

Madison-Monroe-St Clair Unit

Below the Canopy

For Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists



March
2023



Monroe County Office
901 Illinois Avenue
P.O. Box 117
Waterloo, IL 62298
(618) 939-3434
FAX (618) 939-7708

Madison/St. Clair
County Office
1606 Eastport Plaza
Suite 100
Collinsville, IL 62234
(618) 344-4230
FAX (618) 344-5602

Staff:
Laquitsha Bejoile-Hayes
County Director
lb3@illinois.edu

Nathan Johanning
Extension Educator,
Commercial Agriculture
njohann@illinois.edu

Elizabeth Wahle
Extension Educator,
Commercial Agriculture
wahle@illinois.edu

Sarah Ruth
Program Coordinator
ruth1@illinois.edu

Nicole Hellon
Office Support Associate

Mary Kay Rahn
Office Support Specialist

Teri Scott
Office Support Assistant

Master Mob Volunteer Opportunities

Calling all Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists!! Area projects have scheduled spring clean-up days to get sites ready for the coming spring and new growth. Contact Sarah if you have any questions.

Baebler Farm Pollinator Clean-Up

March 25 from 10 a.m. to noon at Baebler Farm, 4022 JJ Road, Waterloo
Bring pruners, loppers, rakes, gloves and other tools to help clean up the pollinator habitat and other garden beds. Water and snacks provided.

Drost Park Open Gate Garden Community Event

April 1 from 9 to 11 a.m., #8 Schiber Court, Maryville
Assist with weeding and cleaning out beds. Bring trowels, pruners, and gloves.
Water and snacks provided. Rain Date: April 15.

Speakers Bureau Volunteers Needed

Looking for new volunteer opportunities? Enjoy sharing knowledge with others? Consider joining the Speakers Bureau. The office receives numerous requests throughout the year for presentations at garden clubs and other organizations. Extension Educators have created slides and scripts, so you don't have to research and create your own presentations. Volunteers are ready to train and support new volunteers. Contact Sarah to learn more.

Eckert's Dine and Shop Fundraiser

Dine at the restaurant or shop the general store and garden center at Eckert's in Belleville all day on Tuesday, May 9. A percentage of your purchase will be donated to St. Clair County Extension and Education Foundation.

Garden Tour Info

The Garden Tour committees have been working hard to prepare for the June events. Mark your calendars. Sign up sheets to assist with the events will be available soon. Proceeds from the events support the Madison and St Clair County Foundations.

Gardens in Bloom—June 2 and 3 in O'Fallon/Shiloh

Madison County Garden Tour—June 23 and 24 in Maryville/Glen Carbon

Naturalist Phenology for March 2023

Bill Klunk and Elizabeth Frisbie, Master Naturalists

During this month, be on the lookout for:

- ⇒ Bud swell and flower blossoming beginning on many trees and shrubs like Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*), Silver Maple (*Acer saccharinum*), Eastern Redbud (*Cercis canadensis*), American Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*), and various Cherry (*Prunus spp.*).
- ⇒ 22nd - 24th provide some great night sky viewing opportunities in the western sky after sunset. Jupiter will be bright- look for it just west of the crescent Moon. Venus is also very visible just north of the Moon.
- ⇒ Male Red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) are bringing food to their mates who are home in the natal den rearing kits, most of whom will be born from now through mid-April.

Continuing Education Programs

WEBINARS

Master Naturalist Continuing Education Series Tick and Mosquito Monitoring and Management March 15 at 6 p.m.

Join Vector Ecologist, Dr. Holly Tuten, for a 50-minute informational and training webinar on the statewide mosquito and tick surveillance and research programs funded in part by the Illinois Dept. of Natural Resources, the Illinois Dept. of Public Health, the Illinois Lyme Association, and the State of Illinois. She will cover topics related to general vector biology, vector bite prevention and risk awareness messaging, the surveillance and research programs and partners, and what has been learned about Illinois vectors (and the disease agents associated with them) in the last 5 years of public health entomology work at the Illinois Natural History Survey Medical Entomology Lab. She will also share ongoing and upcoming opportunities for you to participate in community-engaged surveillance, research, and prevention messaging on vectors and vector-borne diseases in Illinois. Directions for acquiring outreach and awareness materials for your own programs and information on follow-up trainings will be provided. Register for the webinar at <https://go.illinois.edu/tick>.

ON DEMAND CLASSES

The Morton Arboretum offers a variety of on demand, online classes for adult learners. When you register, you will have access to learning materials for a limited time. The online classes are self paced. Topics include Invasive Species, Woodland Ecology, and Basic Plant ID. Register [here](#).

