2026  
10 a.m.-Noon or 6-8 p.m.**

The Hawk - Farmington Hills  
Community Center  
29995 W. 12 Mile Road  
Farmington Hills, MI 48073



Light fare will be included. Please RSVP by Jan. 5  
at [bit.ly/Engage\\_RSVP](https://bit.ly/Engage_RSVP)

**News You Can Use**



## Winter sowing in containers for Michigan gardeners

**Lindsey Kerr and Barslund Judd, Michigan State University Extension - December 04, 2025**

Winter seed sowing is a fantastic way to take advantage of winter's chilly temperatures to help germinate seeds that require cold stratification. Some seeds need cold stratification to break dormancy, meaning they won't germinate until they have experienced a long period of freezing or near-freezing temperatures. There are cases where seeds may require multiple stratification periods to break dormancy. Seed dormancy is a mechanism that prevents the seed from germinating too early or when conditions are unfavorable. This survival mechanism is an important way to ensure a higher survival rate for young plants.

[Read More](#)

## Registration now open for MSU Extension's winter online Foundations of Gardening course

**Sarah Rautio and Ruth Dorando Marcy, Michigan State University Extension - December 03, 2025**

Learn the science behind great gardens this winter with a gardening course from **Michigan State University Extension** (MSU Extension). The next **Foundations of Gardening course** runs from Feb. 12-April 16, 2026, with live sessions taking place on Thursday evenings from 6-8:30 p.m. The online format enables you to participate from home with a variety of learning materials, including videos, readings and webinars. Winter is the perfect time to be part of this informative course that prepares you to start a smarter and more productive garden when spring comes.

[Read More](#)



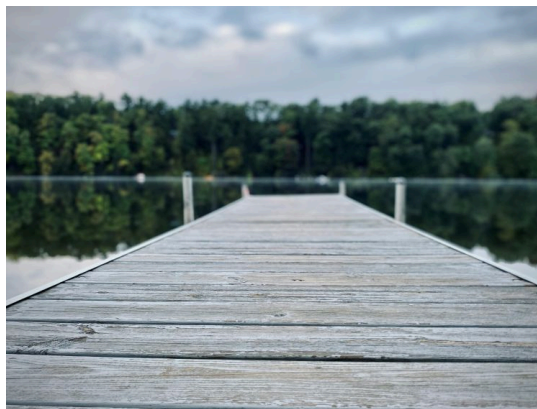
## Propagating Jack-in-the-pulpit

**Barslund Judd, Michigan State University Extension** - November 18, 2025

Updated from an original article written by Gretchen Voyle.

Not all seeds get the chance to grow into plants, some will die in unfavorable conditions, others may rot, while lucky seeds will be spread by wildlife. With a little help in your garden, you can improve their germination rate and potentially produce dozens of offspring. These perennial plants will return year after year from their corm, which stores nutrients from year to year. Jack-in-the-pulpit grows best in rich, damp soil. They grow in woodlands, boggy areas and stream banks.

[Read More](#)



## Extended version of MSU Extension's popular Conservation Stewards Program coming to capital region in 2026

**Audrey Etzin-Gagner, Michigan State University Extension** - December 12, 2025

**Michigan State University Extension** is now enrolling participants for its **extended, pilot version** of the popular **Conservation Stewards Program (CSP)** beginning in 2026 for the Tri-County Area, including Clinton, Eaton, and Ingham Counties.

With the same high-quality, hybrid curriculum and hands-on learning experiences as the original CSP program, the **Extended Conservation Stewards Program (ECSP) pilot** provides participants with an extended timeline that allows for deeper engagement with the material, their cohort peers, and when applying their skills to real-world conservation projects.

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