

GETTING AN EARLY START by Brenda C. Adams

It's April and still darn cold outside. But it's spring and you want to start gardening. Alas, you have no greenhouse, or maybe you do but it's unheated or still buried in snow. How can you get a jump start on your summer garden?

I'm sure you've heard your gardening friends talk about starting plants on south facing windowsills or even covering the dining room table with rows of little seedlings. But who wants to give up their table for three months? Windowsills can be cold and drafty, not to mention the fact that the plants need to be turned periodically so they don't stretch so far for the light that they fall over. If you start plants too early when we don't have much light, you can end up with leggy, scraggly fellows. That said, some plants, like artichokes for instance, really need to get started in February if you hope to have a summer harvest. Surely there's a better way? And there is: grow lights. Good old basic shop light fixtures with fluorescent bulbs. Some of you may already use grow lights, but there are many folks who do not. In the belief that old tried-but-true lessons are worth repeating, let's explore this tool a bit more.

A couple of decades ago, I used plain shop lights above a small workbench in the garage to germinate my seeds. The bench held seven flats. By the time the seedlings were ready to be potted up, I moved them to the greenhouse. Yes, I'm lucky enough to have a greenhouse and some years I had it operating by mid-March. Before using the grow light system I'm about to describe I would start moving the seedlings out to the greenhouse where they could soak up the full sunshine. For safety,

I had a thermostatically controlled heater that included a freeze alarm that issued a loud tone on the base station in my bedroom. Too often the alarm would go off while I was sleeping, stirring me to action.

I hated those middle-of-the-night alarms going off, telling me the temperature has dropped dangerously low. What I hated even more is jumping into my boots, throwing a long coat over my pajama-clad body, then trudging out into the cold night to hustle the flats of plants into the house for safety. Once day broke and the greenhouse warmed a bit, I had to drag everything back out. No, with temperatures consistently pegged below zero for days—actually weeks—many years, I needed a better plan.

So, about twenty years ago, I worked out a better strategy. Our garage, like most Alaska garages, was packed with stuff—a snow blower, firewood, a four-wheeler, dog food, tools, fishing poles, and supplies of every sort. The only thing lacking was a car! There wasn't much spare room in there, but there was a little. A strip two feet wide by eight feet long. In that strip I can now have forty flats of plants! All that emerging life makes the garage smell like heaven. It's also warmer and more

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Your AMGA board met in March to review financial updates, organizational projects, and plans for the upcoming gardening season. The 2026 budget, approved at a previous meeting, will remain stable with individual expenses authorized as needed throughout the year.

Significant discussion centered on the transition to the Neon One membership database system. While the current database of 162 active members has been successfully uploaded, the implementation has faced delays due to technical issues during data migration. Additional one-on-one technical support has been approved to help complete the transition and improve email communication and member portal access.

Work is also underway on an AMGA website redesign, which will include improved navigation, mobile compatibility, and a simplified events calendar.

Planning for spring programs and fundraising activities is also in progress. The annual Spring Plant Sale is scheduled for April 18 at Midtown Mall and remains a key fundraiser, with volunteers encouraged to assist. Several member engagement workshops—including glass fusion, hanging basket making, and other hands-on classes—have been well attended and will continue through the spring.

The board also reviewed updates on the Homer garden tour and other potential member events. In addition, a committee is developing a new grants and scholarships framework to support community gardening initiatives and expand educational opportunities. With new Master Gardener graduates expected later this spring, AMGA board continues to focus on strengthening member engagement and community outreach.



Click here for master gardener Deb Blaylock's seed starting schedule!

Balances on 1/31/2026

Checking S-88	\$18,265.22
Savings S-2	\$ 5.25
Savings S-29	\$ 17,217.45
CD General 2 year mature; 1/3/27	\$ 11,648.33
CD General 1 year; mature 1/30/26	\$ 10,830.19
Total Assets	\$ 57,966.44

Interest/Dividends	\$3.96
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This month's revenue

Membership	\$1,280.66
Donations	\$100
Fundraising/Plant sale	
Advanced M.G course	\$222.13
Total revenue	\$ 1602.79

This month's expenses

NEON 1	\$125
Grants	\$0
Operations	\$ 134.64
Website Hosting	\$287.64
Pioneer Home Garden	\$0
Postage/Box Rental	\$
Fundraising/plant sale	\$
Newsletter	\$ 39.99
Postage/Box rental	\$
Speaker Fees and costs	\$
Total Expenses this month	\$ 587.27

Balances On 2/28/2026

Checking S-88	\$ 19,280.74
Savings S-2	\$ 5.25
Savings S-29	\$ 17,221.41
CD General 2 Year 2.71%, (1/23/25)	\$ 11,648.33
CD General 1 Year 4.07% (1/30/25)	\$10,830.19

Total Assets on 2/28/26	\$ 58,985.92
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Prepared by Jan van den Top

EARLY START, *continued from page 1*

humid than normal, so the worm farm that I had back then was incredibly active—an unexpected bonus.