IN PERSON

Wildflower Hike

Tuesdays, March 21 to May 2 from 9 to 10:30 a.m. at The Nature Institute, Godfrey
Saturday April 1 from 9 to 10:30 a.m. at the Nature Institute, Godfrey

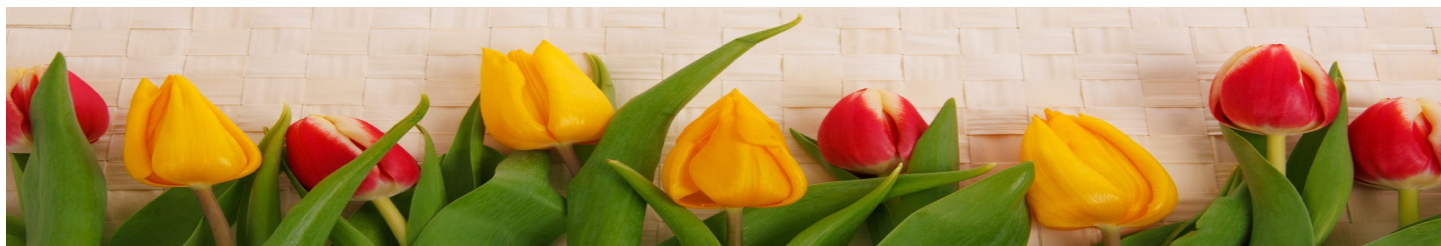
Many of the flowers you'll see in the spring are known as ephemerals due to their short-lived nature. Join one of our naturalists to identify some of these plants before they're gone! Free for Nature Institute members, \$5/ non-members. Register [here](#).

Frog Walk

March 31 from 6:30– 7:30 p.m. at Poag Sand Prairie, Edwardsville

Join HeartLands Conservancy and learn about early spring frogs in southwestern Illinois in this easy, family-friendly walk. Learn to identify certain frog calls and see if you can find any frogs as we walk! This event will be outdoors during the evening (when the frogs call) rain or shine. (Rain is actually better for finding frogs!) Please dress appropriately for weather conditions and wear comfortable walking shoes. Flashlights or headlamps are highly recommended. Registration is required. Donations are appreciated, but not required. For more info or to register, visit <https://heartlandsconservancy.org/event/frog-walk-2/>.

Check out the Unit Webpage for the most up to date info.
<https://extension.illinois.edu/mms>



Wondering While Wandering
Naturalist Ponderings for March 2023
Elizabeth Frisbie, Master Naturalist



The White-breasted nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis*) is one of my favorite birds and some of the behavioral changes I have observed lately bring questions to mind. For instance, I've noticed they are making fewer trips to my feeders as the weather warms while other birds seem to be feeder feasting at their former steady winter rate. I've also been hearing a new, extended song from the male Nuthatch as well, while it seems perhaps early for songbird courtship tunes.

Although we often visualize the Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) when hearing the phrase "early bird," when it comes to spring courtship, this title could be given to the White-breasted nuthatch. Among our region's songbirds, Nuthatches are generally the first to begin courtship with the males shifting to courtship behaviors in late winter as soon as the weather begins to warm. Listen this month for the unpaired male Nuthatch singing courtship melodies to attract a mate. His song is generally "whe-whe-whe-whe-whe" in a series of six to eight notes, sounding quite different than his usual nasal "ank" or "yank" call. Once the male Nuthatch has selected his desired mate, with whom he will form a monogamous pair lasting until one of them dies or disappears, he will display highly distinctive courtship behaviors. He performs a bit of a dance for his chosen one, first raising his head, spreading his tail and drooping his wings and then swaying back and forth. This display ends with the male bowing deeply to the female. Nuthatch males also engage in quite a lot of courtship feeding of the female, bringing her food from his cache of seed, generally hidden in bark crevices within his territory. Ornithologists have noted that when a male Nuthatch is particularly interested in a female, he not only brings her select seeds but also shells them and passes the kernel directly to her.



Notably, this bird's name originates from early descriptors of its method for opening seeds and nuts. "Nuthatch" is believed to have derived from "nut hacker" or "nut-hack" their original old English name, suggestive of this bird's system of opening nuts or strong hulled seeds by wedging them into a bark crevice and hammering at them with their strong bills. Those who read either fiction or natural histories written in the 1700s through the Victorian period may also recognize the names "Mud Dabbler" or "Mud Stopper" as belonging to the Nuthatch. These early names derived from the Nuthatches' habit of plastering mud around the rim of their nest entrance. Both male and female Nuthatches also engage in "bill sweeping." During this behavior, the pair will wipe crushed insect (held in their bills) across the out and insides of their nest (a simple cup of bark fibers, grasses, hair and twigs constructed by the female usually in an abandoned Woodpecker hole). It is believed that predators may be repelled by the chemical secretions from the insects' bodies and/or that the combination of mud and insect scent masks or removes the scent of the Nuthatches around the nest, thereby reducing the likelihood of detection by predators such as Snakes or nest competitors such as Squirrels.

