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Extension Gardener provides timely, research-based horticultural information. We publish four issues per year. Send comments about *Extension Gardener* to:

Content Editor and Team Leader
Lucy Bradley, Ph.D.
NC State University
Campus Box 7609
Raleigh, NC 27695-7609

Managing Editor
Ben Grandon

Regional Editor, Coastal
Matt Jones

Regional Editor, Piedmont
Brad Thompson

Regional Editor, Mountains
Hannah Bundy

Statewide Editor
Hanna Smith

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Holiday Cacti: Beautiful, but now what?

Thanksgiving cactus (*Schlumbergera truncate*) and Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera bridgesii*) are popular houseplant mainstays in stores during the holidays because their beautiful blooms are show stoppers during the cold, dark months of winter. Native to Brazil, these plants come in a wide range of colors, including red, pink, purple, lavender, peach, orange, cream, and white. They are short-day plants, meaning that they initiate flower bud development when the nights get longer. When these plants are grown under normal light conditions, the Thanksgiving cactus blooms around late November and the Christmas cactus blooms around late December—hence their common names.

How do you tell the difference between a Thanksgiving and a Christmas cactus? First, take a look at the leaves, which are more properly termed "phylloclades." The "leaves" are actually flattened stem segments. On a Thanksgiving cactus, the phylloclades will have two to four saw-toothed projections along the margins that will be more pointed than those on a Christmas cactus, which has more rounded projections.

You can also look at the color of the anthers in the flowers. On a Thanksgiving cactus the anthers will be yellow, and on a Christmas cactus they will be purplish-brown.

Maybe you picked up a holiday cacti while shopping one day, or maybe someone gifted one to you. And now that the show of flowers is over, you're wondering just how to care for your new plant. The key factors are providing the right amount of sunlight, the perfect growing media,



Notice the pointed tips of the phylloclades on this Thanksgiving cactus. ©Maja Dumat, CC BY 2.0, flickr.com



Christmas cactus phylloclades have rounded tips. @louirc, CC BY 2.0, flickr.com

and some water and fertilizer, and you'll have your holiday cactus around for several years to come.

For both Thanksgiving and Christmas cacti, light shade is ideal. Full sun is beneficial for a magnificent flowering display when flower buds are forming and during flowering, but full sun during the summer can cause the leaves to look dull and yellow. These plants actually like to be a little pot-bound, so repotting should be done only once every three years or so and should occur in the spring after flowering. Good drainage and soil aeration are also critical, so aim for a mix that contains about 60 to 80 percent potting soil with about 20 to 40 percent perlite.

Holiday cacti tolerate dry, slightly underwatered conditions, especially during the spring and summer. A good rule of thumb is to water when the growing medium feels dry to the touch but not fully dry throughout. A balanced 20-10-20 or 10-10-10 fertilizer can be applied at one-half strength once monthly from late winter through the summer. During the late summer, stop fertilization for greater flower bud production.

Extension Showcase

Cleveland County Cabin Fever Gardening Symposium

The upcoming symposium “Cabin Fever—Gardening in My Own Backyard” is brought to you by the Extension Master Gardener Volunteers of Cleveland County.

This is our second year of offering classes on all aspects of gardening for beginners all the way through professionals in the landscape field.

Online registration will be open on January 1, 2019, for the symposium, which will be held on March 2, 2019, at the Cleveland Community College in Shelby: cleveland.ces.ncsu.edu.

We are excited to welcome these presenters:

- Lee Reich, author of *Weedless Gardening*
- Jeff Gillman, director of UNC—Charlotte Botanical Gardens
- Bodie Pennisi, University of Georgia’s statewide Extension landscape specialist
- James Barilla, author of *My Backyard Jungle*, University of South Carolina.

The symposium fee is \$60 if you register by midnight, February 1, 2019, and \$65 after that date.

All registrations must be made by February 23, 2019.

Whether you are new to Cleveland County or have gardened here for many years, the presenters will help you learn and grow as a gardener.

—Julie Flowers

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Smart Gardening: Disease prevention begins in winter



Disease organisms thrive in our climate and geography. @Eli Snyder

Weather patterns this year challenged experienced and novice gardeners alike when it came to managing diseases in gardens and landscapes. But in any year, our climate and geography render our gardens ripe for diseases. Prevention is key when it comes to disease management, and winter is the perfect time to start taking preventive steps. First, remove diseased plant debris where fungal or bacterial diseases overwinter. If left in the landscape, disease organisms can quickly infect plants as soon as conditions are right. If your deciduous tree experienced a foliar leaf disease last year, rake up leaves and send them to a municipal leaf collection, or bury them. Prune out limbs with fire blight or cankers well below the infected area. Avoid spreading these diseases by sanitizing pruners between each cut.

