

Successful Gardener

NC STATE UNIVERSITY NORTH CAROLINA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

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

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JC Raulston Arboretum Plant Focus

Deciduous Hollies Provide Winter Interest

Deciduous hollies carry heavy crops of bright red, orange and occasionally yellow berries well into the winter. The absence of leaves during the dormant season makes the fruit display all the more striking. The berries blaze with color, adding needed punch to the winter landscape.

The most common deciduous holly species are *Ilex verticillata*, winterberry, and *I. decidua*, possumhaw. These two common names are often used interchangeably, though they really should not be. Winterberry has a slightly larger, more rounded leaf than possumhaw, while possumhaw is a glossier shade of green. The most obvious difference between the two is their mature size. Possumhaw is larger, topping out at 30 feet. Winterberry usually reaches no more than 15 feet. Most cultivars will not attain that size in the landscape. *Ilex verticillata* is slightly hardier, ranging from zones 3 to 9. *I. decidua* is typically hardy only to zone 5.

Native to swampy areas, deciduous hollies are somewhat adaptable to various soils, as long as they are not allowed to get too dry. Both species prefer soils with an adequate amount of organic matter. Mulch your plants about 2- to 3-inches deep with organic mulch. Deciduous hollies prefer full sun, but can set some fruit in shade. Best fruit set is attained if there is a male plant in close proximity to the female to ensure adequate pollination. You may see some leaf spot or powdery mildew on some plants, but there are no serious pests.

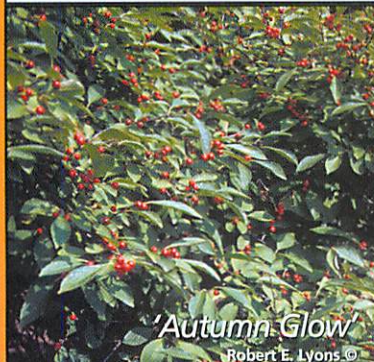
Used in the garden, deciduous hollies often fade into the background until fall. After the leaves have fallen, the berries shine forth in all their glory, at least until the birds find them. Give these plants a bit of "elbow room." They can fill up a smaller space quickly. In the landscape, they can be used as a large shrub or a small tree. Plants will often produce suckers from the base, but this is rarely a significant problem.

Popular cultivars include 'Sparkleberry', 'Winter Red', or 'Byers Golden'. Suggested male pollinators are 'Apollo' and 'Southern Gentleman'. American holly, *I. opaca*, will provide pollen for the species and some cultivars. **Jeff Rieves**

'Sparkleberry'
Robert E. Lyons ©

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'Autumn Glow'
Robert E. Lyons ©



Deciduous Hollies
Robert E. Lyons ©



'Sparkleberry'
Robert E. Lyons ©



Mark Dearmon ©

Seed Catalogs Inspire Spring Dreaming

In most of North Carolina we are blessed with mild winter weather that allows us to garden almost all year. However, when we do have those chilly days and nights, stay warm indoors thumbing through the new seed catalogs that come in the mail. Seed catalogs contain more than just photos and plant descriptions. Some of the best are filled with growing tips not found in gardening books, including germination, starting times, bloom and harvest times and ease or difficulty of growing. Many also include great recipes as well. The tools and books offered in seed catalogs are usually top-notch. Most seed companies put their entire catalog inventories on their Web sites, so if you prefer to shop online you can do so.

When perusing catalogs the language often combines marketing with information. As a result, you can expect some jargon in the mix. Here is a sampling of catalog phrases and their likely meanings:

Start seeds indoors describes seeds that require more care than the average. They may germinate slowly or need warmer temperatures, or seedlings may demand extra time or attention prior to planting outdoors. Many perennials fall into this category.

When a vegetable is “novel” or “unusual” or has unique color or shape, you know flavor and texture are secondary. Similarly, giant is a clue to vegetables that are grand in size but perhaps better mounted above the fireplace than tossed into a winter stew.

Watch out for anything **vigorous**. It implies that the vine, shrub or vegetable in question is ready and able to out-compete most plants in its path. If space is limited, look for compact, bush or dwarf varieties.

Plants that **self-sow readily** are usually annuals and biennials that you plant once and have evermore. Each year a new crop of seeds germinates and grows without any help from you. Depending on the plant and your attitude, it might become a weed or a favorite companion.

