



Helping Carolinians Increase Their Knowledge of Gardening, Manage Their Landscape Investment & Protect the Environment

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

NORTH CAROLINA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE & LIFE SCIENCES

JC Raulston Arboretum Plant Focus

## Hellebores Color Winter with Charm

**H**ellebores are small, lovely evergreen plants that add charm and color to winter gardens. Small enough to be tucked into little pockets of space in a garden, their blooms and foliage add a big boost of winter interest.

The most popular member of the *Helleborus* genus is the Lenten rose, *Helleborus orientalis*. The foliage adds a bold texture to the woodland garden. Rising from a central crown, the leaves are large, dark green, glossy and divided into 5 to 9 segments. Plants stand 12 to 18 inches tall and up to 2 feet across.

The unique flowers of Lenten rose appear in February, even through a layer of snow. The nodding, five-petaled cups may range in color from cream to light green to pinkish brown, usually with maroon speckling. The flowers, which last several weeks, are followed by interesting seedpods.

Christmas rose, *H. niger*, is quite similar in appearance. Flowers may not make it in time for Christmas, but will probably be blooming by January or early February. They are usually creamy white, changing to pink with age. The foliage is not as dark and glossy as Lenten rose, but is otherwise similar. *H. niger* has a reputation for being more temperamental to grow.

Plant all hellebores in at least partial shade. In the mountains of North Carolina, plants can tolerate a half day of sun, but they need shade in the afternoon in the Piedmont and coastal areas. They will perform best in a woodland setting with moist, well-drained soil amended with plenty of compost. Lime will probably also be appropriate as they prefer neutral to slightly alkaline soil.

The JC Raulston Arboretum at NC State University has an abundant collection of hellebores. In addition to the species already mentioned, check out *H. x sternii* 'Boughton Beauty Strain' for its sparkly, coppery appearance. Collectors of the color green will gravitate toward *H. foetidus* but watch out for its generous self-sowing propensity in the garden. With winter holding so much potential for gardening, you've got to go for a visit! [Linda Blue](#)



Lenten Rose

Robert E. Lyons ©

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- National Association of County Agricultural Agents
- Southern Extension Forest Resource Specialists
- N.C. Association of County Agricultural Agents
- Mecklenburg County Priority Awards



Lenten Rose

Robert E. Lyons ©



Green Hellebore

Robert E. Lyons ©



Lenten Rose

Robert E. Lyons ©



## Choose a Home-Grown Tree for Your Holiday Tradition

Of the memories most remembered about Christmas, the aroma of freshly cut Christmas trees and greenery stand out the most. Freshly cut Christmas trees, especially Fraser firs, have distinctive fragrance which easily puts anyone in the holiday spirit. According to the North Carolina Christmas Tree Association, over 90 percent of the Christmas trees grown in North Carolina are Fraser firs.

The Fraser fir is popular because of its “typical” Christmas tree shape. The stiff limbs and excellent needles are easy to decorate, remaining beautiful the entire holiday season. Other popular trees are White, Virginia and Scotch pines.

The quality of Christmas trees continues to improve due to better cultural practices, improved tree breeding programs and a uniform grading system. Purchasing a North Carolina grown tree not only aids our economy, but assures the customer of a freshly cut Christmas tree.

### How to Select and Maintain the Perfect Christmas Tree

- Pinch the needles. The needles should be soft, supple and aromatic. Avoid a tree that has pale, lifeless needles.
- Shake the tree. Needles should not fall from a rigorous jolt.
- The trunk end of the tree should reveal fresh,

sticky sap. Hardened, glazed-over stumps indicate a tree that has been cut for a long period of time.

- Place the newly selected tree in the shade if the tree isn't scheduled to go up immediately. Saw 2 inches off the trunk end of the tree and place the newly sawed end in a bucket of water.
- Do not locate the tree over or near heat registers, continuous drafts or near the fireplace.
- Erect the tree with the type of stand that has a water reservoir. Check the reservoir often since these trees draw water quickly. A tree can use up to a quart of water per day for each inch of stem diameter.
- Never mist Christmas trees. Serious electrical damage may occur. Christmas trees will maintain their fresh cut appearance from 2 to 4 weeks with proper care.
- Those who elect to purchase balled-and-burlapped trees should keep these indoors for a very brief period. Hot, dry indoor conditions limit their life spans. Place balled-and-burlapped trees in a tub and maintain a rigorous watering schedule.

