
January & February

It's fitting that as the days grow noticeably longer, the seed catalogues begin to arrive, with their glossy panoply of full-colour options for the garden patch-to-be. Why can I never resist ordering at least one vegetable that I know is doomed to fail in our short, cool season: that cantaloupe, those eggplants? Obamian audacity of hope or just plain folly? This year, I promised myself not to start my tomatoes in the frosty late January window as I did last year when my impatience for spring overwhelmed my better sense: by May, the long and leggy offspring were toppling off the ledge and spooking the dog, who proceeded to tread the tumbled potting soil through the house. That'll teach me. (It's a good idea to start your seeds about four to six weeks ahead of the time you plant them out: for tomatoes, late March is a safe bet).

We usually run out of last summer's carrots and by this time of year, and some of the winter squash has gone mouldy. Thank goodness for the farmers' market!

Eager gardeners, keep your eyes open for signs of spring wherever you can find them, from the tightly-furled buds

on the magnolia and rhododendrons to the appearance of peat pots on the shelf at Canadian Tire. It won't be too long, now.

By February, it's impossible to miss the extra hour or so of sunlight we've gained since the dark days of November and December. On a sunny thaw-day, you may even catch an earthy whiff of spring or spot a brave snowdrop heaving its shoulders above the snow cover. The seeds you ordered last month should have arrived (or will shortly); keep them away from moisture so they don't think it's spring and start to sprout.

Don't let an icy yard keep you from making regular contributions to the compost pile; remember that it takes mass to keep warm and active during the cold weather—and it really can get warm in there! Last year, after a late February snowstorm that blew the lid off my compost container, I noticed that the snow was melting on top of the pile; digging further in, I saw steam escaping and felt the warmth at the centre of the pile. What an amazing process!