

The Latest Dirt

La Porte County Master Gardener Newsletter



JANUARY 2026

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

ASSOCIATION NEWS	2
LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT	2
HOLIDAY GREENS EVENT	3
HOLIDAY DINNER	4
IN MEMORIAM – RIMA BINDER	4
EDUCATION	5
JESI'S CORNER	6
GARDENING ARTICLE-CARROTS	7
GARDENER'S LATIN LIABILITY	9

2026 MEETING SCHEDULE

Meetings will be held at 6:00 p.m. on Thursday at the La Porte Main Library Meeting Room B, unless otherwise noted

January 8	Business Meeting
February 5	Workshop
March 5	Business Meeting
April 2	Workshop
May 7	Business Meeting
June 4	Workshop
July 2	Business Meeting
August 6	Workshop
September 3	Business Meeting
October 1	Workshop
November	Business Meeting
December 3	Election of Officers Holiday Dinner Party

NEXT BOARD MEETING

January 12th- 6:00 p.m.
Extension Office

"THE LATEST DIRT" is published monthly.
The next deadline is December 20, 2025

www.lpmastergardener.org
<https://www.facebook.com/MasterGardenersLaPorteCounty>



PURDUE EXTENSION
MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM

Gardening Tips for January

By: Rosie Lerner

With the holidays over and we get back to normal, here's a few tips to keep those holiday plants you got healthy and to start thinking about spring.

Home (indoor plants and activities)

- Keep holiday poinsettias and other plants near a bright window. Water as top of soil becomes dry.
- Increase humidity around houseplants by grouping plants together, placing them on a pebble-water tray or running a humidifier.
- Check stored produce and tender flower bulbs and roots for rot, shriveling or excess moisture. Remove and discard damaged material.
- Repot houseplants as they outgrow current pots.

Yard (lawns, woody ornamentals and fruits)

- Check young trees for rodent injury on lower trunks. Prevent injury with hardware cloth or protective collars.
- Keep road and sidewalk salt away from plants. Construct a screen of burlap, if necessary, to keep salt spray off plants.
- "Leaf" through nursery catalogs or visit websites and make plans for landscape and home orchard additions. Order plants early for best selection.
- Early spring-flowering trees and shrubs such as forsythia, crabapple, flowering quince, and flowering dogwood can be forced for early indoor blooms by placing cut branches in water in a warm location.

Garden (flowers, vegetables and small fruits)

- Send for seed catalogs for the garden.
- Sketch your garden plans on paper, including what to grow, spacing, arrangement and number of plants needed.
- Order seeds and plants as early as possible for best selection.
- Wood ashes from the fireplace can be spread in the garden, but don't overdo it. Wood ashes increase soil pH, and excess application can make some nutrients unavailable for plant uptake. Have soil tested to be certain of the pH before adding wood ash.

ASSOCIATION NEWS

Letter from the President

Vicki Znavor

I am excited about 2026 and hope that you are as well. I am excited about my second and final year as president and even more excited about the new members of the board. There is a wonderful mix of long-term and new members, and I am hopeful that together we will create exciting opportunities to *help others grow*.

I loved seeing so many of you at the holiday party. Theresa Dzoga-Borg did a great job selecting the room and several members arrived early to create a lovely event for everyone to enjoy. Amy Cooper and Karen Sarver made the centerpieces, Maria Maule brought white tablecloths, Mike Altman said grace, many brought fun gifts for the white elephant gift exchange, and the wait staff was exceptional. What I observed is what I always observe with this group – we come together to create beautiful things not only for others but for each other.

I enjoyed getting to know two new members who attended the dinner – Michele Vargas and her son Shawn Vargas. Welcome Shawn & Michele!

I also really enjoyed the wreath-making workshop. Many of us have never made a wreath with live greens, but it was pretty easy, and the wreaths were absolutely gorgeous. A few attendees created baskets, and they were lovely as well. Kit's granddaughter had a blast with all the ribbons and festive picks and her basket was gorgeous. Special thanks to Karen, Amy, and Theresa for gathering the greens and getting things ready. And thanks so much to Donna Pouzar who patiently taught us what to do.