When looking for new varieties, seek recommendations from other experienced gardeners in your area, or contact your county Cooperative Extension Center for information. Choose varieties that are resistant or tolerant to common diseases. For example, tomato names may be followed by the letters VFN. These letters mean the plants are resistant to verticillium wilt, fusarium wilt and nematodes, common diseases and parasitic organisms that plague tomatoes. Always order your seed from reputable seed companies. Bargain seed at a

local hardware store may be more of a bargain than you counted on because they were probably packaged for the previous year or earlier. Don't save seed from last year's hybrid plants. Most hybrid varieties will not remain true to the variety once they've been planted and have produced their own seed. Plants like summer squash also can cross-pollinate with some pumpkin varieties. So, if you save the seeds and replant them, you may grow some weird summer squash. Here is a short list of seed companies.

Seeds of Change

1-888-762-7333 • www.seedschange.com

A great resource for organic gardeners, Seeds of Change offers 100 percent organic vegetable, herb and flower seeds. They offer a huge selection, including several new introductions and many heirloom varieties. Their easy-to-read catalog also features gardening tips and recipes for using produce grown from their seeds.

W. Atlee Burpee & Co.

(800) 888-1447 • www.burpee.com

The grandfather of seed catalogs, Burpee's has been selling seeds via mail for over 130 years. This comprehensive resource is packed with new introductions, many of them Burpee exclusives. There are also thousands of vegetable, herb and flower seed varieties as well as seedling plants and summer bulbs.

Park Seed Co.

(800) 213-0076 • www.ParkSeed.com

Selling much more than just seeds, Park Seed Co. tests more than 2,000 new varieties of flowers and vegetables each year. The ones with the best results make it into its catalog.

Thompson & Morgan

(800) 274-7333 • www.thompsonandmorgan.com

This world-famous, 200-page seed catalog contains hundreds and hundreds of full-color photos. This one is a must if you are into flowers. Thompson and Morgan specializes in flower seeds, particularly those featured in English cottage gardens.

Select Seeds – Antique Flowers

(800) 648-0395 • www.selectseeds.com

This catalog contains an interesting selection of seeds and plants. They specialize in heirloom flowers.

Johnny's Selected

(877) 564-6697 • www.johnnyseeds.com

Johnny's specializes in cold-tolerant vegetable, herb and flower seeds that are flavorful, disease resistant and good producers.

A word of caution: Don't forget that winter daydreaming can result in a summertime burden. Resist the temptation to choose more than you can actually manage in your home garden.

Amy-Lynn Albertson



Mark Dearmon ©



Mark Dearmon ©

Gift Subscriptions Available

Extension's Successful Gardener is a great gift for gardening friends. The 10-month-per-year newsletter, written by North Carolina Cooperative Extension horticulture experts, is filled with information for North Carolina gardeners. Visit www.successfulgardener.org or call (919) 513-3112.



Q&A

Is my poinsettia poisonous?

The short answer is “yes” if you consider “poisonous” to mean anything that can cause negative symptoms. Poinsettias, however, are not as poisonous as many people think.

Poinsettias gained the reputation for being highly poisonous after an incident in the early 20th Century in which a child died after eating poinsettia leaves. However, the leaves were not confirmed as the reason for the child’s death.

An evaluation of 22,793 reports of poinsettia exposure to poison centers, published in 1996, found no deaths, and symptoms of toxicity were reported in fewer than 1 in 10 cases. Two experiments investigating the effects on rats of eating poinsettia parts found no deaths and no apparent behavior changes.

Humans can experience skin irritation after contact with poinsettia sap, and at least one case of asthma and nasal irritation has been documented. It has been suggested that people with latex allergies may also have an allergic reaction to the sap in poinsettias.

Pets sometimes experience negative effects after ingesting poinsettia. These are believed to be due to stomach or intestinal irritation. Animals, and quite possibly humans, may vomit or have diarrhea, but are highly unlikely to die as a result of eating poinsettia.

Humans or pets that eat poinsettia parts may experience uncomfortable symptoms but are unlikely to experience severe effects. Having said this, we are not medical professionals, and if you believe an allergic reaction is occurring, seek medical attention.

Mary Helen Ferguson

Christmas Tree Safety

Christmas tree safety depends on a few basics. To start, select a tree stand that will hold a gallon or more of water to help ensure that the tree will not dry out. Check the water level of the tree daily. Trees are thirsty and often require daily watering. A well-watered tree will stay fresh longer and won’t dry out as quickly, reducing the chances of the tree becoming a fire hazard.

