

Garden Logue: February 2nd
William Moss

Chicago has proven to be a great city for urbanites, who, like me, love to be outdoors. With the lakefront, parks, forest preserves, bike paths, and countless social events the city screams for its citizens to go outside and get active. In this green city gardening is also a favorite activity. Chicago's climate provides enough Summer heat to grow peppers and enough Winter cold for quality apples. In addition, our status as a Zone 5 region (minimum winter temperatures ~ -20⁰F) allows us to grow interesting trees, shrubs, and perennials from around the world.

The only real drawback for Chicago's dirt-diggers and flower-pickers are the gray days of winter, when the bitter cold and dreariness limit our gardening efforts to thumbing through the pages of seed catalogues. But something has changed. Our gardens are alive and moving this winter.

On a visit to my community garden Thursday, I quickly noticed this season is different. I ventured out on that sunny day to see what Mother Nature was up to. I knew the weather had been mild; but to my surprise, the usually slow march towards spring had become a quick two-step. Like little phoenixes, plants were busy rising from the leaf litter and debris.



Signs of growth this early in the year are stunning. However, if penguins can thrive in Antarctic cold, I should not be surprised that during our mild winter things have hardly slowed down. Remarkably, the last flowers on my fall witch hazel are still going, even as my spring witch hazel begins to break bud.

The basal leaves of asters, goldenrods, and monkshoods are just visible through the duff. Spring bulb foliage is peaking out of the ground. And, most exciting, the snowdrops are already up and blooming!



Like clockwork, the resident rabbit sampled the first snowdrop, only to drop the unpalatable flower to the ground. I sigh knowing that the first crocus and species tulips will suffer the same fate. Fortunately, I've planted plenty enough to satisfy both the rabbit's gastronomical curiosity and my viewing pleasure. Although, I wish they would not nibble my plants, I enjoy seeing the rabbits, voles, and field mice. Their presence makes our measured plots seem natural and untamed.

The constancy of life is amazing and reassuring to your faith, especially in these tough times. To see nature in action always soothes my troubles and puts things in proper perspective. If witch hazel flowers can survive through winter, then everything is gonna be alright. If snowdrops are blooming in January, then fo' sho' everything is gonna be alright. (And if a rabbit nibbles off a snowdrop flower, then it must be my brash yet dim-witted clan of rabbits that never seem to learn snowdrops taste nasty!)



My rewards for venturing outdoors on this sunny Groundhog Day (he saw his shadow by the way) included not only a release of stress and exciting nature observations, but also a rare day of winter harvesting. The soil was not frozen, which allowed me to dig some sun-chokes. My great grandmother grew this native, perennial sunflower (*Helianthus tuberosus*) for its potato-like tubers.

I'm sure she was surprised and tickled watching me from above as I gathered sun-chokes in mid Winter. I know it won't last, but this mild spell is alright by me.