

The Green Thumb

Lawn and Garden News You Can Use

February 2009

Flowering Plants Bring a Smile On Valentine's Day

David Robson, horticulture educator

A flowering plant makes a wonderful Valentine's Day gift for that special someone. African violets are without a doubt the most commonly grown flowering plant indoors. They require 10 hours of light and moderate temperatures, and they resent having wet leaves. Once they become accustomed to their new home, they usually bloom faithfully and nearly year round.

Bromeliads are related to pineapples. They grow in a similar fashion with a whorl of spiny leaves and a brilliant flower that develops in the midst of the whorl. They need well-drained soil, filtered light, and household temperatures. When the plant has flowered, the center of the whorl deteriorates, but the new "pups" grow from the base.

Amaryllis plants have strange habits. The large 4-inch bulbs are planted singly in pots with just enough room around them for a little soil. If watered immediately after potting, a bulb sends up a strong stem and, in six weeks or so, several 6-inch flowers. They may be red, orange, white, or pink. As the flowers fade, the bulb sends up several strap-like leaves that persist for several months. Plants sending up leaves in the spring can be set outdoors in a protected place for the summer. Repot and bring in before frost. Allow the plant to dry out so the leaves die back and drop off; then keep it in a cool, dry place for a couple of months, preferably with the pot laid on its side. Then, resume watering and the cycle will repeat. Some people time the red flowers for Christmas blooming.

Flowering shrubs that bloom well indoors also make nice gifts. Oleander and hibiscus need only a bright warm place to flower profusely. Just remember that oleander is considered poisonous and should be kept away from children. Gardenia grows well and easily sets flower buds; but if it is too hot or cold, too dark or light, too wet or dry, it will drop buds before they open. Azaleas grow nicely indoors and can take a summer vacation outdoors. Flower buds develop during the summer but need several weeks of cool temperatures (in the 40s) to break dormancy. Then, when moved indoors, the buds break into bloom for a period of several weeks.

Some orchid species adapt well to home conditions. Cymbidiums, the smaller, colorful corsage orchids are remarkably easy to grow indoors considering the reward for the effort. The plants grow from pseudobulbs in a light potting mix of at least half sand. A shoot of daylily-like leaves develops each spring. In the late fall or early winter, one or two flower spikes develop from the base of a pseudobulb. A spike may have a dozen or more flowers which last for weeks. Indoors, cymbidiums like filtered light and cool temperatures. In the summer, they enjoy a screened porch or sheltered outdoor spot. Do not be intimidated by their reputation—these orchids make delightful houseplants.

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Dealing with Snow, Ice Damage

David Robson, horticulture educator



Trees and shrubs are prone to injury throughout the year. But, a heavy snowfall or ice storm may bend branches to the point where you want to take action.

Sometimes, the best thing is to do nothing. Branches have a natural tendency to bend under the weight of ice and snow. If you have swung on a limb or pulled it down to pick an apple, you realize the elasticity of limbs. But, bend a branch back too far and it breaks.

Weak-wooden trees such as Siberian elm, poplar, willows, and silver maple suffer the most breakage during heavy snows or ice. Fast-growing trees like birches are also vulnerable. Similarly, trees with rot, decay, weak crotch angles (e.g. ornamental pears), or V-shaped crotches (again, silver maples) easily split in severe weather.

Most heavy, wet snows don't accumulate enough to cause damage to single-trunk deciduous trees and shrubs. Damage usually occurs on multi-stemmed plants and evergreens. However, ice accumulation by itself, or coupled with the snow's weight, can cause problems.

Old stems are more prone to injury than younger ones, much like people and bones. The thicker the bark, the less likely the limb will bend.

Evergreens also suffer under ice and heavy snowfall due to the increased surface area of the plant as do broadleaf evergreens like hollies, rhododendron, and boxwood.

Some shade trees that retain seed pods (sweetgums) or leaves (many oaks) are prone to injury, although these two trees have stronger branch angles and wood.

The same amount of snow may bend or break evergreen branches yet cause no damage on a leafless shade tree.

What To Do

Don't run out to brush away the snow with a broom or stick. This may put more pressure on a limb and cause it to break. Plus, there's a chance the limb may fly up and hit you, fall on a power line, or further damage property.

The best recourse is to wait until the snow or ice melts. Many branches will return to their original position a couple of days after the snow or ice melts.

If branches have been bent out of shape, they can be propped or tied to higher branches now or in the spring before new growth appears. Within a month or two, the limb should be set, and you can remove the anchors or props. Evergreens may need to be pulled and anchored in the early spring as growth starts. However, do it carefully. If you pull too much and too fast, you can snap the top out.

Carefully inspect damaged or broken limbs before pruning or removing. Realize that you don't need to remove branches at the moment unless they pose a hazard to buildings, traffic, utilities, or people. While damaged branches may look bad, they aren't putting additional stress on the plant. Insects and diseases will not attack the plant during the winter months.