Discard plants from areas with root-knot nematodes. Do not transplant or compost them as this may spread the nematodes to other parts of your garden. In vegetable gardens, remove infected plant debris and till the rest under the soil or compost. If you prefer not to till, consider solarizing soil on a rotational basis by placing a clear plastic tarp over the soil for one month during the summer. Write out your vegetable garden rotation plan. Peruse seed and plant catalogs for resistant varieties that suit your needs. Don’t overlook cultural practices: select appropriate plants for each site, prepare the soil, plan for minimizing plant stress, and observe proper plant spacing. Spend time this winter understanding the diseases you typically face and making a plan for prevention. If you need assistance, contact your county Extension agent. He or she can help you identify the disease or, if need be, send a sample to the Plant, Disease, and Insect Clinic at NC State.

—Eli Snyder

Food Production: Winter lettuce and leafy green production



Row covers enable leafy green production through the winter. @Hannah Bundy

Do you ever feel dread with winter coming on because your fresh vegetable production can’t keep up in the cold winter? Well, fear no more! You can grow delicious and nutritious food all winter long. There are season extension tools such as high tunnels for larger operations (as shown below) as well as for homeowners. Small greenhouses can be purchased, or cold frames can be built in areas that drop below freezing often during the winter, and row covers can be utilized to hold heat in for crops as well. These can be purchased, and there are many do-it-yourself designs that can be made relatively cheaply.

Plantings can be made through the winter, and harvesting can last through winter as well. Some crops such as kale are cold hardy, meaning that they don’t experience as much damage from frost as other crops such as lettuce, so you’ll want to keep that in mind when you’re planning out your design and what you will be planting where. My favorite crops to plant in the late fall are those that can be harvested as “cut and come again.” Every few days I can go out and snip a few leaves here and there and allow the plant to continue growing for the entirety of the season. These include crops such as arugula, kale, lettuce (both leaf and head lettuce), and spinach. Carrots are especially delicious if they have experienced a bit of frost. If you have space to do so, I recommend having a carrot patch that is seeded in the fall and not harvested until spring. The cold encourages carrots to sweeten, which makes them even more delicious than in the fall. If you have any questions about what structure is right for you or planting recommendations, contact your county Extension agent.

—Hannah Bundy

Pest Alert: Unwelcome house guests

With cooler temperatures, you may have noticed an uninvited pest crawling around your home. The brown marmorated stink bug (BMSB) was accidentally introduced to the United States from Asia in the 1990s. It has since become invasive and can be found in most North Carolina counties. The adult BMSBs begin to congregate in the early fall on the exterior of man-made structures. The bugs find their way into homes through attic vents and gaps in soffit and window casings. They often overwinter in a semi-dormant state in attics or within walls. From there some of the stink bugs may find their way into the interior of the home through gaps around ceiling fixtures, outlets, and trim.



Brown marmorated stink bug (*Halyomorpha halys*).
©Hectonichus, commons.wikimedia.org, CC BY-SA 4.0

In the landscape these insects can devastate crops; however, in the home these pests are considered more of a nuisance as they are not harmful to humans or pets. These bugs will not damage a home because they do not feed on wood or clothing. They can emit a foul-smelling chemical when threatened as a defense mechanism. Extension receives calls fall through spring from homeowners inquiring about spray recommendations to eliminate these pests in their home. We do not recommend spraying or using fogging insecticides inside for these pests. In fact, using an insecticide to kill stink bugs inside a wall or attic could invite an even worse pest, carpet beetles, who will feed on the carcasses of the dead stink bugs. The best way to get rid of visible stink bugs is to handpick and drown them in soapy water or vacuum them up and freeze the vacuum bag before disposal. To prevent future BMSB invasions, spend time next summer caulking or screening entry points on the exterior of your home.

—Sara Freeman

Lawns: The perfect lawn

The lawn as we know it has been around for only the last couple of hundred years. Prior to the 1700s, lawns were really meadows: mixtures of native grasses and broadleaf plants that were often kept short by grazing livestock. Due to high standards, lawns have become a hot topic for homeowners. There are some simple ways to reduce your maintenance while keeping your lawn healthy and beautiful. Choosing the correct turf type, mowing at the correct height, returning lawn clippings to the soil, fertilizing properly, and adequate irrigation can produce grass that requires less chemical input. The first step is to choose the grass that is right for you. In western North Carolina we mostly grow fescue. Fescue is a cool-season clumping lawn grass that grows best in USDA hardiness zone 7 or lower. It is green year-round and is easy to re-seed in the fall if you have bare areas. Fescue is planted and re-seeded yearly in early September. For new lawns, simply prepare the area by killing any grass and weeds currently growing. Remember, soil preparation is very important. Test your soil to determine if lime is necessary; and if it is, apply lime prior to tilling the soil thoroughly.



A healthy beautiful lawn enhances outdoor spaces. ©Steve Pettis

Spread the fescue seed at a rate of 5 pounds per 1,000 square feet, firm the ground with a roller, and cover the seed with wheat straw. If you have an established fescue lawn already, aerate, soil test, and re-seed at a rate of 2 to 5 pounds per 1,000 square feet. Because tall fescue is a cool-season grass, all types of it suffer during extreme summer temperatures (above 90°F) and drought. Mow fescue at 3 or more inches high. Allow clippings to fall to the ground, where they will return to the soil as nutrients. Fertilize using inorganic fertilizers such as 10-10-10 or organic fertilizers such as Milorganite as needed.

