

Take time to prepare for spring

BY MARGE ALPERN
SPECIAL WRITER

Gardeners, it's time to take a rest! That's what all of nature is doing now. The earth needs this time to lie fallow if it is to come alive in a few months and bring forth beauty and bounty. We, too, are given these quiet months to rest, contemplate, regroup and prepare ourselves for the renewed life of spring.

The Chinese have an encouraging ancient saying: "The harsher the winter, the more beautiful the spring." If this is true, spring 1994 should break all records, just as the severe winter of 1994 has done.

The bitter cold, the frozen soil and the heavy blanket of snow should bring forth tremendous growth. Snow, which farmers call "the poor man's fertilizer," sends valuable nitrogen deep down into the soil and the abundant moisture goes to the farthest roots of the large trees.

There is very little work to be done outside now, but it is still the gardener's pleasure to tramp through the snow and check it all out. Knock the icicles off the house, check the bird feeders, but don't take a snow shovel to the garden evergreen boughs. The latest reports indicate that more branches are broken by a well-intentioned homeowner than by the weight of the snow.

Promising plants

This is the first year I have forced the witch-hazel shrub,

GARDENING

Hemamelis variety, "Arnold's Promise" for bloom in the house. This small shrub thrives at the edge of the shade garden in acid soil and is the first shrub to bloom in early spring, at least a month before the forsythia. The golden yellow, ribbon-like flowers cascade down, making an unusual and welcome display. I'm surprised it isn't used more widely, and I recommend you consider planting it.

The rhododendrons, which share the protected northern shade area with the witch-hazel, also have a winter feature that I enjoy. They are true thermometers.

During the cold weather the leaves hang almost vertically and look wizened and dead. At 40 degrees they automatically perk up and are proudly held horizontally. It is as though they are waving and signalling us to give them their second application of Wilt-Pruf, which is available at many hardware and garden supply stores.

Wilt-Pruf is an organic, non-hazardous film protector that should be applied at temperatures of 40 degrees or above. The first coat goes on in November or December and the second one in late winter. These two coats help prevent winter burn when drying winds and frozen ground deprive the plants of their natural moisture. Check out the numerous

swollen buds on the vigorous "rhodies." They are promises of spring from these priceless landmarks in the shade garden. Wilt-Pruf can be used on any broad-leaved or narrow-leaved evergreen that is in a location where it gets dangerous exposure.

Checking up

The tall ornamental grasses have definitely lost their proud magnificence, and the dancing parchment-colored plumes and flowing foliage no longer look so stunning. Any day now I will be home really tired of them and cut them down to the ground as the first step in the spring cleanup. The low-growing grasses shouldn't be cut back until later, after the new growth is well up. At that time the old foliage can be selectively removed.

The dahlias tubers have been resting in the cool, dark basement in boxes and bags of peat moss. Once or twice during the winter I sprinkle a cup or two of warm water over the peat moss and stir it up. The tubers shouldn't be allowed to dry out nor to become so moist that disease and rot set in.

I don't take them out of the peat or divide them until just a few weeks before planting time. Starting them indoors too early produces weak and spindly young shoots.

If you didn't check your garden equipment in the fall, now is a good time to clean it up and get it ready. The Neighborhood Pro

Hardware, 1260 S. Woodward in Birmingham, offers a fine service. They sharpen all small hand garden tools as well as hedge cutters, scissors and knives. If you bring the tools in on Monday, you can pick them up on Thursday, or bring them in on Thursday and pick them up the following Tuesday.

Neighborhood's fast and inexpensive service has been a real help to me. Old, even cheap pruners are greatly improved and go through the gardening season with blades I can count on.

Indoor activity

Indoors the story is much the same, it's still winter. But the houseplants, although they aren't actively growing, are quite demanding. The soil dries out rapidly in our overheated, under-humidified homes. Even if the soil isn't dry, often the foliage is stressed and looks dehydrated.

Frequent dusting, sponging or misting will not only help plants look their best, it will also help guarantee them getting through to spring. As the days lengthen and early growth activity is visible, a weak dilution of fertilizer can be judiciously applied.

Nature is getting restless and will soon stretch and wake up. How about you?

Marge Alpern is a Birmingham-based freelance writer and avid gardener.

Color trends shown

Decorating Den, the largest in-home interior decorating franchise company, will host a free decorating workshop, "Today's Color Trends for the Home," 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 10, at the Guest Quarters Hotel in Troy.

Seating is limited. Call 1-313-513-6900 for reservations and information.

This workshop will demonstrate the latest in decorating tips and ideas to enhance your home, and offer exciting ideas on the latest information about the color fashions for your home in the 1990s. The presentation will feature before and after slides of rooms that have been professionally decorated

by Decorating Den interior decorators, showing colors that reflect each homeowner's lifestyle.

