

## POLK COUNTY URBAN HORTICULTURER NEWSLETTER

December 2003

Dear Reader,

Thanks to those of you who have responded to my October purge notice and survey. We have received about 800 of the 1600 that I sent out, so there are still many of you who have not responded. If you want to continue to receive the Urban Horticulturer in 2004, please fill out the enclosed purge notice and survey (the survey is optional) and send it back to the Extension Office. If you can't remember whether or not you sent the first notice back to us, just go ahead and send the one enclosed this time - we will sort it out. Those not responding will be taken off the January 2004 mailing list. As I mentioned to you before, we are required by state law to purge the mailing list every 2 years.

As a reminder, the Urban Horticulturer Newsletter is also published monthly on my Polk County Horticultural Web Site - <http://polkhort.ifas.ufl.edu>. In addition, if any of you would like to receive the Newsletter by e-mail please let me know. My e-mail address is [dbshibles@ifas.ufl.edu](mailto:dbshibles@ifas.ufl.edu).

### COLD PROTECTION

I have already seen frost on the roofs and lawns in my neighborhood three times this year. I hope this is not a warning of what's ahead in January.



In any case you need to be prepared to protect your sensitive plants. Many plants can be kept outside until a freeze is forecast and then the night of the freeze be moved inside. As I have mentioned before, many plants like orchids with exposed roots, weeping figs, desert rose, frangipani and episcia need to be protected at temperatures below forty degrees.

I took cuttings of my Green Corduroy Episcia and brought them inside as starter plants for next spring, and left the mother plant outside on my patio as an experiment to see how much cold weather it would take to damage the plant. The plant endured the cold weather up until this last cold spell which damaged it considerably. The temperature (high 30's) was not low enough to damage any of my other tropical plants. My tomatoes and peppers in buckets also have endured temperatures in the high 30's.

Temperatures in the 20's probably will be coming in January, so you will need to think about protecting your in-ground plants. Cold protection for protecting in-ground plants involves trapping heat in the air or soil to protect the plant from freezing temperatures. To be really effective the covering needs to insulate the plant. The higher the wind speed, the less effective are the plant wraps.

Some of the techniques for protecting plants are as follows: 1) cover flower beds with light blankets or sheets and then put a plastic cover on top of the sheet or blanket, 2) wrap the plants in blankets or burlap and make sure the material reaches the ground, 3) totally cover the plant with plastic sheeting supported with PVC poles making a mini-greenhouse and place a large light bulb inside for heat (use low wattage outdoor approved lamps), 4) put hay, pine needles or leaves over the entire planting, 5) cover the plants with flower pots, garbage cans, cardboard boxes, etc. and use newspaper inside for insulation and 6) water plants the morning before a predicted freeze - wet soil will hold more heat than dry soil.

I don't recommend that you use water for cold protection. Most home water systems will not supply enough, evenly placed water to adequately protect plants. Trying to use this technique, as a homeowner, would waste a lot of water and it even might make the plant damage worse. The principal of using water to protect plants is not that the ice blanket insulates the plant, but that as the water freezes it give off heat which keeps the plant just above 32EF. And, as you probably have seen in strawberry fields, the water must be kept on until the dew point is above 32E.

Also, washing ice or frost from a sensitive plant will not protect it from freeze or frost damage. Once the dew freezes on the leaf surface of a sensitive plant, the leaf cells will be destroyed by ice formation inside the cells

of the leaf and the leaf will die.

## CHRISTMAS PLANTS



Christmas is not far away and this is the time for giving and receiving flowering potted plants. A bright, colorful azalea, Christmas begonia, c h r y s a n t h e m u m , Christmas cactus or a nicely decorated poinsettia added to the other decorations in the home give the holiday season a festive air.

These Christmas plants can be enjoyed not only during the holidays, but will remain attractive far into January and even February, if cared for properly. Care of Christmas plants, whether a colorful cyclamen, a long lasting kalanchoe or a cheerful Christmas begonia is easy. Faithful attention will add days, even weeks of life to any of these Christmas plants.

Temperature has an important influence on the length of time a flowering house plant will remain attractive. The poinsettia is especially sensitive to chilling, and a prolonged chill will cause it to lose its leaves. The plant should be placed in the coolest part of the room, but not in a cold draft. This means away from radiator and other sources of heat. A temperature of 65E at night is satisfactory, but 60E is still better for most of the flowering potted plants. In fact, cyclamen like a 50E night time temperature.

The method of watering, many times, determines the life of a plant. Many people drown their plants by watering at regular intervals, not considering whether the plant needs it. Plant roots need air as well as water, and excessive amounts of water do not allow a place for air in the soil. Over-watering literally smothers the plant roots. Proper

watering calls for a little thoughtfulness and often the exercise of restraint. Water should be applied in sufficient quantities to thoroughly soak the soil in the pot and no more until the soil approaches dryness again. Plants should be checked for dryness daily but not watered if the soil is still moist.

Remember that most holiday plants have been out of a greenhouse for only a short period. The difference between a greenhouse environment and a typical indoor room is usually considerable. 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 receive morning sun. Poor light will cause leaf drop.

