



## Got the Fever?

*A Green Hearts essay by Ken Finch  
Winter 2013 - 2014*

One warm winter's day: that's all it took. Out came my newest home landscaping reference book (The Midwest Native Garden; Adelman & Schwartz) and a red pen to mark all the ideas I want to use in my yard. Then onto the internet to find the spring date for my favorite local native plant sale (Nebraska Statewide Arboretum), and to see if the 2014 catalog is out yet from my best mail-order source of native plants (Missouri Wildflower Nursery).

Yet almost instantly a little voice in my brain began scolding me, "No, no, no! Finish the basement remodeling during these cold months. *Then* start planning the landscape improvements!" But right now, with the temperature at 65 degrees in mid-January, springtime's siren song is riveting....

Spring fever may have arrived prematurely this year, perhaps as a reaction to the "polar vortex" that plunged us into the deep freeze so early in the season. But for me, there may be another reason: I'm a proud papa gardener in waiting. Growing season number three is approaching for me in this current house. Season number one was repair: re-cutting beds, removing exotic and invasive plants, re-locating a few others, tearing out asphalt shingles that the previous owner had used as a weed barrier (honest!), and getting a first layer of wood mulch spread. Season number two was replanting: three new trees, about two dozen new fruit-bearing shrubs, a large butterfly garden, and a fenced vegetable garden ready and waiting for 2014 seeds and seedlings. Plus ten more cubic yards of mulch.

Hopefully, growing season number three will be for rejoicing at the success of my new babies! All the wonderful, carefully chosen plants that I added last year just basically sat there through the summer – as expected. The old adage about planting perennials is true: first year sleep, second year creep, third year leap. So this year won't see lots of blooms and leaping growth, but it should show progress. Plus, inevitably, it will reveal which young and tender plants didn't make it through the winter. No gardener ever bats 1,000! But I'm eager to see which plants will be poised to "take off."

I'm lucky that my yard backs up to a creek and woods, so there's more "nature" to be seen than most suburbanites enjoy. Yet it's still just a tiny chunk of land, with nothing astonishing about it. By contrast, over the years I have been blessed to see the bulk of North America's most spectacular natural wonders, from the Everglades to Banff, from the Smokies to the Olympic peninsula, from Big Sur to Acadia, and uncounted scores of other striking places in-between. Yet despite all the "star" places I've visited, my very favorite natural area is a quiet patch of Vermont woods that barely makes it onto the maps. Thirty-five years of solo visits there – hot, cold, wet, dry, always-delightful visits – have made this bit of wilderness the most beloved place in my heart.

But now gaining rapidly in the competition for my affection is this little patch of suburbia that I actually own, and which I am visibly and mindfully improving with my own hands. It has been a steady courtship since move-in day. The yard bird list has grown to 68 species. I've spotted deer, red foxes, garter snakes, skunks, woodchucks, toads, and frogs, along with fascinating fungi and beautiful blooms. Each January I look forward to the booming hoots of the local Great horned owl, putting his best foot forward for mating season. I note the arrival dates of the Juncos, watch for where the Cooper's hawks will nest this year, and savor the occasional surprising visitor, like last year's Whippoorwill.

In short, as I learn and do more with my little personal patch of ground, the connection grows stronger and my sense of place spirals upward.

Do you have a piece of ground in your heart? If not, it's never too late to start. You don't need to be a kid at play or an adult world traveler in order to begin nurturing your bond with the natural world! But a good case of spring fever can't hurt....