

Urban Horticulturer

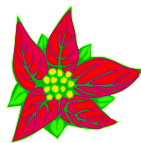
December 2001

Dear Readers,

Thank you for promptly returning the purge form and survey. I have already used the survey information in my annual report to the University of Florida, IFAS Extension. However, I find that there still are a number of readers who have not yet responded. Just to be sure that your purge form was not lost or forgotten, I have included another one in this month's newsletter. If you sent in the form last month, then you don't need to respond again this month. In January, we will remove all names of those current newsletter recipients who have not responded.

PLANTS FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Poinsettias - Most gardeners prefer a red poinsettia, but there are several colors including pink, whites, yellows, oranges, burgundies, and marbles. You need to keep your poinsettia in a bright location, but out of the mid-day sun. Check the soil often to make sure it is moist. There is no need to fertilize for the next few weeks.



The plant can be grown for another year, if you like. If you decide to keep the plant, place it in full sun and fertilize every other week with a soluble fertilizer. In March, replot the plant and cut it back about one half.

Gloxinia - These plants are close relatives of the African violet. They have large upward pointing bell shaped flowers of white, red, pink and purple colors. The plants will last for several months.

Kalanchoes - This is one of my favorites and used to be available only in an orange color. Now they are available in yellow, pink and red flowers. The flowers occur in small clusters well above the foliage. These plants can be kept in bloom for a number of weeks.

Cyclamen - This is another attractive Christmas plant. This plant has white, pink and red blossoms. They once needed the coolest place in the home now they grow almost anywhere. Keep the plant out of direct sun and it will bloom through early spring. Sometimes they will produce flowers until summer.

Holiday Plant Care - Faithful care of Holiday plants will add days or weeks onto their life. Temperature has an important influence on the length of time a flowering house plant remains attractive. The poinsettia is especially sensitive to chilling, and exposure to chilling will cause the leaves to drop. Sixty-five degrees F. is a good night time temperature for poinsettia, but they should not receive a cold draft. Sixty degrees F. is even better for most flowering potted plants.

The method of watering many times determines the life of the plant. Many people water at regular intervals whether the plants need it or not. Plant roots need air as well as water, so when the plants are over watered there is no place in the soil for air. The roots are actually suffocated.

Water should be applied in sufficient

quantities to thoroughly soak the soil in the pot and no more given until the soil approaches dryness again. The plants should be checked daily and no more water added until the soil surface feels dry to the touch.

In the home, provide as much natural light as possible. A dark bedroom, hall, entrance foyer, or living room does not have optimum growing conditions. Place your plants where they will receive morning sun. Poor light will cause leaf drop.

By giving your Christmas pot plants the best environmental conditions of proper temperature, adequate water, and good light, they will furnish you with an attractive display for many days or even weeks.

COLD PROTECTION

It doesn't really seem like it, but colder weather is just around the corner. Remember that Florida weather can change rapidly, so you need to be prepared. Probably many of you, like myself have many cold sensitive plants sitting out on your deck or patio. Most of these plants will be protected if they are moved inside before freezing temperatures arrive. But remember, some sensitive plants like orchids, weeping figs, desert rose, frangipani and other tropicals will need to be protected if the temperature dips below 40 degrees F. Epescias will be damaged if the temperature drops below 50 degrees; I had some damage to my Epescia already this year from the cold nights we experienced a few weeks ago.

Most cold protection for in-ground plantings involves trapping heat from the air or soil around the plant, which insulates the plant from the cold. Containers can be used such as cardboard boxes, flower pots, trash cans, etc. The plants can be wrapped in some sort of fabric such as blankets or sheets, but the

covering must reach the ground. I find commercial freeze cloth to be quite effective. Beds can be covered with blankets or sheets and then covered with plastic. Do not use plastic alone, because it does little to hold in the heat. You can build an enclosure out of plastic, and then use some sort of heat source such as a light bulb. Hay or pine needles also can be used to cover flowers and vegetables.

Do not try to use water for cold protection, because most homeowners do not have an adequate output of water for this technique to be effective. When there is an adequate amount of water, as you have seen with strawberries and citrus, the surface of the leaves and fruit are kept just above 32 degrees F. under a layer of ice.

The reason for this is that as the water freezes it gives off heat. Ice builds up on the plant and the leaf temperature remains at 32 degrees, as the water freezes and gives off heat, even though the outside temperature is below 32 degrees F. The down side is that the buildup of ice can physically damage the plants-break branches.