Looking ahead, I hope that we can start the new year off with great attendance at our January 8th business meeting (6:00 pm, La Porte Main Library, Room B). **We will be talking about the projects that we anticipate in 2026 and possibly early 2027.** Here are some of the projects we will seek your thoughts on:

- Pioneer Garden – We need help leading the team that supports it
- Palladin Head Start
- Friendship Gardens
- Long Beach
- Community Grants (these have already been approved for 2026)
- The hotline
- Doug Tallamy
- 2027 Garden Show?
- Other Suggestions from the membership

Your input is needed and wanted. Please attend the meeting or, if it's not possible, please contact one of the officers and let us know what you want to propose.

2026 Board Members

At the November board meeting, board members were selected as follows:

- Vicki Znavor, President
- Tom Boesen, Vice President
- Maria Maule, Treasurer
- Kim Varga, Recording Secretary
- Amy Cooper, Corresponding Secretary
- Metta Barbour, Education/Speakers' Bureau
- Janet Davis, Education/Speakers' Bureau
- Kit Knoll, Education/Speakers' Bureau
- Carol Nolan, Immediate Past President

I'm excited about the rest of the year. I have learned a lot from all of you, and I truly want you to know that I want us to have as many members working on things as possible, things that make a difference. You have a voice; we want to hear you so it's important that you share your thoughts with us. Most importantly, I hope we can make some beautiful memories together this year. May you and your loved ones have a wonderful new year.

Holiday Greens Event

By: Karen Sarver



Our first Holiday Greens event was held on Sunday afternoon, December 7 after a snow-related delay. Initially scheduled for November 30, the heavy snowfall and cold temperatures pushed us out by a week.

We rallied to find a new location as the Fairgrounds that Sue Salisbury coordinated for us were committed to their own holiday event on the seventh. Thanks goes out to Master Gardener Bev Griffith for securing the new location at her church, the First United Methodist Church in Michigan City.

Our original instructor, Kim Varga (a new LPCMG member) could not participate on the new date. We are thankful for Donna Pouzar for stepping in at the last minute to lead the workshop. We were also fortunate to have access to George Sarver's new truck to store the 72 pounds of evergreen materials. Thank you to Karen and George for that!

Participants chose one of two projects to construct. Kim Varga had made a demonstration wreath as well as a sample of a basket arrangement for a hearth. This latter item included a small yew tree that can be replanted in the garden.

We had a lovely time. In total, 15 members and guests learned about evergreen varieties and made beautiful items to enjoy this holiday season.

HOLIDAY DINNER Christo's Restaurant



The Holiday Dinner Party held at Christo's Family Dining on Thursday December 4, was a lovely event. We had a wonderful turn out and two new members, Michele and Shawn Vargas attended.

The evening began with a fun game where everyone was given a sheet with scrambled letters that made up various words associated with Christmas. You had

to unscramble these words within a certain timeframe. There were quite a few people who did very well, but Brenda Altman was the winner and received a lovely prize.

Mike Altman said Grace before dinner was served. During dinner members who brought gifts participated in the White Elephant gift exchange and to complete the evening, Marcy Dailey recited her entertaining poem "Gardener's Latin Liability." (See Page 9)

A big "thank you" to Amy Cooper and Karen Sarver who made the beautiful centerpieces which went home with the lucky person who had the lucky number under their placemat; and to Maria Maule who supplied the white tablecloths.

It was a lovely evening and a lovely way to end a good year.



IN MEMORIAM

Rima Binder was born on March 21, 1939, in Lithuania. In the summer of 1944, she and her parents fled Lithuania and settled in Chicago in 1950. In 1962, she married Walter J. Binder Jr. her devoted husband and lifelong partner who passed away last November.



Rima dedicated her life to education and service. She was a proud member of the community of Long Beach, Indiana; she was on the board of the La Porte County Symphony Orchestra and past President of the Illinois Association for Gifted Children. Rima was a board member and then board president of Friendship Botanic Gardens. As an advocate for the Gardens, she accomplished much over her years as a volunteer, gardener, and board member. She conducted countless tours of the gardens to numerous organizations and gardening clubs educating them on the history and horticultural aspects of the gardens.