—Steve Pettis

Tips & Tasks

Lawns

- Apply crabgrass preventer on cool-season lawns in late winter before crabgrass starts to germinate.
- Fertilize cool-season lawns with a slow-release lawn fertilizer.
- Sharpen lawn mower blades before using in the spring.
- Control winter annual weeds November through February.

Ornamentals

- Prune fruit trees and grape vines for optimum fruit production.
- Prune established blueberries by taking out a third of the oldest canes at ground level.
- Prune summer-flowering shrubs such as crape myrtle, rose of Sharon, and butterfly bush in February
- Prune roses before bud break.
- Deadhead pansies to prolong flowering.

Edibles

- Plant asparagus crowns when the soil is dry enough to work.
- Plant early season vegetables such as English peas, onions, Irish potatoes, and spinach.
- Order garden seeds such as beans, corn, and okra.
- Make sure all debris is cleared out of the vegetable garden.
- Draw your garden plan to include crop rotation of sensitive vegetables such as tomatoes.

—Donna Teasley



Helping You Grow

Choosing native plants

Native plants make an excellent addition to any garden. Planting natives attracts pollinators, birds, and butterflies to your yard. This diversity can improve vegetable harvests and offer fun opportunities to observe the natural world in your own backyard. Plus native plants are well-adapted to your local climate, allowing them to thrive in the garden.

As you plan your garden for the upcoming season, consider adding more native plants to your landscape. One great place to start is the “Native Plants” chapter in the **NC Extension Gardener Handbook**. This chapter is accessible at content.ces.ncsu.edu/12-native-plants.

You can also search for native plants that will thrive in your zip code on the Audubon Society’s website: www.audubon.org/native-plants. The site will help to create a list of plants for you, and you can get additional tips on creating a bird-friendly habitat.

If you’re looking for even more information about native plants, visit gardening.ces.ncsu.edu/native-plant-resources.

—Leslie Peck

Joe-pye weed. @Leslie Peck



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Plant Watch: American holly (*Ilex opaca*)



American holly has spiny leaves and red berries. ©BlueRidgeKitties, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0, flickr.com

The American holly is a beautiful native evergreen tree. In home landscapes, with limited area for growth, trees typically reach up to 30 feet high. Hollies are dioecious, meaning male and female flowers are on separate trees. Both trees are needed to have fruit on the female. Often American holly is used as greenery for Christmas decorations, as in “Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly.” American holly prefers well-drained, slightly acidic soil, but will not tolerate consistently wet soils. If the soil pH is too high, chlorosis will occur, with some leaf drop associated with this problem. The American holly is the only native holly with spiny leaves and red berries. The tree’s appearance is improved by letting limbs grow all the way to the ground, allowing this holly to be used for privacy screens and specimen plantings.

—Shannon Newton

Incredible Edibles: Pansies aren’t just for looks

Most vegetable gardens are laid to rest for the winter. But never fear, you probably have something tasty planted right outside your front door! Pansies are winter annuals that are edible and have a slightly sweet, floral flavor. Although their flavor is mild, pansies are great for candying or eating whole on crackers with cream cheese. And pansies are a great way to add beautiful color to salads and desserts such as cakes and pastries. To harvest, pick flowers in the morning, after dew has evaporated, and keep them cool after harvest to maintain freshness. Before eating any flowers, make sure you have properly identified them, and only eat flowers that you know haven’t been treated with pesticides. You can learn more about edible flowers and how to use them from this NC State Extension publication: *Choosing and Using Edible Flowers* (AG-790).

—Hanna Smith



Pansies have a sweet floral flavor. ©Heather Acton, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Sustainability: Keep it real!

Labor Day rolls around, and plastic Christmas tree-shaped decorations begin to appear in stores. Many consumers are tempted to purchase these plastic objects instead of a “real Christmas tree.” Some might not want a real tree because it has to be cut each year, which doesn’t seem sustainable. There is no need to worry. When a Christmas tree is harvested, the grower replants a tree to take its place. During the many years a tree grows to become the centerpiece of holiday celebrations, it is also serving as habitat for deer, bear, rabbits, and birds, including grouse and wild turkeys. The fake plastic tree is manufactured in an Asian country from nonrenewable petroleum. Meanwhile, the real Christmas trees are growing on American-owned family farms across North Carolina. Growing Christmas trees as a crop ensures that land owned by many families for generations will remain family farms, providing jobs and bringing income into the local economy.

Now that you feel good about purchasing a real tree, the next thing that might concern you is disposing of it after Christmas. Never fear. There are many free opportunities to have your real tree recycled. Most trees are chipped up into mulch, which will break down and help another plant grow. The fake tree will lose its ornamental value quickly, then be tossed into a landfill where it will remain for eternity. Make the sustainable choice this year by “keeping it real.”

—Paige Patterson