

For us eager gardeners, this is surfing weather

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By Bill Thorness

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In winter, armchairs hold many fidgety gardeners, as rain and chilly days force a reprieve from pruning, potting and puttering about in the yard. But winter gardeners can still be productive. Trade the armchair for the office chair, and surf the Web for ideas on renovations, new techniques and plant varieties. Or diagnose a problem seen but not addressed last season. With the Internet's help, there's much more to be done than wait for the seed catalogs to arrive.

Sites range from the practical (A-Z list of plants) to the whimsical (Web cam to watch cats digging in the garden).

Virtually all local gardening organizations post Web sites, and many offer educational and volunteer opportunities. Here are 10 out of the thousands that provide diversions with which the winter hours may be whiled.

WSU Cooperative Extension

This should be the first stop for any area gardener who wants region-specific plant information or solutions to problems. The extensive library is well-organized and offers an effective key-word search. The information is exhaustive, heavy on text and light on photographs or graphics.

<http://gardening.wsu.edu/index.htm>

Gardening blogs

Garden Web provides links to an endless supply of gardening blogs, many with wonderful photos, as well as a forum section with a page devoted to the Northwest. Read about and view gardens from around the world, or start a chat with fellow regional gardeners.

www.gardenweb.com, <http://forums.gardenweb.com/forums/nwest>

Bug guide

You will be amazed at the close-up detail on some of the thousands of bug pictures sent in by amateur naturalists for cataloging. The site provides information and images on "insects, spiders and their kin" in the United States and Canada. Browse the entries, or submit your bug photo for identification. <http://bugguide.net/node/view/15740>

Botanical gardens

Exploring out-of-state botanical gardens is a pleasant rainy-day diversion. The Brooklyn Botanic Garden offers a wealth of photography, and even short movies showing 360-degree views of many of its themed gardens. The Missouri Botanical Garden provides extensive information for children, such as an overview of the Earth's biomes and ecosystems, and information on all the foods coming from tropical lands.

www.bbg.org, www.mbgnet.net, www.mobot.org

Organic Gardening magazine

The magazine's site is filled with practical, timely tips (make a bean trellis out of your Christmas tree), and blogs for each U.S. region. As do many full-featured sites, it offers a free e-newsletter. This is a great way to sample the magazine without cutting trees.

www.organicgardening.com

Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center

Click on Explore Plants to reach a database of 17,000 wildflowers and native plants in the Native Plant Information Network, which is browsable or searchable by scientific name, common name or plant family. Enjoy the cleverly named advice column, "Ask Mr. Smarty Plants," or e-mail photos to get help identifying a plant. www.wildflower.org

Seeds of Change

The New Mexico seed company produces a beautiful site with a unique feature: the online GardenCycle Calendar, which allows users to keep an online garden journal. Their well-written e-newsletter (recent article: the history and varieties of carrots) is provided on the site, along with other articles and a lively bulletin board. www.seedsofchange.com

Sunset Publishing Co.

From the creators of the invaluable Sunset Western Garden Book and Sunset magazine comes a professional media site that offers monthly tips, how-to projects, feature articles and great photos. The site covers many lifestyle topics besides gardening. www.sunset.com

Rainy Side Gardeners

Produced by Cascadia gardeners, this offers articles about gardening in our region, plus an active forum and a plant guide with many excellent photos. www.rainyside.com

Earthcam network

Although gardeners haven't started populating YouTube with video of seeds sprouting (as far as I know), there's always EarthCam. Type "garden" into the search engine, and browse through live Web cams of gardens around the world. You'll find everything from chickens to zen gardening ... even a garden Web cam all the way from Tacoma. Check the weather elsewhere and dream of a warm, dry day among your own plants. www.earthcam.com