She was a long-time member of the La Porte County Master Gardener Association and Project Coordinator for Friendship Botanic Gardens where master gardeners volunteer to help maintain the many gardens which benefit and educate the surrounding community.

EDUCATION

Plant Quest



Registration is now **OPEN** for the four-part winter webinar series—PLANT QUEST!

Join us on this year's quest to find amazing plants, new gardening techniques, exciting design ideas, and the latest environmental best practices for your garden!

Michigan State University Extension's West Michigan Consumer Horticulture Team is excited to host PLANT QUEST 2026's speaker line up of noted authors, educators, and horticulturists! This year we will be focusing our lenses on utilizing the bold colors and textures of tropicals in temperate gardens, tree conservation efforts in the Midwest, the benefits of gravel gardening, and combining garden beauty with ecological insights.

This webinar is designed to be easily accessible and available at your convenience. Join every **Monday evening in January** on ZOOM LIVE or watch any time after using the recording link sent to you each week. Just in time for holiday giving, this webinar series will warm your winter with visions of beautiful plants and lush gardens. Register and complete payment by January 4 to receive a \$10 early-bird discount!

Click on this link <https://events.anr.msu.edu/PlantQuest2026/> to register any time before January 25th to receive notification of all live AND recorded sessions. Share the link with your gardening friends to invite them on our quest!

Have a wonderful December and we hope to see you at PLANT QUEST in January!

Sincerely,

Deanna F. Hedlund

Michigan State University Extension

Consumer Horticulture Educator | West Michigan

Rebecca Finneran

Michigan State University Extension

Senior Horticulture Educator | Retired

Grand Ideas Garden | Director

*Several partial scholarships are available for this program series. Please contact Lisa Renye renyelis@msu.edu to inquire.

Garden or plant questions? **Ask Extension!**

Visit our website **Gardening in Michigan**

EXTENSION OFFICE JESI'S CORNER

I hope everyone had a wonderful and restful holiday season! As we welcome the new year and begin planning for the months ahead, I wanted to take a moment to share a friendly reminder regarding new projects or programs for this year's Master Gardener Program.

Any new projects or programs must have the appropriate form completed and approved *before* hours can be counted toward Master Gardener service. This helps ensure consistency across the program and keeps us aligned with Purdue Extension guidelines. The form is available for pickup at the Extension Office or can be found on the MG Manager website under the MG Association tab.

As a brief refresher, all Master Gardener programs and projects must meet the following criteria:

- Educate the public on a home horticulture-related topic
- Take place within the state of Indiana
- Go beyond simply providing free labor
- Not offer any form of compensation
- Clearly represent the Purdue Extension Master Gardener Program

Thank you all for your continued dedication, time, and passion for serving our communities. We truly appreciate the impact you make, and we look forward to another successful and rewarding year together!

2026 EXECUTIVE BOARD

PRESIDENT	VICKI ZNAVOR
VICE PRESIDENT	TOM BOESEN
TREASURER	MARIA MAULE
RECORDING SECRETARY	KIM VARGA
CORRESPONDING SECRETARY	AMY COOPER
EDUCATION COMMITTEE/ SPEAKERS BUREAU	JANET DAVIS* METTA BARBOUR KIT KNOLL
PAST PRESIDENT	CAROL NOLAN