Those flats (720 plants in total) are arranged now on two inexpensive, four-foot-wide metal-wire, racking systems on casters that my late husband, Bill, got for me at Three Bears. The shelves in my racking system are adjustable, so I have some set close together for the germination trays, but still have allowed for a few quite tall shelves to accommodate bigger plants like dill and tomatoes. He outfitted each shelf with two shop fixtures hanging by chains from the shelf above. The chains are important so the fixtures can be raised as the plants grow taller. It's best to keep the lights about 4 inches above the plants.

Because Bill was trained as an engineer, he liked to do things the best way possible, so he filled the shop fixtures with grow lights instead of plain shop lights, patiently explaining to me about the different spectrums of light from each type. After hearing his explanation (which I will spare you here), I'm sure grow lights must be a little better, but the less expensive vanilla lights work just fine too. Since those long-ago days, there are many new options on the market for light fixtures. Keeping with the times, I've upgraded to LED lights, but trust me, the shop lights worked well and they are considerably less expensive.

As always, I've started too many plants and am now out of room, but a little more self control at seeding time should result in this system being sufficient until it's time to start moving things to the greenhouse. Even so, I have delayed opening the greenhouse a good six weeks later than the old days and the weather is finally relenting. Hopefully, there'll be no 2 AM alarm bells this late in spring.



Brenda's seedlings under grow lights. Adams photo.

April Member Meetings

Monday, April 20

6:00-6:30 mix n' mingle

6:30-7:30 presentation

HERBS

**Debbie Hinchey and
Jerelyn Miyashiro**

BP Energy Center
all are welcome

Monday, April 27

1:00-2:00 pm

HOUSEPLANTS: Spring Care and Feeding

Green Connection
804 E 15th Ave.
all are welcome

Herb Study Calendar

The Herb Study Group meets the 2nd Friday of each month from noon to 1:30 PM. The following topics and dates are planned, subject to possible changes. Interested in joining any of the meetings? Email: anchorageherbstudygroup@gmail.com

April 10 – Tea Party, RSVP required
May 8 – Plant Exchange TBD

YELLOW FLAG IRIS: A THREAT TO ALASKA'S WETLANDS by Tim Stallard

The hallmark of highly invasive plants in Alaska is that they somehow show up in natural areas (hitchhike, spread by birds, rivers, wind, etc.) and then spread locally and displace native plants—eventually affecting ecosystems.

Last summer I was sent to remote Kayak Island southeast of Cordova to survey and control invasive yellow flag iris (*Iris pseudacorus*), which I had previously only seen on invasive plant lists. This plant is ranked 66 out of 100 by the [Alaska Invasive Plant Ranking System](#), with a higher number indicating more invasive qualities.

Yellow flag iris was introduced from Europe as an ornamental and for erosion control. It has showy flowers and loves to grow in wetlands—hence the problem. Yellow iris spreads aggressively and outcompetes native plants through several mechanisms. The plant forms dense rhizome mats, which create impenetrable clumps that crowd out native plants and reduce diversity. Each plant produces hundreds of seeds that can float and spread via water. The seeds can tolerate high salinity and can remain viable after floating for up to 30 days.

Yellow iris also spreads vegetatively: small root or rhizome fragments can start new plants—so human (digging) or natural disturbance (storms, flooding, etc.) can spread it. This species is highly tolerant of extreme environmental conditions such as flooded or low oxygen soils, variable water levels, and salinity, which give it a big advantage over native wetland species.

From the aggressive biology described above follow major ecological impacts to sensitive wetland ecosystems. Yellow flag iris can form dense monocultures and displace native plants such as sedges and rushes. It can alter hydrology with its dense growth by slowing water flow and changing sediment dynamics. These hydrological changes along with decreased biodiversity can reduce habitat quality for salmon spawning, waterfowl, and amphibians. It is also toxic to livestock and wildlife. The sap of yellow iris can cause severe irritation, rashes, and blisters especially if it gets on the skin while digging or cutting the plant.

Yellow flag iris is a major problem in Washington,



This beauty is a beast. Iris pseudacorus on Alaska's remote Kayak Island. Tim Stallard photo.

