

# TOM'S GARDEN

## BLOG FEBRUARY 2024

### Bird Watching

A third of American adults are bird watchers in some way. Around 96 million people in the U.S. closely observed, fed, photographed, visited parks, or maintained plantings and natural areas around the home for the benefit of birds in 2022 according to a recent survey. The new estimate is almost double the survey conducted in 2016.

Did the covid 19 pandemic influence this rise in popularity? I think so. This latest survey reflects a worldwide birding boom in the years since the covid outbreak in 2020.

The survey also shows that birding is big business.



Altogether, wildlife watchers spent 250 billion last year on their hobbies which includes hunting and fishing. A lot of that money was spent on equipment such as binoculars, cameras, bird food, bird houses, and feeders.

Many bird enthusiasts travel all over the world for birding adventure vacations.

Check out

[www.allaboutbirds.org/news/birding-festivals](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/birding-festivals) for more information.

### The Peat Moss Problem

Most gardeners in America are not aware of the global concerns about the extraction of peat moss and the connection to climate change.

The U.K. originally had a ban on peat-based products starting in 2024, but that has been pushed back to 2030.

Europe lost 95 percent of its peat bogs in the last 100 years, most of it being used for heating fuel.

Peat is used by every American nursery or garden center as a foundation for soil amendments and potting soil.

Soiless mixes typically are preferred for their consistency, ability to hold onto nutrients and water, and give much needed air to the roots.

Peat moss is formed in peat bogs that cover about three percent of the earth's land surface. Peatlands are vital habitats for plants and animals. Peat bogs are filled with dead and decaying plants ranging from six to almost 50 feet deep.

Living sphagnum moss, a spongy carpet, sinks and gradually decomposes at a very slow rate of 1/32 inch per year. It takes 1,000 years for three feet of peat to form. Once gone, it takes many lifetimes to replenish a peat bog.

Peatlands store a lot of carbon, twice as much as all the trees and vegetation on earth combined.

Peat is harvested by removing surface plants, draining the wetland, and vacuuming up the layers of peat. This releases huge amounts of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

The U.S. gets 85 percent of its peat from Canada. No restrictions or bans are being discussed yet in North America. Canada has more than 294 million acres of peatland, about 25 percent of the world's supply.

There are peat-free alternatives for gardeners and commercial growers. Peat moss is replaced with compost in some organic potting soils, but they are hard to find. Peat-free mixes typically contain coconut coir, compost, recycled paper fiber, perlite, rice hulls, and worm castings. These mixtures are very forgiving and hold moisture longer, making them ideal for hanging baskets.

Several public gardens have eliminated peat in their potting mixes for plants in conservatories. They are moving away from peat because of its environmental impact, which has been well documented. Also, coconut coir must be shipped from the tropics to temperate regions of the world. A better solution would be something made locally.

Compost is a completely renewable source and can be made in your own yard or purchased in bags at your nursery. I normally mix store-bought potting soil with compost from my compost piles at a 50/50 ratio.

There are sources for peat-free potting soil online. [www.gardenista.com](http://www.gardenista.com) has recommended sources and also [www.amazon.co](http://www.amazon.co) sells peat-free soil and shipping would be free for Prime members.

I will certainly be trying to reduce my carbon footprint this year just by reducing or eliminating peat-based products.

## Some Ideas for Dealing with Drought

Drought is becoming a major issue across the country, but there are ways of dealing with it without pouring more water on the problem.

Water is precious and needs to be conserved, especially in the south and west. Homeowners in Arizona can no longer grow lush green lawns as they did before. Now they have gone back to desert-type landscapes with cacti and succulents, which are their native plants.

No matter where you live, your native plants are the most drought tolerant and will thrive in your local soils, local climate, precipitation, and feed your local pollinators. They will also be more resistant to disease and predators.

After natives, use plants that are from a similar region. It's OK to sprinkle in a few tropical plants, just remember they take different care and are most of the time happier in a planter or pot. They will need to be stored indoors over winter.

Group plants with the same watering needs together. This creates a zone that will be more manageable when the summer dry spell happens. Hanging baskets and small planters can be problematic if the plants need constant moisture. I will grow plants such as Johnny jump-ups in spring and then switch them out for more heat and drought resistant plants later on.

Water hanging baskets till the water runs out of the bottom. To deeply water a plant in the ground, put a small hole in the bottom toward the edge of a one gallon milk jug.

The goal here is to have the jug empty in about 20 minutes. If your hole is too big, Seal it up and try again with a smaller hole. This is also a good way to fertilize plants by mixing in water-soluble fertilizer in the jug. Deep watering a couple times a week is better than a little water every day. To access the U.S. Drought monitor system, Go to <https://droughtmonitor.uni.edu> This includes a color-coded map showing the location and density of drought conditions in the U.S.

## Don't Till

Research shows that using a rototiller destroys soil structure, damages the soil microbiome, dries out the soil, and brings weed seeds to the surface. You will also destroy earthworm tunnels. It's better to spread compost or manure over the surface and work it into the top two inches of soil. Earthworms, grubs, and microbes will do their job.

## How to start rosemary from seed

Rosemary is a tender perennial in our area, seldom making it through our Northeast Ohio winters.



You could buy a plant from a nursery, but why not try to grow your own from seed? You will have plenty for yourself and some to give away.

Here's how:

Start the seed about 12 weeks before you plan on putting the seedlings out in the garden or a container.

Spread fine seed starting medium in a shallow tray. Spray water over the medium with a hand sprayer. Place the seeds about a half inch apart and press into the soil. Cover a quarter inch with more soil or vermiculite. It really helps if you buy pelleted seed. Spray the soil again several times. Cover with plastic wrap so they don't dry out. Place your tray under a grow light or a bright window. Make sure the temperature is 70 degrees, the seeds will not germinate if it is too cold. It's very important that the soil doesn't dry out!

Normally, germination takes 10 to 14 days so be patient. When the plants are an inch tall, transfer them to three-inch pots with regular potting soil and fertilize them lightly. Grow them on until they are 3 to 4 inches tall and can be planted out or into a pot. Two or three rosemary plants can be grown in a pot together and don't mind being a little crowded.

## Foxglove Facts

Foxglove (*digitalis* spp) is loved by hummingbirds and bumblebees. Some varieties are biennial (blooming the second year) but look for hybrids that bloom the first year. They can be purchased in spring, or you can start them from seed. Follow the instructions on the seed package. Foxglove will reseed, so remove the spent flowers if you don't want that. Foxglove is poisonous and deer will not eat them.