

GROW-ZONE

A Quarterly Journal Review of our Seasons

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Seed Collecting

Collecting seeds from healthy plants that are established in our gardens ensures that new plantings will fare well in their environment. Staff have been busily collecting seeds and making planting plans to be certain not to introduce any species that may negatively impact existing ecosystems. Species that have been collected include Primrose, Joe Pye Weed, Baptisia, Butterfly Bush, Coneflower species, Liatris species, and many more! The photograph to the left depicts the various species that have been collected and processed this Fall.

Prairie Restoration

Prairie restoration has been a continuous project over the last several years, with late fall and early winter being a crucial time for preparations. During this time and depending on weather, seeds may be collected, processed, and then dispersed. There are a few focus areas being worked on throughout the Christopher property, with hopes of increasing the local biodiversity of native prairie plant species. Restoration sites typically must be prepped as a first step to introducing new seeds or plantings.

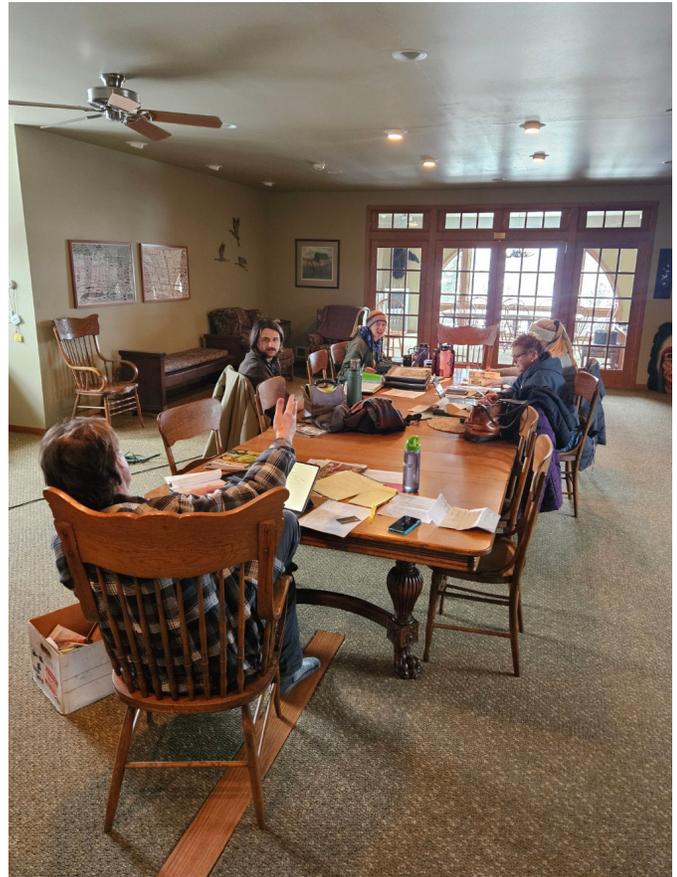
This buffer strip along the Lake Michigan bluffs (seen in the photograph to the right) had to be prepped by removing the few species of dense grasses before any new plants could hope to be established. This area was mowed, sprayed and then raked. Collected seeds were dispersed on the freshly raked areas by staff members, in an effort to seat them into the exposed soil before being covered with incoming snow. Many native species need their seeds to experience natural freezing and thawing cycles to break their dormancy. This type of “frost seeding” greatly increases the chance of the seeds germinating successfully. Native plant seeds being dispersed in these areas include Aster species, Goldenrod species, Rattlesnake Master, Blue Stem species, Coneflower species and Foxglove.



Planning for Next Year

If you visit the gardens during the growing season, you will see our staff members throughout the gardens hard at work with various preparations and projects. What you may not realize is that there is also a lot carried out behind the scenes, throughout the entire year! Winter is a great time to reflect on what went well during the last season, and to plan for the next season's improvements. In the photograph to the right, you can see a meeting of the minds, where staff members are planning for the upcoming season in our conference room.

Our dedicated staff works into the fall and winter on various projects such as seed processing, planting plans & ordering, updating species lists & GIS maps, carpentry and maintenance projects. There are also staff members who work through the winter in our greenhouses, with the farm animals and by removing invasive species. Thank you all for your hard work!



Ash trees & the battle with “EAB”

One of the major projects taking place in the gardens is tree removal, with the plethora of dying Ash trees as the main target. Our arborists have been at the chainsaw quite often this fall and into winter, as we've had such mild weather.

Many landowners in Wisconsin are seeing their Ash groves dying out due to the invasion of the emerald ash borer beetle, commonly referred to with the acronym “EAB”. EAB is an insect that originated from East Asia, that is thought to have hitchhiked on lumber products from that area. They chew and bore through the tissues of soft wood trees, eating the veins of the tree, essentially cutting off their flow of nutrients and water to the upper branches and leaves. Though preservation can be achieved with periodic chemical treatments, it's not feasible to treat every tree in this way. Our arborists have chosen to treat 90 trees ranging from 4" - 30" diameters in our Jayrassic Park sculpture & Hosta garden, and one large 36" tree near the Farmhouse, as these are the individuals that show the most promise of survival. The rest, unfortunately, already show major signs of EAB damage, and will be cut down, like the few shown in the photographs below near the Schell house driveway.