*INDICATES MEMBER IS FILLING ANOTHER PERSON'S TERM, OR EXTENDED THEIR TERM WITH THE APPROVAL OF THE BOARD

2026 PROJECT COORDINATORS

Friendship Botanic Gardens

OPEN

Garden Hotline

Extension Office _____ 219-324-9407

Garden Show

Theresa Dzoba-Borg _____ 773-960-5848
_____ dzozo@yahoo.com

Ann Klosinski _____ 219-872-8367
_____ annak47@comcast.net

Carol Nolan _____ 331-903-0091
_____ cnolan41@yahoo.com

Karen Sarver _____ 219-921-9704
_____ ksarver@csinet.net

La Porte Builders Assn. Home Expo

Donna Pouzar _____ 219-363-2960
_____ pouzdlp@icloud.com

Pioneer Land School Tours

OPEN

Pioneer Heritage Garden

Connie Shei _____ 219-362-4866
_____ jshei@comcast.net

Sunflower Fair

Theresa Dzoba-Borg _____ 773-960-5848
_____ dzozo@yahoo.com

STANDING COMMITTEE COORDINATORS
 History Book _____ Donna Pouzar
 Hospitality _____ Eunice Conway
 Librarian _____ Linda Hough
 Newsletter _____ Donna Pouzar
 Speakers Bureau See Executive Board

Purdue Extension Office __ 324-9407

Jesi Davenport jfurness@purdue.edu
 Sue Salisbury salisbk@purdue.edu

The Latest Dirt is published monthly. The deadline for submission is the 20th of each month. Our mission is to publish articles and events of interest to other Master Gardeners and the community. Articles about personal experiences, suggestions on gardening books, catalogs, helpful websites, tips and tricks, book reviews, seminars you've attended are welcomed.

Submission requirements: Articles should be no longer than a page and can include photos. References must be included. Latin names of plants should be italicized. We do not accept articles pertaining to medicinal information. Master Gardeners will get volunteer hours for time spent working on an article.

Buy, Sell, Trade at the Trading Shed

Place your free ad in "*The Latest Dirt*"

Tools, tillers, mowers, plants - anything garden related. Keep ads brief. Provide your phone number and/or e-mail address. Ads will be limited to space available.

Information must be submitted by the 20th of the month to:

pouzdlp@icloud.com

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GARDENING ARTICLES

Real vs. Artificial Christmas Trees

Submitted by: Kate Mulcahy,
 Master Gardener Intern

Real vs. Artificial Christmas Trees: Environmental Pros, Cons & Personal Reflections

Every holiday season, the question returns: real or artificial Christmas tree?

It's more than a practical decision—it's deeply connected to family traditions, memories, and values. My own story illustrates how this choice weaves into life's changing seasons, shifting not just with environmental awareness, but with the eras and people who shape our lives.

Real Christmas Trees: Living Traditions and Environmental Benefits

Real Christmas trees are not harvested from wild forests; they come from managed farms, where trees are grown specifically for the holiday market. These farms typically replant one to three seedlings for every tree harvested, helping sustain the cycle of growth and renewal¹. Over the years, the growing trees sequester carbon, contributing to climate regulation².

Beyond carbon, tree farms also support wildlife. The rows of evergreens provide nesting, shelter, and foraging areas for birds and small mammals. When the season ends, real trees can be recycled: chipped for mulch, composted, or even used in ecological restoration efforts like shoreline stabilization³.

These environmental benefits are matched by deeply rooted traditions in my family. When my son was young, we made a ritual of heading out the weekend after Thanksgiving to cut our own tree. Untangling our mittens, breathing in the crisp air, and walking through rows of evergreens became a yearly adventure—one that connected us to the land and to each other in a way few other holiday activities do.

Artificial Trees: Convenience, Longevity, and Emotional Meaning

Artificial trees offer ease: no watering, no dropped needles, no need to find a fresh tree every year. Most are built to last—many families keep them for 10–15 years or more⁴. But there are environmental trade-offs.

Most artificial trees are manufactured from PVC plastic and steel, materials that require high energy to produce and generate significant carbon emissions². Many are produced overseas, which adds transportation emissions³. And when their usable life ends, artificial trees are rarely recyclable, meaning they often end up in landfills¹.

According to a life-cycle assessment by the American Christmas Tree Association (ACTA), an artificial tree must typically be used for 8–10 years to approach the environmental impact of a real tree purchased annually⁵.

Despite that, artificial trees carry their own warmth for many families—including mine, across generations. In the mid-1960s, my family embraced the modernity of the era with a shimmering aluminum Christmas tree—complete with a rotating color wheel. It reflected the optimism and design sensibility of its time, just as today's trees reflect ours.

