

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

## Inside

# 2

**Bonsai:  
Miniature  
Masterpieces**

# 3

**Enviro-Tip**

# 4

**Garden  
Spot**

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## JC Raulston Arboretum Plant Focus

# Evergreen of Interest for Carolina Landscapes

The Chinese yew, *Taxus chinensis*, has emerged as having great potential in our Carolina landscapes. This small evergreen tree somewhat resembles a hemlock but grows only 10 feet in height. A specimen just outside the lath house at the JC Raulston Arboretum (JCRA) at NC State University is still performing magnificently after many years.

This tree is easy to root from cuttings, responds well to pruning and is tolerant of heat, drought, sun and shade. You may actually be familiar with many other members of this family of trees but perhaps don't realize it. Known by the common name of yews, they can be tree form, shrub-like, dwarf or prostrate in habit. Whatever the shape, all yews are narrow-leaved evergreens with needles about an inch long in two ranks that are spirally arranged along the green twigs. The fruits are most distinctive. The yew produces a fleshy berry about the size of a pea and is open on one end to reveal a single, hard seed inside. The seeds are often poisonous, so be sure to teach children not to randomly eat parts of any landscape plant, yews included.

Most people have great familiarity with the English yew, *Taxus baccata*, which is among the most ancient of trees with some English specimens known to be 3,000 years old. It has also been a mainstay of the American suburban landscape for decades. Another relative, Japanese yew, *T. cuspidata*, also shows great hardiness and variability within the genus. All yews seem to be capable of hybridizing among themselves which has led to a great degree of confusion at times in naming the species.

Look carefully for Chinese yews in your local garden centers. If you can't find them, ask for them, repeatedly. Try the Internet, too, as mail order sources are becoming more prominent in this new age of marketing plants. The JCRA is certainly one place where a quick look at this plant is an easy way to make your own evaluation. While you're there, make a comparison of the more than half dozen types of yews in their collections. **Carl Matyac**

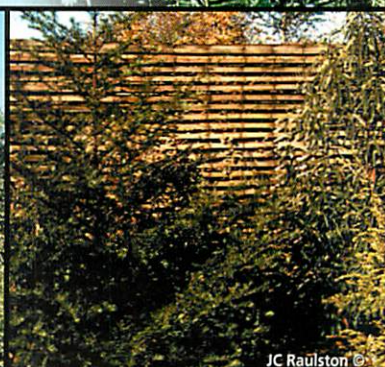
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Chinese Yew  
JC Raulston ©



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Robert E. Lyons ©

*Chinese Juniper*

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*Trident Maple*

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*Hall's Crabapple*

## Bonsai: Miniature Masterpieces

While on a visit several years ago to the National Bonsai and Penjing Museum, located at the U.S. National Arboretum in Washington, D.C., the bonsai “bug” bit me. The magnificence of these miniature masterpieces is impressive and inspiring. They also can be a bit intimidating when you consider the skill necessary to produce these beautiful specimens. For uninitiated gardeners, bonsai are essentially dwarf trees that have been placed in a fancy ceramic pot. For bonsai connoisseurs, it is an art form where the placement of branches, styling and the container itself can convey deep symbolism and respect for nature.

Growing high-quality bonsai requires horticultural skills such as proper pruning techniques. It also helps to have the keen eye of an artist to visualize the long-term impact of each pruning cut. When it comes to the art of bonsai, pruning instruments are the equivalent of an artist’s paintbrush. Considered by many gardeners to be the ultimate gardening challenge, a quality bonsai can take many years of close attention and lots of patience before achieving the desired effect. For example, many of the bonsai in the National Arboretum collection are over 200 years old.

If your interest is piqued, starter bonsai kits are readily available at local garden centers and home improvement chains. Success with bonsai begins with proper plant selection so be sure to match the plant with its proper growing conditions. These kits commonly utilize evergreen species such as junipers that are relatively inexpensive but challenging to grow and maintain. Because they need high humidity in the winter and relatively cool temperatures, junipers don’t survive well under wintertime conditions indoors. Placing bonsai near cool windowsills and on moistened pebbles will help but, speaking from experience, don’t feel badly if your first attempts at growing junipers as bonsai are less than satisfactory. Take comfort in the knowledge that it is relatively cheap practice and can help remove a beginner’s hesitancy to prune. Similarly, temperate zone deciduous species such as a maple or crape myrtle can also create a challenge. These plants need a dormant period and will need to be kept outside during the winter, but due to the limited soil volume of the pot will need winter protection from extreme cold.