However, you can use water to help protect your plants. Watch or listen to news broadcasts, and the day before a predicted freeze, make sure all your landscape plants are well watered. Unfortunately, you will have to coordinate this irrigation cycle with your legal watering day. The amount should be about 3/4 of an inch. If possible, water during the early morning the day before a front with cold weather is to arrive. **Do not water** the afternoon before the front is to arrive, because your plants may remain wet, and the water will freeze on the leaves. The previous day watering allows the soil to go into that day and the next morning with plenty of moisture. Such soils will store more heat and thus allow for a slower cooling during the evening of the hard freeze. For every hour that the soil

surrounding the roots doesn't freeze, the potential for cold related root injury is lessened. Covering these plants will give even more protection.

MOVING PLANTS IN THE LANDSCAPE

December is the first of several months for moving plants in your landscape. A tree or shrub may be in a spot where it is not needed or seems to be out of place. Now is the time to give it a new home. Make sure the soil is moist before making the move. Make downward cuts around the plant to sever roots, and then dig under the root ball. Root balls can be quite heavy, so make sure that you have plenty of help when the plant is ready to be moved to the new site. If the plant is to be moved very far, you may want to wrap the root ball in burlap or some other type of cloth.

At the new location dig a hole 2-3 times the size of the root ball. Do not dig the hole deeper than the height of the root ball. The top of the root ball, in well drained soils, should be even with the soil surface. Place the root ball in the hole and fill the hole around the root ball half full with unamended soil and tamp the surface lightly with your hands and water in until you see no bubbles. Then, finish backfilling the rest of the hole around the root ball. Thoroughly soak the root ball with water to settle the soil-don't pack the soil with your feet.

Do not put soil on the upper surface of the root ball. Planting too deeply and capping the root ball with soil are two major causes of plant death. Build a berm around the root ball (just around the root ball) 2-3 inches high to hold irrigation water and rainfall during the first year. Water every few days or when the soil surface becomes dry.

VEGETABLE GARDENING

Vegetables - Many cool season vegetables can be planted in December. Those include beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, celery, Chinese cabbage, collards, kale, kohlrabi, leek, lettuce (all types), mustard, onions (all types), parsley, English peas, and radish.

If you have winter vegetables in now, you will still need to follow a regular fertilizer program. Vegetables need 1-2 pounds of 6-6-6 fertilizer per 100 feet of row every six weeks or so until spring. Since phosphorous (the middle number) is usually high in central Florida soils, a 15-0-15 may be a better choice applied at ½ pound per 100 feet of row. Check the fertilizer label for water insoluble nitrogen.



To fertilize vegetables already growing and in place, do not throw the fertilizer onto their leaves which could cause a burn. Instead, drop it along side the plant in a band 2-3 inches wide and gently work it into the soil with your hands.

PRUNING SHADE TREES

January and February is the ideal time to do major pruning on shade trees-as long as they don't bloom in the spring, like dogwood. Don't prune just for the sake of pruning-have a reason. Remove dead or broken branches. Remove weak spindly branches (often referred to as water sprouts) that result when a branch becomes less vigorous. Remove suckers that come from roots or stems close to the ground. Remove one side of a branch that splits into a sharp angle causing the bark to bunch up in the crotch (called included bark). When the tree gets larger, these V angles can split in half. Other branches should only be removed if they threaten utility lines, or other

structure such as roof or vehicular traffic (don't remove too many of these branches). Never simply top out a tree to make it shorter by cutting all the branch tips off. As the tree grows, the branch unions will be weakened.

MISC. DECEMBER GARDENING

Crape myrtles - I have had several calls concerning pruning crape myrtles. It is best to wait until the danger of frosts and freezes are over in February. If they are pruned now, new growth may be stimulated which could make the tree more sensitive to freeze damage.

Flowers to plant - calendula, candytuff, carnation, geranium, goddetia, dianthus, ornamental cabbage and kale, pansy, petunia, shasta daisy, snapdragon, statice, stock, and sweet pea.

Citrus - I regularly see citrus leaf miner damage. This is a moth which lays its eggs on citrus leaves and the caterpillars bore into the leaf and make a mine. This mining causes the leaf to become distorted. It doesn't do major damage except on young trees. It really doesn't do any good to cut the branches off with this leaf damage, because the leaves are still alive and helping the tree grow, in spite of the mine. It just makes the tree look really bad. About the only control is to keep the new flushes of growth covered with horticultural oil (spray oil once per week for 4-5 weeks on each flush).

Turf - Winter is the time of year when you will see Brown Patch on your St. Augustinegrass. This disease is easy to diagnose because the leaf sheaths become rotten and the blade can be pulled out of the sheath. It can be controlled with 2

applications of a recommended lawn fungicide.

Polk County Parks and Recreation User Guide - A user guide is currently available at no charge from the Polk County Parks and Recreation Department (863)534-4340 or the Polk County Cooperative Extension Office (863)533-0765. This guide lists all of the Parks in Polk County and gives specific information on the use of each one. It includes ballfields, campgrounds, picnic pavilions, boat ramps, gun ranges, user fees, etc.

Happy Holidays,

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For gardening information:
<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>

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