Although humidity in a house is not easily altered, plants will do best in an area of the house where the humidity is the greatest. This usually is the cooking area. It often helps if the plants are set on pebble-filled saucers with water maintained at a level just below the bottom of the pot so that it does not touch the water.

By giving your Christmas potted plants the best environmental conditions of proper temperature, adequate water, and good light, they will furnish an attractive display for a longer period of time.

## **INVASIVE EXOTIC PLANTS TO AVOID**

**by Anne Yasalonis, Florida Yards  
and Neighborhoods**

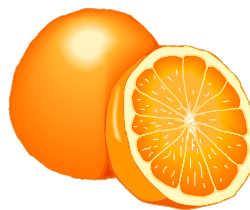
Invasive plants are a major problem throughout Florida. Brazilian Pepper infests over one million acres in Florida. Melaleuca covers almost 400,000 acres of wetlands. Hydrilla has shoved out our native aquatic plants in over 50% of Florida's water bodies! With these stunning facts it is easy to see what

a monumental problem invasive exotic plants have become.

When you bring something into the state that you think may be new and interesting, it may actually become a great problem. Invasive exotic plants crowd out our native plants and invade the native plants' dwindling habitat. Some plants that have traditionally been used in the landscape, are now on the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council's list of invasive species. Plants such as Wedelia, Mexican sage, Nandina and Chinese tallow are now on the growing list.

If you have any of the following plants in your landscape, you are strongly encouraged to remove them. Remember, these plants will only become a maintenance hassle for you. Ten common invasive plants in central Florida are: Melaleuca, carrotwood, Chinese Tallow (popcorn tree), Brazilian pepper, Australian pine, Hydrilla, cogongrass, air potato, cat-tail and tropical soda apple. If you are unsure of the identity of a plant in your yard and you think it may be invasive, bring a specimen of the plant to the Extension Office for identification.

## **CITRUS**



One of the most frequent complaints by homeowners is that their fruit is partially or totally dry. This is a condition called granulation which is particularly common on Navel and Valencia oranges, tangerines, tangerine hybrids and grapefruit. The calls I receive seem to be mainly on Navel oranges. There are a number of factors contributing to this condition. The fruit may simply be picked too late and the tree has absorbed the juice from the fruit for use elsewhere in the tree. Sometimes the tree was inappropriately grafted onto a rootstock which

is very vigorous (lemon) which puts energy into growing vegetatively. This problem may also be related to extended warm, and/or dry fall weather, or may be associated with young trees, which eventually mature and produce acceptable fruit.

I'm afraid that there is not much you can do to correct granulation of dry fruit other than follow best management practices. Keep your tree well watered in dry times and follow recommended fertility schedules. I know it is very frustrating to take care of a Navel orange for 6-7 years or longer and never have an acceptable fruit. I would encourage anyone buying a citrus tree to purchase it from a reputable citrus nursery. Ask for plants grafted onto 'Carrizo' citrange for sweet orange, grapefruit and tangerines cultivars and 'Swingle' citrumelo rootstocks for grapefruit and Navel oranges.

## MISC. DECEMBER GARDENING

**Flowers To Plant** - Alyssum, baby's breath, begonia, bush daisy, calendula, candytuft, carnation, chrysanthemum, delphinium, dianthus, dusty miller, foxglove, geranium, goddetia, hollyhock, Iceland poppy, lobelia, ornamental cabbage and kale, petunia, salvia, shasta daisy, snapdragon, statice, stock, sweet pea, verbena and viola.

**Vegetables To Plant** - Beets, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, collards, horseradish, lettuce, mustard, onions, peas, radicchio, radishes, spinach, Swiss chard and turnips.

**Herbs To Plant** - Anise, arugula, basil, bay, chives, cilantro, coriander, dill, fennel, garlic, lavender, mint, oregano, parsley, rosemary, sage, sweet marjoram, thyme and water cress.

**Bring Greenery Inside** - Potted plants are only one way to have greenery and color inside your home. You can create a wreath or swag for the inside of your home.



This will not last as long as a potted plant due to the warm Florida weather, but it will bring cheer for a short period during the holidays.

Some of the longest lasting greenery include juniper, pine, podocarpus, holly, evergreen cypress and magnolia branches. Shorter lasting choices include pittosporum, ligustrum, anise and wax myrtles.

A wreath can be made from wire, grape vines etc., however it may be easier to buy a preformed wreath. Use fishing wire to anchor the greenery to the frame. Then, accent features such as pine cones, citrus fruit, gum balls, etc. can be pinned or glued to the branches. Use your imagination!

Have a good gardening day,

David Shibles  
Residential Horticulturist  
Polk County Cooperative Extension Service  
P.O. Box 9005, Drawer HS03  
Bartow, FL 33831  
(863) 519-8677 Ext. 109  
e-mail: dbshibles@ifas.ufl.edu

For Polk County Gardening Information:  
<http://polkhort.ifas.ufl.edu>

Polk County Web Site:  
<http://polk.ifas.ufl.edu>

*Happy Holidays!*