Years later, after my mother passed away, I inherited her artificial tree. At first, I felt a pang of loss, missing our fresh-tree outings. But decorating that tree each year—unwrapping her ornaments, remembering which ones she made or collected—has come to feel like a quiet conversation between generations. That tree holds her presence, my childhood, and our family's evolving story in its branches.

Now the tradition has shifted again. My son, in a nod to both simplicity and individuality, has an artificial tree he hangs on his wall—up year-round. It's unconventional, practical, and unmistakably his. Like the aluminum tree of my childhood, it reflects its moment in time and reminds me that traditions don't disappear; they adapt.

Which Option Is More Environmentally Friendly?

There's no one-size-fits-all answer; your "right" choice depends on what matters most to you:

- **Choose a real tree** if you value renewability, habitat benefits, and local farming.
- **Choose an artificial tree** if you plan to use it for many years—especially if it carries sentimental value, as mine does.

From an environmental perspective, the longer you keep and use an artificial tree, the more it offsets the carbon and resource cost of manufacturing. But if you discard it too soon, its impact can outweigh that of a real tree⁵.

A Meaningful Holiday Choice Rooted in Memory

For me, the Christmas tree isn't simply a decoration—it's a living archive of family life. Whether we're out in the cold choosing a fresh tree, gently unpacking my mother's artificial one, remembering an aluminum tree from the 1960s, or smiling at a wall-hung tree that stays up all year, each branch carries meaning.

By being thoughtful—choosing what aligns with your values, how you celebrate, and what you want to pass on—you make the holiday tree a reflection not just of environmental considerations, but of love, tradition, and memory.

Footnotes

1. Euronews. (2024). *Fact-check: Is a real or artificial Christmas tree better for the environment?* <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/12/25/fact-check-is-a-real-or-artificial-christmas-tree-better-for-the-environment>
2. Institute for Environmental Research & Education (IERE). *Are fake Christmas trees better for the environment?* <https://iere.org/are-fake-christmas-trees-better-for-the-environment/>
3. The Nature Conservancy. *Real vs. fake Christmas trees.* <https://www.nature.org/en-us/what-we-do/our-priorities/protect-water-and-land/land-and-water-stories/real-vs-fake-christmas-tree/>
4. Minnesota Christmas Tree Association. *Real vs. artificial Christmas trees.* <https://www.mncta.com/why-real-trees/real-vs-artificial/>
5. American Christmas Tree Association (ACTA). (2018). *Life-cycle analysis of Christmas trees.* <https://www.christmastreeassociation.org/s/2018-ACTA.pdf>

Gardener's Latin Liability ©

A True Story!

By Marcy Dailey Rolling Prairie, IN

Foreign language has always been of great interest to me,
So I've added botanical Latin to my vocabulary.

I've memorized names all these years, so now who would have thought
Using these Latin monikers could leave me so distraught?

While shopping at the nurseries I'm treated as an oddity;
I've found comprehension to be in short commodity.

I'll not ask for "pincushion flower" if Astrantia is my desire,
For I may be offered Knautia, or Scabiosa I might acquire.

"I'm looking for Fothergilla," seemed like a simple plea,
But locating this native shrub proved difficult for me.

The clerk behind a desk replied with answer, oh, so queer,
"I'm really very sorry, ma'am, I don't think he is here!"

On yet another nursery stop I asked to see Amsonia.
The clerk then steered us down a row to present, instead, Aronia.

There was the time I asked to buy a Spigelia or two;
The clerk said, "Tim, get out here! There's a woman who talks like you."

And of course, it's so frustrating to find out "they've" changed the name
Of a plant I've come to well know. Why don't they just leave things the same?

It's sometimes hard to learn names once, let alone to learn them twice;
Before the taxonomists are through, I may have to learn them thrice!

Yet, despite these slight frustrations, I'm sure Linnaeus would agree,
When compared with common titles, Latin lends the clarity.

