

#12 February 2019

Green Thoughts

Conversations and ideas about growing at The Spring Gardens

This land was ours before we were the land's Robert Frost

*When does
the growing
season begin?*

Yes, when? Ask different gardeners and you get different answers. Some say it begins when you plant pea seeds and you shouldn't plant peas until St. Patrick's Day, in mid-March. In Philly I have never had much success growing peas if I wait that long: they start out fine, the shoots emerge. And then either they get devoured by bugs or, by the time they are ready to

flower, it gets too hot. Instead, if the ground isn't frozen or too wet, I plant my first pea seeds in mid-February, before any sensible bugs wake up and start chewing away. I hedge my bets by planting more pea seeds in succeeding weeks (in mid-February peas take more than a week to germinate). So far that has been a reliable method. You who grow peas, please let us know what you do.

*TSG
in winter*

Growing throughout the year

Other gardeners grow throughout the year. Green Thoughts checked recently and found that 15 of our fellow gardeners, including me, have protective cloth over parts of their plots and they are growing things underneath.

Philly is warm for a northern city. Our beloved community garden is in the middle of the city so we get an extra warming boost from all the surrounding heated buildings radiating towards us. In addition, we are only 35 miles north of the Mason-Dixon line so geographically we have a milder climate than say, Boston, which is much further north.

St. Patrick's day is probably a better benchmark for planting peas in eastern Massachusetts than in southeastern Pennsylvania.

On the average, our coldest days of the year are in late January when the mean high temperature is 40 degrees F and mean low temperature of 24 degrees. Of course cold snaps like that polar vortex we just suffered disregard statistical averages. Early in February the average temperature starts its inexorable rise. By Feb 15 the average high in Philly is 44 degrees and low is 28 degrees. Additionally, that fine polypropylene cloth lets in most of the sunlight and acts as a

blanket for heat. The temperature of the soil can be raised a few degrees. Speaking of the sun, on December 21, at the winter solstice, we have only 9 hours and 10 minutes of daylight. By mid- Feb we have about 10 hours and 40 minutes of daylight. And the mid-Feb sun at mid-day is much higher in the sky than at the solstice and casts less of a shadow...

Casting off the gloom

*When Frost was spectre-gray
And Winter's dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day...*

Thomas Hardy

Thomas Hardy was always sounding gloomy especially when he was outside in winter. And let's face it, The Spring Gardens at this time of year (February) has a very limited palette of subdued colors. This is not the best time to show off our splendid space to visitors. To cheer ourselves we can always look at seed catalogues with their striking color photos of what those seeds will turn into despite the current winter's dregs. When it comes to sowing, I usually end up planting too many seeds per inch so the resulting plants are crowding each other. Reluctantly I must thin.

A field trip to the Spring Gardens on 5 February

The temperature had gotten down to 8 degrees F on February 1st so I wanted to take stock of how things were a few days later. For our optimistic/energetic fellow gardeners who had planted new crops in mid to late fall,

I was curious how their plants were faring. This 5th of Feb was sunny and the air temperature was predicted to reach an April-like 60 degrees.

Nonetheless, soil in the plots and water in the watering barrels don't instantly belie



Yes, that's ice there, about 5 inches thick on Feb 5th

what came before. As I walked around I could see low spots on the ground were still wet and muddy and the blue watering barrels contained a 5 inch rind of ice on top. In the plots, an inch or two below the surface, the soil was frozen.

Not time yet to plant anything new. But for those who planted last fall and covered their crops, things are working out beautifully.



Red oak leaf lettuce on 5 Feb

Underneath the cloth are cold-hardy annuals including, lettuce, Brussel sprouts, broccoli, kale, spinach, garlic, kohlrabi. Under one

cloth that not been firmly tucked in, a feral cat was taking a siesta in the sun. Fellow



Spinach planted late Nov photo 5 Feb

gardener Greg, who has a plot near mine,



Greg's spinach planted earlier. photo 5 Feb



Extensive cloth over semicircular hoops with plants underneath. Photo 5 Feb

didn't even cover his spinach this winter and it looks fine. These types of plants don't mind sub-freezing weather. Internally they have the equivalent of anti-freeze. It is made of proteins that inhibit the formation of ice crystals. Any day the temperature is above freezing the plants grow. (Even frogs in

Pennsylvania have anti-freeze to get through the winter. It is a combination of special proteins and a high concentration of sugar which prevents their cells from freezing even though they are covered in ice. At low temperatures their heart stops beating but they are easily revived once it warms up). Perennial plants wait for warmer weather to perk up. They don't look so great at the moment but they do come back strong each year – strawberries, asparagus, chives, oregano, thyme, and tarragon.

I strolled over to see how the bee hive was doing. No activity to report. But that isn't a bad sign. The bees won't get going until there is something to forage. And there are no flowers to feed on yet.

And no sign yet of a banana tree shoot in fellow gardener Rafael's plot. We see banana



Yes, we have no bananas

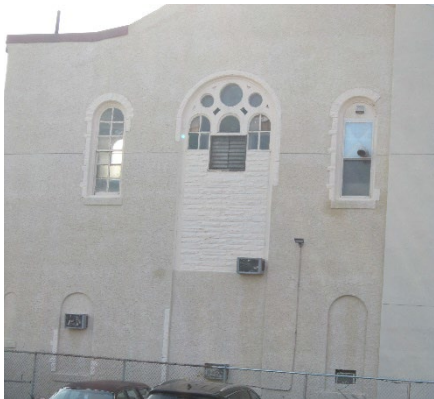
Rafael's banana shoots photo August 2018

shoots in his plot each year. Over the summer they grow to about 6 or 7 feet high. Since we are not in the tropics, and it is cold here in winter, does he plant a new root each year? No, he told Green Thoughts, the roots survive and a new shoot emerges each spring. I

suppose the roots are deep enough so the soil down there doesn't get cold enough to kill the roots. He never gets bananas because it takes 10 to 15 months of warm weather before a shoot bears fruit. I suppose the banana tree is his equivalent to Proust's madeleine – a nostalgic tropical memory of things past.

Subsidence

Last year Enon Baptist Church at 19th and Green, had a partial collapse of the north wall of its annex. Green Thoughts wrote about it



Refurbished north wall of church Photo Feb 2019

and suggested the collapse was probably due to subsidence from an underground stream bed (issue 8). Now the wall has been rebuilt and it looks lovely and sturdy. We spoke to the builders who said they put in a new foundation reaching 20 inches below the surface. We hope the foundation goes deep enough so there won't be any new subsidence there. Unfortunately the parking lot just north of the church is sinking in several places. So possibly there are multiple subterranean stream beds around.

A sinkhole closer to us

A few hundred feet north of the church we see the first sign of a new sink hole in the

baseball field of Roberto Clemente Park. The concavity is just to the south of the Spring Gardens in deep center field near the corner of 19th and Wallace. It is still pretty small but sink holes tend to grow. We'll keep our eye on it since it is in a line with the newly rehabbed church wall and a low area of the northwest part of the Gardens. Eternal vigilance.

Can't wait 'til spring!

Please send your ideas, thoughts, suggestions and observations to:
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that address can also be used for getting on the mailing list for **Green Thoughts**, or getting off.

Prepared by Ed Gruberg

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