For more information, contact your county Cooperative Extension Center or the North Carolina Christmas Tree Association at (800) 562-8789.

Visit their web site at <[www.ncchristmastrees.com](http://www.ncchristmastrees.com)> for choose-and-cut locations and upcoming events.

**Darrell Blackwelder**



## Gardening Gift Ideas for Everyone on Your List

Whether there are seasoned gardeners on your holiday gift list or beginning gardeners you'd like to encourage, these gift ideas are sure to please!

A gardener can never have too many tools, and high quality ones are always welcome. Look for large, sturdy handles and durable materials. Consider tools that will make routine jobs easier, such as ratcheting pruners, a trowel with an extra long handle or ergonomic tools with angled handles and extra padding.

For a new gardener, a general plant reference book is indispensable. Look for one that is specific to North Carolina growing conditions. For the experienced gardener, consider a more specific reference such as one on herbs, perennials, roses, wildflowers or other plants, depending on the gardener's interests.

For the gardener who has everything, you can't lose with a gift certificate. Try a favorite local nursery or an on-line garden shop for

the distant friend or relative. One of the joys of gardening is viewing the wildlife that comes to visit, so birding supplies are a nice option. Feeders, birdbaths, or even binoculars and bird identification books come to mind. Sculptures or statuary add a playful touch to any garden. They are available in many sizes and price ranges. Dedicated gardeners are always looking for ways to bring the joy of plants indoors. Garden pictures, calendars and other decorative items do the job nicely.

For the philanthropic gardener, a gift in his or her name to a local arboretum would be appreciated. There are many good candidates throughout North Carolina! Many gardens also have gift memberships available which include newsletters and invitations to hear guest speakers and to attend garden tours and plant giveaways, among many other activities – a gift that gives all year! For details on gift memberships to the JC Raulston Arboretum at NC State University, access <[www.arb.ncsu.edu](http://www.arb.ncsu.edu)> or call (919) 515-3132. **Paul McKenzie**

## Q&A What's that formula you're suppose to add to Christmas tree water?

Christmas trees need water. Anything mixed into the water will increase the osmotic pressure and make it harder for water to get into the plant. That doesn't stop people from suggesting all kinds of ingredients. Some things such as soft drinks and aspirin will make the solution acidic. This doesn't hurt but isn't necessary. Other ingredients seem designed to keep the water safe from microorganisms. That would be useful if you are planning on drinking the leftover water. Otherwise

it isn't necessary. Plain water will not support enough bacteria to plug the vascular system of the tree. Some people add sugar which might be based on formulas used to help some cut flowers expand and grow. On Christmas trees, however, you are simply trying to maintain the current leaves, so they don't need sugar. I haven't figured out the thinking behind some ingredients but they are solving a problem that doesn't exist. The formula needed is 100% plain water.

*David Goforth*

## Deck the Halls Safely

As the holidays approach and the halls are decked, it's important to be aware of a few plants that aren't safe for children and pets. Even though poison control centers report far fewer poisonings from plants than from common household products such as cleansers and disinfectants, it doesn't hurt to be aware of plants that can cause illness if eaten, whether they're part of the decorations or a plant received as a gift.

Although the first to come to mind is often the poinsettia, research has repeatedly failed to find this plant to be poisonous, even when ingested in large quantities. Some individuals may experience skin irritation from the milky sap.

Holiday decorations you definitely do not want to eat are mistletoe berries and holly berries. They will make you sick.

If boxwood or rhododendron are used for wreaths or table decorations, guard against children or pets chewing on the stems. Both of these plants can be very toxic.

A few houseplants deserve some words of caution. The tempting-looking berries of the Jerusalem cherry can cause severe stomach upset. Several common plants contain crystals that cause the mouth and throat to swell, possibly causing choking and nausea. These include dumb cane (*Dieffenbachia*), philodendron, pothos, schefflera and fishtail palm. *Linda Blue*

## ENVIRO-TIP Recycle Your Christmas Tree

The holiday season will soon be over, the trimmings and trappings all put away, and the only thing left behind in many households will be bills and a bare Christmas tree. I can't help you dispose of your bills, but there are several choices for disposing your Christmas tree.

