

THE CHRISTOPHER FARM & GARDENS

GROW-ZONE

A Quarterly Journal Review of our Seasons

VOLUME 4 | ISSUE 2

FEBRUARY - APRIL 2026

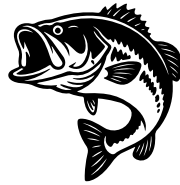
Wings on the Willows



A Painted Lady butterfly was photographed sipping the nectar of a flowering willow shrub by Erika Lusthoff on April 11, 2026. Similarly to monarchs, this pollinator migrates to their wintering grounds in Mexico, before returning to the U.S. in spring for breeding. It is quite rare to spot one so early in April, and to be in the right place to capture it with a camera is very lucky. We'll take it as a good omen for the growing season to come!

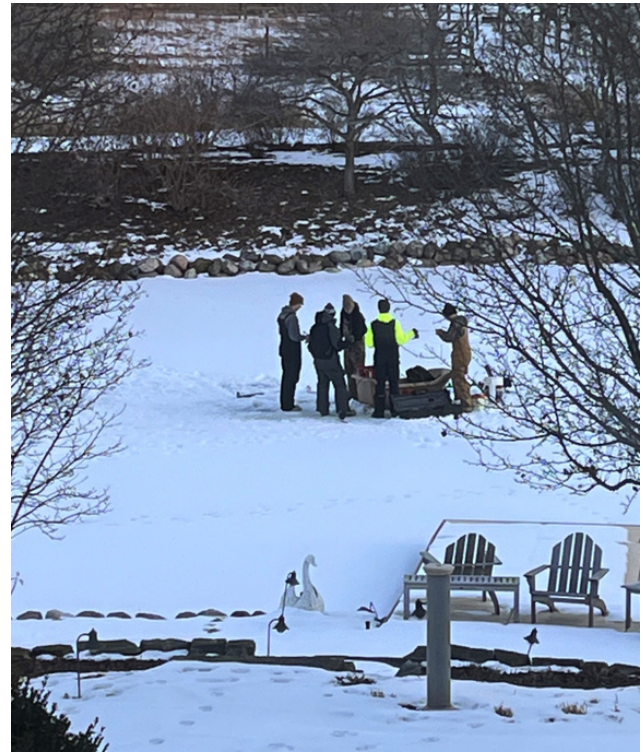


Kiel's High School Fishing Team



Frigid temperatures in January stocked up many inches of ice on our ponds, which makes for perfect February ice fishing conditions. The local Kiel High School Fishing Team enjoyed catching huge bluegills from the Farm House Pond on a few occasions this winter. This has become a favorite spot for the team, especially since many of the students were able to catch some of the enormous bluegills that live there, and add a "Master Fish" to their annual catch list.

A "Master Fish" can be any species of fish that is longer than the average length listed in the state requirements. Catching a fish like this will earn a student extra points, which go toward making the state fishing team and for individual awards for the school's team. These boys were able to get a nice head start on their points already this winter!



New Duck Houses



Our friends from the Sheboygan County Cancer Care Fund helped to install a few new duck houses on our icy ponds this winter. The circular mallard duck house (bottom left & center) had old straw and eggshells removed. New bedding was placed in the bottom, and shingles were placed between the tops of the two metal rings to form a roof. This will keep the mother mallards dry while they sit on their eggs during rainy spring weather. The bottom right photo shows a wood duck box that was installed in our Turkey Trot Agricultural Pond. These ducks are typically more skittish and favor a more enclosed home to build their nest in. New duck houses like these were also placed in our Perch Pond and the Farm House Pond.



Beeswax Crafts

Beeswax is a bodily product of honeybees, secreted by a gland on their abdomen when they are between 12 and 20 days old. They take thin sheets of wax off of this gland, mix it with saliva, and form it into rows of hexagonal cells on frames within their beehives. They store everything in these cells – pollen, honey and their babies, or “brood.” Typically, there are frames that the bees will reserve only for honey in the upper section of their beehives. These are the frames that we harvest honey from to avoid disturbing any brood cells.