When decorating the tree, make sure all lights are working properly and that there are no frayed wires on the strands of lights. Another safety tip is to make sure that the electrical circuits do not become overloaded. This is something that is often overlooked, and becomes a safety hazard as the Christmas season comes into full swing.

When placing the tree in the home, keep it away from all heat sources such as heating vents, fireplaces, woodstoves and radiators for safety reasons. This will help keep the tree from drying out, and will lessen the chance of fire hazards.

Turn off all lights before going to bed or leaving the house. This will help to ensure that all potential safety hazards will be prevented, as well as ease the mind. Follow these tips and enjoy a safe and happy holiday season.

Shauna Haslem

ENVIRO-TIP

Protecting Plants From Deicing Injury

While most areas of North Carolina have minimal snowfall throughout the winter months, we occasionally are hit with both snow and ice. Knowing how to properly get rid of snow and ice will help gardeners prevent permanent damage to plants.

Sodium chloride or rock salt is used as a common deicer. Its drawback is that it can burn plants and corrode metal and concrete. If you must use salt, use it judiciously, and erect barriers with plastic fencing, burlap or snow fencing to protect sensitive plants and minimize contact with salt. Reduce salt damage by mixing salt with sand and by removing snow before salting.

When possible, use deicing agents with calcium chloride, or calcium magnesium acetate (CMA), a salt-free melting agent made from limestone and acetic acid. Cat litter or sawdust help create traction on sidewalks.

Do not pile snow that contains salt around plants. Avoid piling it where runoff will flow over root zones. Plants placed near roadways and sidewalks should be salt tolerant. Many plants can recover from occasional salt spray. If it is a yearly occurrence, however, death of the plant may result. Contact Cooperative Extension about salt-tolerant plants for your area.

If salt buildup occurs, water liberally before spring growth by applying 2 inches of water over a 2- to 3-hour period. Repeat a few days later to “flush” the sodium from the soil.

Diane Turner



Robert E. Lyons ©

Gardentalk



“There is no excuse for a bare garden in winter, when a packet of seeds from the ten-cent store will make a grey wall gay with yellow, orange, and wallflower red.”

Elizabeth Lawrence



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Gardening in December

Lawns

- Apply broadleaf herbicides to control winter annual and perennial weeds. Watch for dry, windy conditions with low relative humidity that can damage turf. It may be necessary to irrigate periodically to help the grass survive.
- Visit www.successfulgardener.org. At press time, most of North Carolina continued to be under severe drought. This Web site provides information on dealing with drought.

Ornamentals

- Landscape plantings still can be made at this time of year. If you have purchased plants and are waiting to plant them later, then be sure not to let them dry out in the meantime or suffer cold damage.
 - Tip pruning can be done this month on many evergreens used in various Christmas decorations. Both the foliage and the berries of many favorites, including the holly species, nandina, pines and cedars, are popular for decorating the house.

Remember to not make heavy renovation-type pruning cuts until late winter.

- Continue mulching and composting chores. Your plants will benefit and may be able to survive the winter better.
 - Watch out for animal damage to the trunk of plants. Voles love to feed on the bark of plants and may become a pest in the winter.

Edibles

- Draw up a landscape design to install in the spring.
- Order gardening supplies for the spring.
- When the weather is bad, bring out your notes from gardening this year and devise strategies to overcome problems next year. If you don't have notes, summarize your garden's performance and enter information in your computer for fast retrieval.
- Order fruit trees adapted to your area and designate shipping dates that avoid hard frozen ground problems when planting.

David Barkley

The Museum of Life and Science in

Durham attracts all ages. Its mission is "to create a center of lifelong learning where people from young child to senior citizen embrace science as a way of knowing about themselves, their community and their world." The museum features the Magic Wings Butterfly House, one of the largest butterfly conservatories in the eastern United States. Tropical butterflies flutter around visitors as they enter the conservatory, which is planted with vibrant tropical plants. Magic Wings is part of BioQuest, which brings people, interactive exhibits, nature and animals together in the outdoors. Some of the other exhibits include an adventure playground, farmyard and wildlife animal exhibits.

The museum is open 362 days of the year (not major holidays), Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and on Sunday from noon to 5 p.m. The museum is located at 433 Murray Avenue in Durham. Call (919) 220-5429 or visit www.ncmls.org for more information.

Michelle Wallace

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- ▶ Garden Writers Association
- ▶ International Association of Business Communicators
- ▶ N.C. & National Associations of County Agricultural Agents
- ▶ Southern Extension Forest Resource Specialists
- ▶ Mecklenburg County Priority Awards

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