

Urban Horticulturer

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TURF

Have you ever seen so much rain in December? Not much to say about turf in December, however it should be mowed. Most of the time you may be mowing winter weeds, which is important.

I need to make a correction in a statement that was made in December's newsletter. I mentioned that you can determine the amount of fertilizer (1 pound nitrogen) to be applied to 1000 square foot of turf by dividing 100 by the percent nitrogen in the bag-I have mentioned this many times. Last month, I recommended using a 15-5-15 fertilizer and indicated that you should use 5 pounds per 1000 square feet of turf-this is obviously wrong. One hundred divided by 15, of course, equals 6.7 pounds per 1000 square feet of turf. Please accept my apologies.

MISTLETOE

Mistletoe has been used as a Yuletide decoration for centuries. This soft woody plant, with its dark green, oval foliage and white berries, symbolizes peace and love. The Norse belief may be the origin of this symbolism as it was said that men who met in battle under mistletoe would stop fighting, kiss and make-up. The tradition of kissing under the mistletoe may have also originated from the Druids who considered the mistletoe sacred. They believed that it held magical virtue and was a remedy for evil. The priests would cut pieces of the oak on which the mistletoe grew and offer them along with two

white bulls as a sacrifice to pagan gods. Twigs with berries were hung above doors to indicate the past grievance and hatreds were forgiven and it was used in amulets, bracelets and rings to ward off evil and protect against witchcraft and evil.

These customs and beliefs have carried over to its use at Christmas time to encourage passion by way of kissing. Hanging up the white berries was a subtle challenge to kiss the unsuspecting or unsuspecting individual who stood beneath it.

Mistletoe is not like typical plants which obtain support, water and nutrients from the soil in which they grow. Mistletoe is a parasite which lives in the tops of trees. It sends out roots which penetrate the bark and enter the water and nutrient conducting tissue of a tree.

After a young plant is established, it grows very quickly and lives about 10 years, after which it usually dies from mechanical breakage or excessive shade. Eventually the tree is weakened and will decline as it is robbed of its nutrition by the clinging mistletoe.

Mistletoe is very difficult to control because a portion of it grows into the tree's tissue. Breaking away the mistletoe is ineffective as it will regrow at the point of removal and produce another clump. The most successful method of control is to remove a chip of wood at the point of attachment from the host limb. If mistletoe is on a small limb, the entire limb

should be pruned out one foot below the point where the mistletoe attaches.

Today mistletoe remains a desirable decoration of the holiday season. Most people think of its attractive berries and evergreen foliage in this decorating context and are surprised to hear that it is harmful to trees. The plant also has poisonous properties and should be kept out of reach of small children who may be tempted to eat the berries.

CHRISTMAS TREES

To many people the holiday season is not complete without a Christmas tree. When purchasing a tree, there are a few things you can look for to obtain the best possible tree. Correct maintenance of the tree is important to extend its longevity and retain its attractiveness.

Almost any tree can function as a Christmas tree, but there are several which are particularly suitable. The Scotch pine is one of the most popular with its pyramidal shape and dense needles. The needles have a blue tint and grow up to three inches in length with a bushy appearance. The Douglas fir is also a popular choice. This tree has short needles about one inch long with a silver ban under the surface. The balsam fir is considered the traditional Christmas tree in the eastern United States. It has short rounded needles with twigs growing at right angles to the branches. Many spruce trees are also used for Christmas trees because of their dense symmetrical needles.

When buying your tree, there are several things to look for. Most importantly, purchase a tree with a good needle holding capability. Douglas fir and Scotch pine retain needles well. Spruce on the other hand, lose needles quickly. Fresher trees will hold their needles longer so the more recently cut, the better.

Check for freshness by bending the needles and observing if they are flexible and will spring back. Breaking needles indicate that the tree is not fresh. See how many needles fall when the tree stump is bounced on the ground. The tree is old if more than a few fall. The bottom of the stump should be sticky with sap.

The tree should be purchased a few days before Christmas rather than weeks before as the tree will become dry, even if kept in water thus becoming a fire hazard. You will also want to look for a tree with attractive color, a full appearance and a conical symmetrical shape. A pleasing fragrance will also enhance the tree's appeal.

Once you have purchased your tree, you'll want to keep it as fresh as possible so it will remain attractive throughout the holidays. As soon as you get it home, cut the base of the tree so that the fresh surface can absorb water. Immediately place the tree in a suitable container of water and keep water in the stand continuously. Never allow the stump to dry out. Trees will absorb up to a quart of water a day so adding water each day may be necessary. Make sure the container is sturdy and will not topple over. The tree should be placed away from vents or other heating sources which will dry the tree quickly. A well watered tree not only keeps its needles longer, but will also reduce the chances of it becoming a fire hazard.