Happy 80th Birthday, Jay!



On January 21, our very own Mr. Jay Christopher hit a milestone by turning 80 years old! He was surrounded by family and friends for a birthday celebration, no doubt reminiscing on memories he has made. If you know Jay, you know that he lives a life full of adventure and novelty, and he is always happy to share his experiences.

Jay enjoys spending time in the gardens, with his family and friends, his dogs, and with the many garden visitors. His sense of humor is evident in the jokes he shares, as well as in the details of the garden's artwork and displays, which is pointed out and enjoyed by visitors and garden staff alike. Thanks for spreading your cheer and good will with all of us!

Jay has impacted the people in his life and the community in countless ways. His vision for The Christopher Farm & Gardens has shaped it into a haven for people to find inspiration and peace. He is known for being a man of many ideas, and everyone is always eager to see what's next!

Happy Birthday, Jay & many more!





The Honey Harvest



In this part of the world, a beekeeper can usually expect their honeybee's activity to slow to halt by the end of November. We saw warmer than average temperatures well into December, and in turn, we saw a prolonged season for our two colonies. We extracted a few frames of honey from each colony, leaving enough for each to survive the winter. Although the outdoor temperature was only 38° F, our apiarist Keith Weiland suffered a few minor stings from bees that were much livelier than expected!



We discovered a new way to extract honey from the comb by using a water temperature regulator. When honeycomb is heated to exactly 117° F, it is just warm enough for the honey to seep out of the cells, without melting the wax. Using the warm water bath method proved successful, as we were able to strain the heated honey out of the wax comb. Staff rendered 8 quarts of honey!

We decided not to pasteurize this year's honey bounty. Exposing honey to high heat during pasteurization destroys valuable enzymes and antioxidants, thus stripping it of its antibacterial, anti-inflammatory, and anti-fungal benefits.



Overwintering honeybees in our cold, Wisconsin environment is a challenge for every local beekeeper. We decided to experiment with a few new strategies this season. We added a box of pine wood chips to the top of each hive, to absorb excess moisture – a known colony killer! We also wrapped the hives in reflective, insulating material, which will hopefully help our bees regulate their hive's internal temperature.

Beeswax can be used for many recipes, be it for candles, lip balm, or even boot grease! We melted the wax comb that was left after honey rendering and came up with 32 ounces of wax.



Winter Botany Education

Early in January, we hosted an educational program for local Lutheran Highschool students that were taking a week-long Botany “winterim” class. We first set out for a hike of the Turkey Trot Trail and covered topics like winter plant adaptations, habitat restoration & invasive plant species. This natural area along the lake creates a great opportunity for nature-based education, and to demonstrate efforts to restore and conserve the land.

Next, we took a walk through the gardens to the Production and Show Greenhouses, where staff members talked with the group about their jobs working in the greenhouses and throughout the gardens. The class was given explanations on greenhouse management & systems, propagation techniques and our hydroponics set-up. Getting the chance to pair highschoolers with our garden staff is a great way for students to get a feel for the various jobs available in the realm of horticulture, as they begin to think about their future role in the work force.



Survive, Thrive & Be Fit

The Sheboygan County Cancer Care Fund took advantage of the snow that fell during our early January snowstorm and planned a date for members to join us for a “Survivors on Snowshoes” activity. These folks enjoyed snowshoeing along Lake Michigan learning about our local wintery landscape, and making some snow angels along the way! What better way to stay active and healthy in the wintertime than snowshoeing along Lake Michigan with good company?

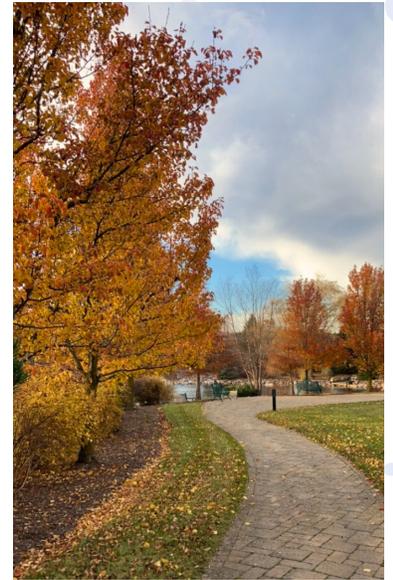


Phenology - “the study of cyclic and seasonal natural phenomena, especially in relation to climate and plant and animal life.”

Date: November 20th, 2023

High Temp: 43; Overcast

Notes: The Ornamental Pear trees are a bright yellow-orange and beginning to lose their leaves



Date: December 15th, 2023

High Temp: 45; Partly Cloudy

Notes: Following yesterday’s site prep, a mix of hand-collected native plant seed was dispersed along the Farmhouse prairie bluffs

Date: January 15, 2024

High Temp: 5; Sunny

Notes: A snowstorm over the weekend has everything covered in snow and ice; steam is coming off of Lake Michigan; 3 deer spotted at noon by the lake path



Date: January 25, 2024

High Temp: 38; Heavy Fog

Notes: We cannot see the lake from the Farmhouse this morning; fresh spider webs caught the condensation on the cedar trees by the Milsted Honey House