Oregon, California, British Columbia, and other regions. Currently, there are a small number of records of yellow iris in natural areas in Alaska—all in southeast. While we haven't found this invader in too many places in Alaska so far, it seems likely that many of our vast coastal and wetland areas are vulnerable to invasion by this problematic plant—especially in a warming climate. One of the yellow iris infestations in a natural area on Mitkoff Island near Petersburg is thought to have come from disposed soil from a home garden—highlighting the risk of spread from garden plants and the importance of proper disposal of invasive plants.

Somehow, yellow flag iris made it to the eastern shore of remote Kayak island and the plant had found its happy place. We documented nearly a thousand invasive iris plants growing in dozens of small, new and large, dense patches along 1.7 miles of remote coast growing just above the high tide line. It appeared that pounding

Continued on next page

Yellow Flag Iris, continued.

winter storms had spread this plant along the coast.

We were able to treat the iris in that area with an Environmental Protection Agency aquatic registered herbicide as the first step to hopefully eradicating yellow iris from this wilderness island. Unfortunately, we ran out of time before we ran out of irises. A conservation crew cleaning up ocean plastics that I had trained on yellow iris identification found additional plants five miles up the coast from where I left off. We do plan to return this summer to follow up the survey and control effort.

Tim Stallard is the owner of Alien Species Control, LLC.



Leandro Gomez stands next to a patch of yellow flag iris, showing how tall these plants can get. Not pictured, we also found a few patches of native purple iris that are less than half the size of yellow iris. Tim Stallard photo.

SPRING PLANT SALE

Saturday, April 18, 2026

10:00 AM - 5:00 PM

Midtown Mall

SELL PLANTS AND MAKE MONEY
FOR YOURSELF AND AMGA.
THEN BUY MORE PLANTS.



For more info, contact Susan Negus,
senegus@gmail.com, or 907-227-6288

**Sign Up: Plant Sale
at Midtown Mall**

SELL YOUR EXTRA PLANTS AT THE MIDTOWN MALL GARDEN SHOW!

New to selling plants with AMGA? [Find all the details here on our website](#), then sign up to sell plants or volunteer using the button, below left. This is a fun tabling event and a chance to connect with Anchorage gardeners.

EVEN MORE EXTRA PLANTS? SHARE THEM!

Anchor Gardens is collaborating with Mutual Aid Network of Anchorage (MANA) and the Lutheran Food Pantry to distribute pots of greens, herbs and other vegetables to people who don't have space for an outdoor garden. It's an opportunity for us to share our abundance. Starts will be distributed in June. So hold on to those extra plants and please contact Margaret if you have plants to share: timmermanmargaret851@gmail.com

"HERB" STUDY: COTTONWOODS by Carey Steele

Cottonwood (*Populus balsamifera* and *P. trichocarpa*) trees are well known in southcentral Alaska, the Pacific Northwest and western North America. *Populus* is a genus of 25–30 species of deciduous flowering plants in the family Salicaceae (willow), native to most of the Northern Hemisphere. Several species form a colonial root system, pushing invasive suckers.

One of the most interesting things about this species are the ecological connections and interdependence, as much as humans may not want to admit. Cottonwood is a keystone riparian tree and plays a major role in river ecosystems. Its roots stabilize river banks, reduce erosion, slow floodwaters, and it quickly colonizes. They provide habitats for wildlife and support many insects and birds. Owls and woodpeckers nest; bears den; beavers eat and build with branches; fish spawn among river drift logs; deer, elk, and other animals eat young shoots and leaves.

It supports 100s of insect species! Aphids, caterpillars, and beetles feed on its leaves. Those insects become food for birds and other animals. Resins protect the buds from insects that would snack on their inner treats. It's also a sticky barrier protecting the tree from bacteria and fungi invasion. Bees gather resins for the protective health of their hives. The pollen and nectar produced in spring also support early season pollinators and insects. Those sensitive or allergic to aspirin should avoid cottonwood. There are rare reports of contact dermatitis. Very few people are allergic to cottonwood catkins (they carry its seeds, not pollen). They are more likely reacting to grass pollen being stirred up.

Perhaps more widespread is the history of *Populus*' medicinal uses. Hippocrates wrote of its usefulness in 400 BC. He recommended the extract "salycasia" to treat ailments like headaches and labor pains, as well as to reduce fever and inflammation. Buds and bark are the most commonly used parts for medicinal use. Preparations include: infused oil, poultice, salve, decoction, tea, or tincture. These are useful for congested coughs, fevers, pain, infections, to support skin health, and as a preservative. It is antimicrobial, an inflammatory modulator, a stimulating expectorant, astringent, and has antioxidants.