After harvesting honey, we scrape the remaining beeswax into a bag to store for winter crafting. This year, we decided to experiment by making a beeswax body butter moisturizer. The combined ingredients like shea butter and vitamin E oil help to moisturize dry winter skin, and the beeswax acts to seal moisture into the skin. We also made lip balm again this year but tried pouring it into sticks instead of dab cups like last time. The stick mold was easier for pouring, so we will likely use this method again!



Greenhouse Gossip

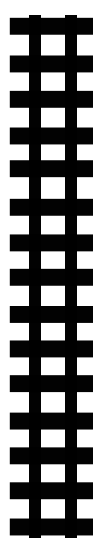
We witnessed the rare blooming of our Blue Glow Agave plant, which has lived in the greenhouse for many years. Agave plants are in the Asparagaceae family, which includes asparagus, hostas, spider plants & about 2,500 other species. This specific type blooms only once in its life, after 10–30 years of growing, and the bloom can last from a couple of weeks to months. The bloom stalk here grew so rapidly over the last month that the stalk has now reached the ceiling of our greenhouse. Our staff gave it a little help by using suspended wire to stabilize the stalk.

In other news, a new employee of ours, Danica, is quite the artist! She painted our greenhouse's resident tree frog!



Transportation Museum Update

What started as a vision has finally been completed! The new addition of the Jay W. Christopher Transportation Museum is now ready for visitors. Guests can now experience what a real passenger train had looked like during the railway era in the United States. The upper level features a ticketing booth (top right), a dining car (bottom left), and an observation car (bottom right).



August Riccono Research Center

The lower level, now accessible by stairs or elevator, showcases the August Riccono Research Center, named after the late Mr. August Riccono, who donated much of the materials on display. A library boasts a bounty of railroad reading materials. The Hornby Model Train set is being arranged so that guests may operate a real model train set. The walls are peppered with decor and additional train models, rounding out the research center's historical railroad atmosphere.



Maple Tapping

This was a great season for maple syrup making! Temperatures in March consistently fluctuated between freezing overnight and thawing daily, to give us many days of great sap flow. At the end of the season, we bottled about 5 gallons of maple syrup. We had a pancake breakfast for the staff in April so everyone could enjoy these treats from the trees.

We also tapped a few black walnut trees on the Jumes property this year. The syrup was interesting – sweet, but with an extra earthy, “tree” taste to it.



The First Flowers of Spring



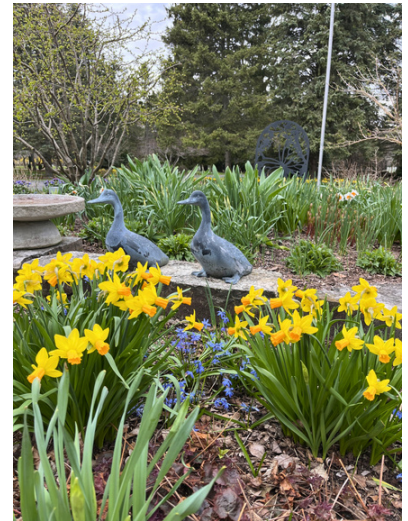
Snow Drops



Crocuses



Hyacinths



Daffodils

New Bees

There are plenty of pollinators to help out in our gardens this year.

In March, we added a few mason bee houses – a small native bee that is a highly efficient pollinator. We also added new Carnolian honeybees to the Observation Hive in mid-April. Another Carnolian and two Italian honeybee hives were also purchased for the Bee Yard.



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

Date: February 18, 2026

High Temp: 53; Sunny

Notes: The first green sprouts were seen peeking out near the Landscape Barn's north side; four new mason bee houses were installed; cardinals were heard singing their spring mating song



Date: March 31, 2026

High Temp: 40; Rain/Hail

Notes: Nickle-sized hail fell this morning multiple times; thunder and lightning all day



Date: April 13, 2026

High Temp: 68; Sunny

Notes: Tree swallows were seen fighting for nest boxes in the Farm House prairie; daffodils, forsythia, hyacinths, lenten roses and siberian squill flowers are blooming; weeping pussy willows have begun to bloom; a red admiral butterfly was seen; a flock of cormerants were seen flying over the gardens



Date: April 23, 2026

High Temp: 61; Sunny

Notes: Tree frogs were heard singing today; bumblebees were seen in the gardens; Virginia waterleaf, ramps, and trout lily leaves are merging from the understory in the Bear Woods