Some bonsai experts suggest that the easiest bonsai for beginners are tropical plants typically used as houseplants such as Chinese hibiscus,

azalea and weeping fig. These plants are better adapted to indoor conditions and more likely to survive following the pruning and repotting necessary to begin your bonsai. Unfortunately, bonsai kits that utilize these types of plant materials are seldom available, necessitating a scavenger hunt in order to select suitable specimens from a local plant supplier. To help ensure a long life for your bonsai tree, it is important to choose an insect- and disease-free plant. Don’t hesitate to pick plants with twisted or malformed branches, though. These flaws help create some character and give the bonsai a more natural look.

The soil mixture and its impact on the watering of your bonsai are important. Because its roots are confined in small pots, watering is critical and it’s important to select soil mixtures that encourage good drainage. Bonsai enthusiasts closely monitor the water needs of their plants by giving them a little hands-on attention. Simply sticking your finger in the soil will help determine if it is damp or dry enough to need watering.

Be careful not to overdo it with fertilizer. Bonsai do not need a great deal of fertilizer since the grower’s intent is to contain and manage growth. Another consideration is the lack of drainage holes in most bonsai containers that limit leaching of excess salts from fertilizer applications, making it easier to kill roots due to salt accumulation. Consider how the same species being grown as a houseplant is treated and reduce the fertilizer rate according to its growing conditions and reduced root system. Always err on the side of caution.

Light levels also will impact the growth and survival of your bonsai. Be sure to provide the plants the same amount of light they would require if grown as a typical houseplant. For example, a weeping fig needs bright filtered light while an azalea needs more direct bright light.

Growing bonsai is not something a gardener should try on a whim or as an impulse purchase in a plant shop. Much like raising a pet dog or cat, bonsai requires commitment and an investment of time and energy. If the tree is ignored, it will die. The gardener must also have a vision for the potential of a given plant, the skill to develop that potential and the patience to wait several years before that plant’s potential can be realized.

To learn more, visit the National Bonsai Foundation Web site at [bonsai-nbf.org](http://bonsai-nbf.org).

**Fred Miller**

### gardentalk

“No great thing is created suddenly.”

– Epictetus



## Q&A What's wrong with my peace lily?

This question "What's wrong?"

applies to almost any houseplant at one time or another. To perform well, houseplants require temperature, light, water and humidity levels similar to what they encounter in their native habitat. Most houseplants, including the peace lily, are tropical in origin and are found as understory plants, thereby requiring filtered light and high humidity. Peace lily, *Spathiphyllum* spp., does not respond well to overwatering or to bright, direct light. Nor does it like too much fertilizer.

To keep your peace lily at its best, plant in a well-drained potting mix and water

regularly. Several factors affect the timing of watering, including leaf size and thickness, light exposure, type of pot (clay vs. plastic), degree to which a plant is pot-bound and the type of soil mix. Do not let the soil dry out. When you water, move the plant to a sink or bathtub and water thoroughly, until the pot is saturated. Let the plant drain well before returning to its permanent location. Fertilize lightly with a complete houseplant food during periods of active growth. Never fertilize a houseplant when the soil is dry. Water the plant first, let it drain and then rewater with a fertilizer solution.

*Royce Hardin*

## Santa Buys His Tree from N.C.

One cannot deny the appeal of fresh, live Christmas trees for the holiday season. The attractiveness, fragrance and tradition cannot be matched with artificial substitutes.

One of the more enjoyable Christmas traditions is replanting a living Christmas tree as an ornamental landscape plant after the holiday season. Living trees are usually purchased as balled-and-burlapped, indicating that roots are left intact and bundled in burlap or other cloth-type material. Following use as Christmas trees, they can be planted outside.

Unfortunately, trees replanted after holiday use often do not have a high survival rate. To help increase success rates, follow these tips:

- Select tree species that can adapt to the local environment. In North Carolina, good choices are hemlocks, white pines, cedars and leyland cypresses. Consider fraser firs only if you are in the mountains.
- Choose trees no taller than 5 to 6 feet so they are better able to survive transplant shock.
- Provide adequate moisture without overwatering.

After a living Christmas tree is replanted in the landscape, practice general maintenance procedures such as watering, fertilization and mulching.

Learn more at [www.ces.ncsu.edu/nreous/forest/xmas/ctn\\_028.html](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/nreous/forest/xmas/ctn_028.html) and [www.ncchristmastrees.com](http://www.ncchristmastrees.com).