"Balm of Gilead" has been listed as a remedy for



Cottonwood buds in oil. Photo by Victoria Nechodomu / Nechodomu Media

centuries. It's still a common reference today to the oil infused with the buds and used as medicine for wound care, pain management, and skin health. The resin has a similar aroma, medicinal properties, and traditional uses to the legendary biblical balm. In the story of Joseph (Genesis), there were traders coming from Gilead (now Jordan) carrying balm, spices, and myrrh. The balm trade is what made the name "Gilead" synonymous with healing for centuries. The true historical *Commiphora gileadensis* grew in the Middle East and produced the rare healing resin referenced. It was prized as a healing medicinal salve "tsori" and a perfume. There is a famous line in Jeremiah where he says, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" The spiritual association in the Bible here is that Jesus is the "balm" for the people who are desperately in need of healing.

To many, the sticky spring buds or poofy catkins of cottonwood are either hypnotizing or annoying. Historically, the trees became a valuable resource because they grow very large and very fast providing: soft wood, huge trunks, sticky buds, and abundant riverbank growth, making it easy to harvest to use for various objects and medicines. Another very interesting "rabbit hole" that I encourage you to explore is the uses of cottonwood by Native Americans for daily living as well as medicine! May the interdependence wildlife and humans have with this ubiquitous tree hypnotize you.

The author makes organic body products and medicinals using balm of Gilead. To see her products, go to careysteele.com.

LEARN / WATCH / SIGN UP!



Apple Tree Grafting Workshop

hosted by the Alaska Pioneer Fruit Growers

Begich Middle School
Sunday, April 19
2:00-4:00 pm

Purchase rootstock for a few dollars a piece; scion wood and instruction are free!

Build Your Own Planter Box or Wooden Sign



April 25 & 26

- 10:00 AM – 5:00 PM (both days)
- Alaska Industrial Hardware, 2716 Commercial Dr.
- Lunch: Not provided



with Alaska Creative Woodworkers

**Sign Up:
Planter Box**

March 11
12-1 pm



Winter Squash
Mavens Tell All!

Leslie Tose
and Elizabeth
Holmgren



Create your own Hanging Basket
with Forget-Me-Not Nursery

April 22, 5-7pm



- Private visit to Forget Me Not Nursery in Indian
- Tour
- Plant a 12" or 14" hanging basket; Forget Me Not nursery will care for it until end of May (unless you want it sooner)
- Choose plants that work in your microclimate
- All participants receive discount coupons for future shopping
- \$100; payment collected at event

**Sign Up:
Hanging Basket**

Time to start your winter squash! [Check out this 2025 recording with Leslie Tose and Elizabeth Holmgren](#), the Winter Squash mavens.

The RurAL CAP GROW YouTube channel has lots of great Alaska webinars; [see their playlists here](#).



Premiering on Netflix on April 22, Earth Day: "This is a Gardening Show," hosted by actor and comedian Zach Galifianakis. [The trailer looks promising; watch it here.](#)

Join our Meetings

Member Mtgs: 3rd Monday of the month, 6:30 pm, September-May (except December), unless otherwise specified. Free and open to the public.

Board Mtgs: 2nd Monday of the month, 6-7 pm, all are welcome to observe. Email president@alaskamastergardeners.org for details.

AMGA Board of Directors

Dawn Groth	President
Troy Weiss	Vice President
Jan van den Top	Treasurer
Diane Peck	Secretary
Brenda Adams, Roz Goodman, Ellen Kirchner, Rich Ervin, Jerelyn Miyashiro, Nancy Tone	At Large

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Nick Riordan	Calendar of Events
Brenda Adams	Advanced MG Course
Kathy Liska, Cindy Walker	Facebook
Nancy Tone	Meetings/Programs
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Board of Directors	Volunteer Coordinators
Nancy Grant, Sue Negus	Plant Sale Coordinators

Renew/Join AMGA

Use our [online form](#) or [fillable PDF](#) to join or renew your AMGA membership. By joining, you support AMGA and its mission of gardening education in partnership with the University of Alaska Cooperative Extension Service. We provide continuing education, grants for garden projects, garden tours, and more, all in service to the community.

Newsletter Submissions

The deadline for submitting an item for publication is the 20th of the month. We welcome educational articles (400-600 words ideal), calendar items and announcements. Educational articles qualify for MG volunteer hours. Please disclose use of AI. Contact/send items to the editor at newsletter@alaskamastergardeners.org.

Connect with AMGA

Website: www.alaskamastergardeners.org
 Facebook: facebook.com/Alaska-Master-Gardeners-Anchorage
 YouTube: www.youtube.com/channel/UCvZehJprKkjQzivQvNDKopQ
 Google Group: <https://groups.google.com/forum/?fromgroups#!forum/AkMGA>
 Membership issues/address updates: rebecca@alaskamastergardeners.org
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