

THE CHRISTOPHER FARM & GARDENS

GROW-ZONE

A Quarterly Journal Review of our Seasons

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Cold Hands, Warm Hearts



As a mild fall season gave way to an icy winter, the beauty of the gardens was not lost! Though cold temperatures started to creep in during the month of December, there was plenty of holiday cheer being spread to make us feel warm. Leading up to Christmas, garden staff get creative with holiday decorating, especially around the Farm House. This light display was done by our own Janice Johnson and Laura Behr on a hawthorne tree that overlooks the Farm House pond. These merry ornaments were surely getting all of Jay Christopher's holidays visitors - and the pond's resident ducks - into the Christmas spirit!

Staff Visit to the Mitchell Park Domes



Field trips aren't just for students. On November 1st, our garden staff embarked on a day trip to Milwaukee, WI to visit the Mitchell Park Domes botanical gardens. This horticultural conservancy is a living plant museum, with a collection of over 1,800 plant species that represent plant life from around the world. There are three domes with distinct species and ecosystems; a desert dome, a tropical dome, and a floral dome that changes its central display about 5 times per year. During this visit, our staff viewed different landscaping and floral arrangement styles, discovered new exotic species of plants, and had the chance to ask the park's horticultural staff questions about their methods and the functions of the botanical gardens. This staff field trip was a great opportunity to learn new things about the world of botany, to see another botanical garden and to enjoy a new experience with a wonderful group of colleagues!



Going on a field trip to a botanical garden with a group of plant fanatics presented an opportunity for coworkers to learn from one another and to bond over a mutual fascination of the natural world.



Bluebird Trail - 2024 Season Review & New Additions

In mid-November, the Sheboygan County Cancer Care Fund's "Survive, Thrive & Be Fit" group came together in the gardens for one final Bluebird Trail mission for the year of 2024. The group reviewed the data collected from the nesting season, moved a few existing birdhouses to new locations, and installed a few new houses to accommodate the growing CFG bluebird population.

The efforts of this great group of volunteers paid off in 2024! Our data from this past nesting season shows that of the 17 bluebird eggs laid, 16 eggs hatched and went on to fledge from the nest, for a 94% success rate. Our birdhouses also helped other bird species; 12 tree swallows successfully fledged, along with 18 house wrens. For the bluebird species, it's customary to see the same individuals return to the nesting grounds year after year, so we are hopeful that we will see a similar population in 2025. With the addition of two new birdhouses, we now have 14 houses along our CFG Bluebird Trail, which is monitored weekly on rotation during the nesting season by the STBF's volunteers and our garden staff.



Above: STBF volunteers work to remove a birdhouse from a raised bed, which was later moved to a new, more bluebird-friendly location in the gardens.



Each of the 14 birdhouses were winterized in November. This was done by scraping out old nest material and rubbing Irish Spring soap on the inner ceiling to prevent wasps from building nests there. The final step was leaving the door ajar for the winter to deter mice from making nests inside.



The 2024 Fall Honey Harvest

With a bittersweet ending to our beekeeping season of 2024, we experienced a loss of a few of our beehives heading into winter. This is unfortunately common for beekeepers in this part of the world, as late/fall winter can be the hardest season for a colony to survive. As sad as it is to lose a beehive, it does yield the opportunity to harvest all of the honey. This year, we harvested 2.5 gallons of honey with the “crush & strain” method, this involves putting the entire honeycomb (beeswax and capped honey) into a pot to melt down in the oven on low heat. After cooling overnight, the beeswax will have separated and can be scraped off the top to expose the honey underneath. The honey is then strained, filtered, and bottled. We also plan to use the separated beeswax to make a set of candles later this winter.



Late Fall Fungi

It's amazing to see so many species of fungi active in November! While the prime-time for fungi hunting in Wisconsin is May - September, there are some species of fungi that will only produce their reproductive “fruits”, or mushroom caps, when there are specific cold and damp conditions. The weather patterns that we experienced here along the lakeshore in late fall were perfect. Because this season was so mild, we were able to photograph fungi in the gardens until November 22nd when we got our first snow and freezing temperatures. While their mycelium in the soil survives freezing by going dormant, their above-ground fruiting bodies will experience cellular-level death when ice crystals form between their cells and explode. Once the ground thaws in spring, the fungal mycelium breaks dormancy and reactivates.



Above: Several ‘Rounded Earthstar’ mushrooms grow in the center display inside the Show Greenhouse.

Jay's 81st Birthday Party

January 21st was a great day at the Farm House! A surprise party was thrown for Jay's 81st birthday. His friends and neighbors attended to help him celebrate. The party was a "Chicago, Mamma Mia!" theme, complete with Lou Malnati's deep-dish Chicago-style pizza, veggie salads and cheesecake for dessert. The city of Chicago's flag lined the tables and Italian music played in the background to amplify the theme. The pizza was great, and so was the company. Happy Birthday, Jay! Thanks for another great year!



Meals on Wheels: St. Nick's Luncheon

On December 7th, staff members and their family members volunteered as a serving team for the annual St. Nick's Luncheon held at Sheboygan County's Meals on Wheels. Every year, Jay sponsors a lunch for some of the meal delivery recipients to attend with a family member. Guests enjoy a four-course meal, complete with a relish tray, soup, followed by the main course and ending with dessert. Guests enjoy mingling with friends and meeting new people, along with festive entertainment. Anne Lapinski sang Christmas songs solo as guests arrived, and The Kohler High School Madrigal Singers performed as the closing entertainment.

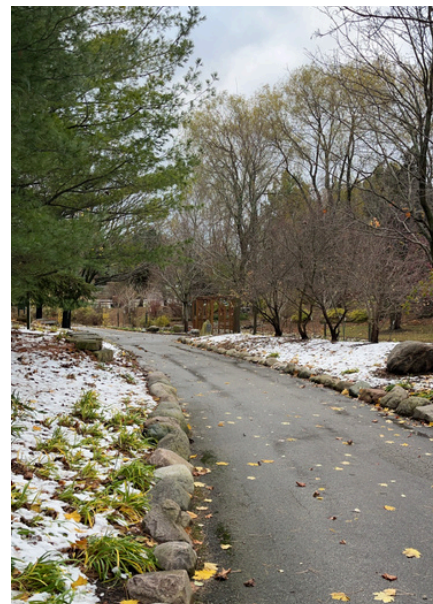


Phenology - “the study of cyclic and seasonal natural phenomena, especially in relation to climate and plant and animal life.”

Date: November 22, 2024

High Temp: 38; Rain/Snow

Notes: The first snowfall of the season; cold weather mushrooms spotted near the lake path; a young buck was seen chasing a doe towards farm property.



Date: December 12, 2024

High Temp: 8; Sunny

Notes: Steam rose from Lake Michigan with the sudden shift into freezing temperatures; geese were seen flying out of the lake in the morning.

Date: January 20, 2025

High Temp: -1; Sunny

Notes: Crows called & flew over the Farm House prairie; many fox tracks in the snow were followed towards the ravine where a den was discovered.



Date: January 30, 2025

High Temp: 57; Sunny

Notes: Insects could be seen flying through the air; red squirrels & several bird species were very active throughout the gardens.