As Nuthatches engage in courtship this month, Human feeder watchers will also notice new feeding behaviors by these birds as the weather continues to warm. While their diet is predominately (70%) seed and nuts (including acorns) during the winter, as soon as warming temperatures result in insects becoming available, Nuthatches quickly shift their diets toward these creatures until their diet is nearly 100% insect-based. During the warm weather months, Nuthatches consume Beetles and their larvae, Ants, Caterpillars, Stinkbugs and Spiders. So, expect to gradually see fewer of them at your feeder and look instead for them to fly high into the top of a tree and then work their way to the base upside down, walking head-first down the tree trunk, thereby earning their other common name "the Upside-down Bird." The leading theory is that acrobatic Nuthatches walk upside down in order to gain a different perspective while foraging for food. In essence, as the only bird able to walk upside down, they easily find food missed by other birds in the crevices of the tree bark. Technically, the Nuthatch is not really "walking" down the tree, but rather hanging from foot to foot. Nuthatches have four toes, three are forward-facing while the fourth, known as the hallux, faces backwards. The hallux is longer than the other toes and is shaped like a downward-curved claw. The strength and shape of the hallux allow the ground-facing Nuthatch to cling to the bark, moving one foot at a time forward down the tree. Their ability to move in this unique way, which allows them to locate food missed by other birds has resulted in the Nuthatch coming to symbolize wisdom among Africans and Native Americans and good luck and hope in the Celtic and Eastern traditions.

Welcome to My Jungle

Dr. Elizabeth Wahle, Extension Educator



From left to right: *Crocus* 'Yellow Mammoth', winter aconite, netted iris, grape hyacinth and scilla all offer a splash of color in late winter to announce the coming spring.

Spring is just around the corner

It's amazing how the little things can give us such joy, like seeing the first bee of the season, or a Carolina wren tearing out last year's nest in order to rebuild it anew. But as a gardener, seeing the first blooms of the year completes that sense of renewal for me.

My go-to's for early bloom are:

- snow crocus (*Crocus* spp.)
- winter aconite (*Eranthis* spp.)
- hellebores (*Helleborus* spp.)
- netted iris (*Iris reticulata*)
- grape hyacinth (*Muscari* spp.)
- daffodils (*Narcissus* spp.)
- squill (*Scilla* spp.)

Plan your fall-planted bulb order now

All of these except the hellebores are fall-planted bulbs, so this is the time I walk the garden and make note of where early bloom could be added in preparation for making my bulb order later this spring. I've said it before and I will say it again, make your bulb order early. No matter what, when those bulbs arrived, you'll find the strength to plant them. If you wait until you are tired out mentally and physically from gardening all summer, you may not have the energy to even make the order.

Daffodils normally require full sun, but for early-blooming cultivars, you can bend the rules a bit and plant them under deciduous trees as long as they are exposed to full sun during the tree's dormant period. It works because the early blooming cultivars can complete their bloom cycle under full sun well before the tree's leaves have yet to emerge and cast shade.



'Tête-à-Tête' is a dwarf early blooming daffodil.

You don't need petals to be colorful

I have had a love affair with hellebores ever since I planted my very first one over 20 years ago. One fun fact is hellebores lack conspicuous petals. It is actually the five petal-like sepals masquerading as petals putting on the color display. The ring of tubular funnel-form nectaries just inside the sepals are the actual modified petals, with the very center of the flower containing 2-10 pistils surrounded by multiple rings of up to 125 stamens.

Hellebores take a bit of work though. Many species and all of the hybrids maintain their foliage throughout all or part of the winter, and often become unsightly when "crisped" by our cold dry winter winds. This requires an annual trimming-back of older leaves to not only improve appearance, but also make room for new growth to emerge unimpeded. It should be noted the sap from cut leaves is known to sometimes cause skin irritation, so it is best to wear long-sleeves and gloves to avoid the issue altogether.

(CONTINUED Pg 5)

Some hellebores can produce a lot of offspring, so any unwanted seedling should be rogued out at this time as well. The majority of seedlings will be clustered at the base of the plant, but don't be surprised if you find some quite a ways away due to ant dispersal (myrmecochory).

The mind just boggles at how so many things have evolved, and work the way they do. Read this! Not only do hellebore seeds contain a fat and starch-rich structure (eliosome) that ants consume after taking it back to their nest, the eliosome mimics and releases an ant sex pheromone to bring them right to the ripe seed in the first place. Quite a nice trade for dispersal services.



Left: It's colorful sepals masquerading as petals give hellebores their color. The actual petals are just inside the sepals as modified tubular funnel-form nectaries.

Right: Lenten rose 'HGC Ice N' Roses Red' after trimming of old winter-burned leaves.



Madison-Monroe-St. Clair Unit
901 Illinois Ave.
P.O. Box 117
Waterloo, IL 62298