Most importantly, ask yourself if the tree or shrub is worth saving. If damage is severe, it might be better to replace the plant.

If you want to attempt to save the plant, decide whether the work can be done from the ground with pruners, saws, and loppers you have available. If you need a ladder to climb into the tree, consider calling a certified arborist (www.isa-arbor.org). Make sure any person hired to do tree pruning or removal is either insured or bonded. This is an absolute must. Insurance and bonding certificates should be current and presented upon demand. This protects you from recourse if something happens during the pruning process.

Question Corner

Answer provided by Tony Bratsch, U of I Extension horticulture educator

Q. I have a shaded area on the north side of my house to landscape. What are some plants besides ferns and hostas that will grow well in the shade?

A. The challenge of shade gardening is choosing plants that will thrive under low-light conditions. Additional challenges include proper fertilization, often dry but sometimes too wet soil conditions, lack of air movement that encourages diseases, and problems with slugs, snails, and other pests that thrive under cool, moist conditions.

Plants that are well-known for their shade tolerance, such as hostas or redbud trees, are easy to find at garden centers. But to find other species, you may want to start browsing catalogs or online nurseries.

When it's time for planting, loosen the soil and add compost or other organic matter. Be careful not to injure the roots of any existing plants. Never apply more than 2 to 3 inches of new soil or compost over existing roots.

Shade plants need regular watering, 1 inch per week—unless rainfall provides it; they need to be cool and damp but not overly saturated, which will encourage diseases.

When possible, use soaker hoses or direct watering to get the water to the roots of the shade plants—rather than watering nearby plants that don't need it. Water plants in the morning so that the leaves have time to dry during the day.

Mulching will also help conserve moisture and lessen weed growth. Keep beds weed-free to reduce competition for water, nutrients, and light.

Finally, adjust fertilizers, using one-third to one-half of what plants growing in the full sun would require. Also, fertilize less often, every six to eight weeks.

Now for the fun part—choosing your plants. Here are some plants known to grow under variable shade conditions:

Trees

Redbud, White Fringetree, Black Gum, Carolina Silverbell, Witch Hazel, Red Buckeye, Flowering Dogwood, Kousa Dogwood, Japanese Amur, Sugar and Paperbark Maples, Katsura Tree, American Hornbeam, Serviceberry, Cockspur Hawthorn

Deciduous Shrubs

Oakleaf and Tardiva Hydrangea, Burning Bush, Fothergilla, St. Johns Wort, Japanese Kerria, Bush Cinquefoil, Red and Yellow Twig Dogwood, Japanese Barberry, Black Chokeberry, Enkianthus, Rose of Sharon, Doublefile, Arrowwood, Cranberry Bush Viburnams, Privet, Spicebush

Evergreens (trees and shrubs)

Hemlock, Yew, Oregon Grape Holly, Catawba Rhododendron and Azaleas, Japanese Pieris, Boxwood, Leucothoe, Mountain Laurel

Perennials

Bleeding Hearts, Coral Bells, Astilbe, Hostas, Hardy Begonia, Lenten Rose, Virginia Bluebells, Bergenia, Tradescantia, Columbine, Foxglove, Cardinal Flower, Sweet Woodruff, Yellow Corydalis, Carex (various sedges), Monkshood, Plumbago, ferns of all kinds

Groundcovers

Ajuga, Pachysandra, Lamium, English Ivy, Lirope, Scotch Heather, Lily of the Valley, Vinca

Annuals

Caladium, Begonia, Impatiens, Coleus, Nicotiana, Lobelia, Violas, Foxglove, Monkey Flower, Fuschia, Primrose



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Upcoming Events



Is it okay to sell home-baked goods to the public? Can I give customers samples of my fresh apples? Can I transport and sell frozen meat at a farmers' market?

These are the questions that will be covered at the Food Rules Workshop set for March 3, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m., at the U of I Extension office in Marion.

The workshop will cover state regulations for selling products, including health department issues. You'll learn how to correctly market home-baked goods and farm products without the fear of fines.

Registration is \$10 per person. For more details and to register online, visit www.thelandconnection.org/farmers/foodrules.cfm or call 847-570-0701.

The Midwestern Herb and Garden Show is coming to the Times Square Mall in Mt. Vernon, February 13–15.

The show consists of 19 learning sessions plus lots of gardening-related exhibits and vendors. Topics range from organic herbs, to median irises and orchids, to bonsai and vegetable gardening, to herbal treats from the kitchen.

The event is free, and the public is invited. For a complete schedule, visit the SI Gardening website, <http://web.extension.uiuc.edu/regions/hort> and click on the *News & Tips* section. Or, call the Mt. Vernon Convention and Tourism Bureau, 1-800-252-5464.



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