*Diane Ashburn*

## ENVIRO-TIP

### Mulch Improves Garden Environment

Homeowners and professional landscapers depend on mulch for many reasons. A good layer of mulch will discourage weeds from growing, conserve moisture during drought periods, improve soil structure, control soil erosion and water runoff, and help maintain a uniform soil temperature which usually results in better plant growth and, in the case of vegetables, in superior quality.

Many organic materials can be used as a mulch. The most widely used materials by North Carolina gardeners are decayed sawdust, pine bark, pine needles, compost and aged hardwood. Most landscape plants benefit when the organic matter is worked into the root zone area. All of the above may be used, except pine needles. Other materials include manure,

composted wood shavings and lawn clippings.

Apply an organic mulch just about any time of the year around trees and shrubs. The best time to apply to

established bed areas is in mid-spring when the soil temperature has warmed up enough for sufficient root growth.

Inorganic mulches are becoming more popular and include gravel, rock, black plastic and landscape fabric. Black plastic will discourage weeds but may also interfere with the normal oxygen and water supply to the roots, creating a very shallow root system. Therefore, it is best not to use black plastic around ornamentals.

An alternative to black plastic may be the landscape fabric mulch which allows normal water and oxygen exchange to occur and also discourages weeds.

In general, organic mulches are more preferable than inorganic mulches. After decomposing, an organic mulch releases valuable plant nutrients, increasing the fertility of the soil. A 3- to 4-inch layer of mulch also adds to the aesthetic value of a garden while protecting the base of plants from being injured by mechanical equipment.

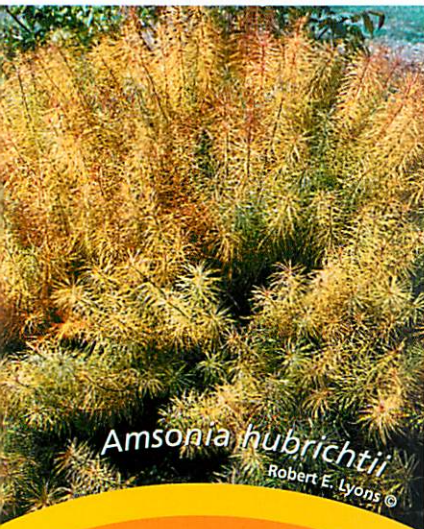
*Willie Earl Wilson*



### greenvalue

North Carolina Christmas tree sales added more than \$99 million to our economy last year.





*Amsonia hubrichtii*  
Robert E. Lyons ©

Garden Spot

## Elizabeth Holmes Hurley Park in Salisbury

is a 16-acre public park composed of woodlands, streams, gardens and quiet pathways. It includes collections of hollies and magnolias, a wildflower garden, an azalea garden and many other plantings which provide year-round interest and beauty. Finely crafted cypress benches and tables, specially designed bridges and distinctive gazebos enhance the gardens and provide a framework for the park.

Hurley Park provides an educational experience, a haven for wildlife and a pleasant place to stroll. It also serves the community as a site for weddings, walking programs, informal meetings and an annual spring celebration. The park is located at Lake Drive and Annandale Avenue in Salisbury and is a joint venture between the Hurley Foundation and the City of Salisbury. More information is available at [www.ci.salisbury.nc.us](http://www.ci.salisbury.nc.us).

*Darrell Blackwelder*

## Gardening in November

### Lawns

- Keep fallen leaves from piling up on lawns, especially if newly established. Accumulations of leaves can smother newly seeded and established grasses.
- Continue to mow cool-season lawns as long as growth is present. Apply 1 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet of established cool-season grass.
- Make sure lawn power equipment is in good working order before storing for the winter. Sharpen blades and change filters now so that equipment will be ready to go in the spring.
- When warm-season lawns go dormant, treat winter annual weeds with a selective herbicide.

### Ornamentals

- Plant spring-flowering bulbs now. Keep bulbs with similar heights and flowering times together.
  - Plant balled-and-burlapped ornamentals after they go dormant. Wait until leaves have fallen before planting.
    - Most shrubs do well when planted in the fall. Plants can tolerate extremes in winter temperatures much better than extremes in summer temperatures.
      - Reapply mulch around trees and shrubs. It holds in moisture and provides winter protection.
      - Remove any damaged limbs from trees and shrubs to prevent hazards from accumulations of ice later in the season.
      - Do not fertilize landscape plants this late in the season. Allow plants to harden off before winter weather arrives.

### Edibles

- If blossom-end rot was a problem on tomatoes, now is the time to do a soil test to check for incorrect pH levels in the garden.
- Continue to harvest fall vegetables such as lettuce and greens.

*Donna Teasley*



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