Many cities and counties will collect trees or you may have to take them to a collection point. The trees are chipped into mulch which in some counties is then available to local gardeners. If you have access to a chipper, you can chip your own tree. It's a won-

derful way to get a second use out of your tree!

Another use for trees is to provide wildlife a place to shelter during winter storms. Birds will love hiding in the tree's dense branches! Place the tree in an obscure part of your yard. Some neighborhoods beside lakes dispose of trees in the water to provide a nesting and feeding area for fish. Check with your homeowners association regarding guidelines.

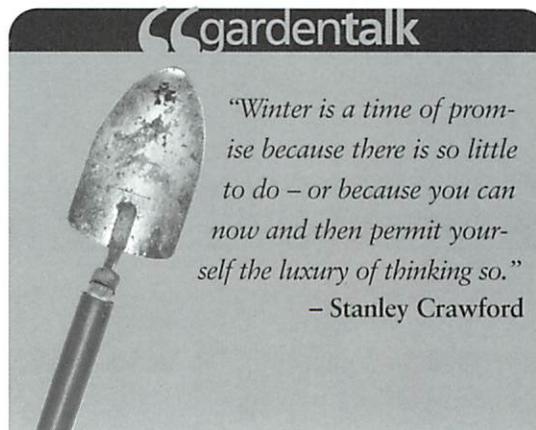
By recycling your Christmas tree, you not only extend its use, you'll be disposing of it in an environmentally friendly way.

*Bill Skelton*



## Successful Gardener Series

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*Tricolor Earth Star*  
Robert E. Lyons ©

Garden Spot

## Biltmore Gardens in

Asheville are among the finest examples of landscape design. The gardens were designed in the 1880s by Frederick Law Olmsted, the father of American landscape architecture. He was commissioned to provide garden grandeur equal to that of the Biltmore Estate mansion, the largest private residence ever built in America. On this 8,000-acre estate, there are 75 acres of formal gardens including a four-acre walled English garden, an Italian garden with pools and statuary, a rose garden and a large planting of native laurels, azaleas, rhododendrons and hollies. Biltmore's forests cover about 4,500 acres. A great time to visit is at Christmas with the madrigal singers, candlelight tours and hundreds of fresh wreaths and poinsettias and dozens of decorated Christmas trees filling the house.

The gardens are open daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. with the exception of Thanksgiving and Christmas days. The fee is \$32 for adults and \$24 for children ages 10 to 15. Call (800) 543-2961 or access <[www.biltmore.com](http://www.biltmore.com)>

*Karen Neill*

## Gardening in December

### Lawns

- Apply broadleaf herbicides (read label for temperature guidelines) to control winter annual and perennial weeds.
- Watch for dry, windy conditions with low relative humidity that can damage turf. If needed, irrigate periodically to help the grass survive.

### Ornamentals

- Keep holiday plants watered and provide with enough light to continue their growth. Avoid cold or hot air drafts.
- Balled-and-burlapped Christmas trees can be used as landscape trees after Christmas. Plant the tree as soon after Christmas as possible.
  - Continue mulching and composting chores. Your plants will love the added benefits.
  - Remove the dead tops of many perennials.
  - Some perennials, although dormant during the winter, offer winter interest. Don't cut the tops back until the early spring cleanup. This list includes sedum and many ornamental grasses.
    - Landscape plantings still can be made at this time of the year for most of the Piedmont and the coastal plains. The ground may be too frozen for mountain plantings.
      - Tip prune this month. Many evergreens are used in various Christmas decorations. Both the foliage and berries of many favorites including the holly species, nandina, pines and cedars are popular for decorating the house. Remember not to make heavy, renovative-type pruning cuts until late winter.

### Edibles

- Order fruit trees adapted to your area now and designate shipping dates that avoid hard, frozen ground problems when planting.

*David Barkley*



Extension's *Successful Gardener*™ program provides timely, research-based horticultural information. The newsletter is part of the statewide horticulture program which includes Extension's Regional Successful Gardener Seminar Series and county workshops. We publish 10 issues per year. Comments concerning *Successful Gardener* may be sent to:

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For a list of garden centers where you can find *Successful Gardener*, please call (704) 336-2561 or visit Cooperative Extension on the web at <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu>

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