The event is sponsored by Louise Oliver, Patricia Duffield, Shirley Burg and Paula Martin, all of Decorating Den.

Decorating Den is a complete in-home affordable decorating service established 25 years ago, with more than 1,200 franchise owners. These interior decorators bring thousands of samples of drapery, furniture, carpet, wallcoverings and more to their customers' homes or offices in specially equipped Color Vans. Consultations are complimentary.

Create dream kitchen

Design the kitchen you've always wanted during a series of free seminars at Ethan Allen Interiors, 15700 Middlebelt, Livonia.

The series will be led by Mary Ford, Ethan Allen Kitchen specialist and certified kitchen designer with more than 15 years experience in kitchen design and remodeling.

She will share key design principles behind creating the kitchen that's right for you. She'll be on hand after each seminar to answer individual questions.

Topics include:
■ "Creating the Kitchen of Your Dreams," 2:30-4 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 6 and March 6. An overview of design considerations to keep in mind when planning a functional, beautiful and efficient

kitchen. Cabinet selection and costs will be covered.

■ "Turning an Ugly into a Wow!," 2:30-4 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 13 and March 13. Learn design tips for updating the look of an existing kitchen and how to make what exists more functional.

■ "Creating a Kitchen that Reflects Your Decor," 2:30-4 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 20 and March 20. Find out how to coordinate kitchen decor with the areas of your home that open up to the kitchen space. Learn about appropriate window and wall treatments as well as selecting other kitchen products.

Light refreshments will follow the seminars.

Call or stop by to make a reservation: 313-261-7780.

Project display offers you a special look

What would you look like as an Asian woman? How about a Hispanic man or a black child? The Morph program, which will be on display as a part of The Colored Museum Project in Ann Arbor, will let you find out.

Your image will be input by a video camera onto a computer screen. From there, you can manipulate your looks.

This weeklong project is designed in four parts: an exhibit on blacks chronicling their history through interactive displays; a production of George Wolfe's award-winning play, "The Colored Museum"; a symposium featuring major American artists; and a series of play readings.

The Colored Museum Project was named after Wolfe's play,

which will kick off the week's activities. Call 313-763-9713 for information and a complete schedule of readings and symposium activities.

"The Colored Museum" will run 8 p.m. Feb. 10 and 12-16, with a late show 10:30 p.m. Friday, Feb. 11, and a matinee 4 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 13. A special benefit performance and reception will take place 7 p.m. Feb. 11.

All performances will be in the Trueblood Theatre, in the Frieze Building on State Street in Ann Arbor. Tickets are \$12 general, \$6 students and \$25 for the special benefit. All proceeds raised from the production will go toward establishing a scholarship fund for students of color to attend the University of Michigan and study

in the performing arts. For ticket information, call the League Ticket Office at 313-764-0450.

The exhibits will be displayed in the Frieze Building and can be viewed before and after the production.

The symposium will begin 1:30 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 12, in the Rackham Auditorium and will feature major American playwrights, directors and performers. The topic will be "Multi-ethnic Theater in the 21st Century." Panel discussions will explore how theater must reflect America's changing ethnic identity.

Panelists include Ntozake Shange, author of "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuff"; Jeff Daniels, creator of The Fur-

ple Rose Theatre and film actor ("Gettysburg," "The Butcher's Wife," "Arachnophobia"); Oz Scott, Broadway and TV director; Balkide Carroll, composer; Dawn Chiang, Broadway lighting designer; Velina Hasu Houston, playwright ("Tea and Necessities"); Oyamo, playwright ("The Resurrection of Lady Lester"); Jude Narita, award-winning playwright and actress; Ken Johnson, associate artistic director of Crowsnest Theatre; Ruben Sierra, Los Angeles director; and Victor En Yu Tan, award-winning lighting designer.

In addition to the panels, a series of readings of plays written by the attending artists will be presented daily Feb. 11-16 in the Frieze Building.

Print day slated

The Paint Creek Center for the Arts will offer a one-session adult workshop, "Print Day," 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 19.

Bring your own negatives and paper to spend the day printing. Workshop participants should have previous experience in black and white photography. The deadline for registration is Wednesday, Feb. 9. For more information, call the PCCA at 810-651-4110 between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday.

DIA sets training

Gallery service volunteers are needed to assist and assist visitors in the museum galleries at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

No special qualifications or background are required. A training session will take place 1:30-3:30 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 5, in the Holley Room at the DIA, 5200 Woodward. For more information, call 833-0247 between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. weekdays.



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- How can you speed the sale of your home?
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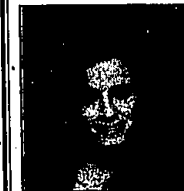
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