Choice decorations carefully to enhance the tree's beauty and reduce its potential as a fire hazard. Be careful not to overload circuits by having too many plugs in one outlet. Examine the lighting sets from past years for loose connections, frayed wires and broken sockets. Remember to turn off the tree lights when no one is home or at bedtime.

Using the evergreen tree in the Christmas

celebration began in Germany over 400 years ago. It gained popularity in the United States when Hessian soldiers of the Revolutionary War decorated trees according to their German custom. The Christmas tree continues as an established symbol of our holiday traditions. By following the above hints, your tree can remain attractive throughout the holiday season.

THE MYTH OF XERISCAPING
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When they hear the word Xeriscape, many people think of yards filled with rock and cactus. This idea couldn't be further from the truth. A Xeriscape can be green and lush and filled with many kinds of plant material. By following simple guidelines, your yard can become a Xeriscape!

A crucial part of Xeriscaping is the first stage, which is planning and design. Begin with an extensive site evaluation and analysis before ever thinking about the plant material you wish to use. This will you avoid costly mistakes and give you a road map that will make completing your Xeriscape much easier.

Make a sketch of your landscape. Drawing it to scale will make it easier when it comes to calculating what you will need. Identify key areas in your yard. Make note of the sunny areas in your yard, wet areas, dry areas, slopes, high traffic areas and views both inside and outside your home. When it comes to choosing your plant material, categorize your landscape into these zones. Group plants with similar needs together. If you are not familiar with compatible plants, you should obtain lists of recommended plant material from the Extension Office.

There are many positive aspects to

Xeriscaping. Turning your landscape into a Xeriscape can reduce water use by 30-80% and it requires a lot less to maintain, as it is more resistant to pests and diseases. But most importantly, a Xeriscaped landscape protects the environment and helps conserve our most valuable natural resource-water.

WHAT'S FLOWERING

Probably many of you have seen the bush with sort of pretty white flowers along the roadsides and in some pastures and have wondered about the name of this plant. The common name is saltbush or groundsel and the scientific name is *Baccharis halimifolia*. It tends to be kind of weedy, but is rather pretty along the roadsides and in the fields.

You also can see the red berries on the Brazilian pepper, *Schinus terebinthifolius*, growing along the roadsides all over central Florida. It is readily spread by birds and will establish in a variety of environments. It produces a toxin (allelopathic agent) which kills or suppresses the growth of certain other plants. It has even invaded the mangroves in salt or brackish water. It produces chemicals in leaves, flowers and fruits that irritate human skin and respiratory passages. Whenever possible, this plant should be removed.

DUNSTON CHESTNUTS

Chinese chestnuts and the newer Dunston chestnuts grow well in central and northern Florida. Once one of the most important economic and ecological tree species in the eastern United States, the American chestnut was virtually destroyed by a bark fungus in the early 1900's.

Plant breeder, Dr. Robert Dunston, of Alachua, Florida, developed a strain of new blight resistant American x Chinese chestnuts

with very large nuts in the 1950's. They grow well in Florida as far south as Orlando and Tampa. They require well-drained soils and do not do well in wet soils. They do, however, have a few pest problems.

Add mulch under the drip line of the tree, water when the soil becomes dry to the touch, and fertilize in February with a 6-6-6 fertilizer that has micro-nutrients.

They are an excellent addition to the landscape as they reach 20 feet tall and wide. They flower in the spring and have 3-4 inch fruit called burrs during the summer months. They are ready to harvest in the fall when the burrs split open and the nuts fall to the ground. So, you can “roast a chestnut on an open fire” for the holiday season.

DECEMBER GARDENING

Vegetables to plant-beets, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, collards, horseradish, lettuce, mustard, onions, peas, radicchio, radishes, spinach, Swiss chard and turnips.

Flowers to plant-calendula, carnation, foxglove, pansy, petunia, Shasta daisy and snap dragon.

Aulacaspis cycad scale-In addition to the horticultural oil sprays Volck and Organocide (Organocide is available at Doty's Garden Store in Winter Haven-Volck is available at most retail garden centers), some success has been obtained with malathion and oil and Sevin and oil sprays. However, keep in mind that these sprays with hard chemicals like malathion and Sevin will also kill beneficial insects.

Some success has been reported with imidacloprid used as a drench when the sago is actively growing. A product is available at

some garden retail stores called Bayer Advanced Garden Tree and Shrub Insect Control. It has 1.47% imidacloprid.

You can check for control by washing off old scale and rechecking to see if there is re-infestation. Also, you can run your fingernail over the scale after a few treatments. If the crushed scale leaves a yellow residue, then it is still alive and requires re-treatment

Have a good gardening day,

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