

The Green Thumb

Lawn and Garden News You Can Use

January 2009

Brighten the Winter Blues With a Blooming Plant

Martha Smith, horticulture educator

January is here, that time of year when everything takes on a gray hue. Your clothes seem dull, your home lacks its usual luster, and your cat seems a bit ashen. When will spring get here?

If the winter blues are setting in, maybe you need a splash of color from a bright, colorful, blooming plant. Stop by the local greenhouse to see what's in stock. You will be surprised at the selection and colors available. Cyclamens, chrysanthemums, African violets, gloxinia, primrose, and cineraria are just a few of the choices.

A flowering plant can psychologically help us through the dull, gray months of February and March. And many small blooming plants are inexpensive, often less than \$10.

When buying blooming potted plants, follow these suggestions from the Greenhouse Growers Association.

- Avoid plants that are still wrapped. Wrapping can shorten the plant's life span. Even paper wraps, if left on too long, can cause damage. Poinsettias, spring bulbs, roses and Rieger begonias are good examples of plants that deteriorate quickly.
- Be sure the plant is in good condition. Avoid improperly cared for plants that have yellowing leaves. The soil media may not smell fresh, and the leaves and stems can appear droopy.
- Some people assume that if the plant contains tight buds rather than having open blooms, the plant will last longer. This is not true. For most blooming potted plants, it is essential that at least half the blooms be nearly fully opened; otherwise, when the plants are taken from the greenhouse and placed in lower light, the buds usually won't open. This is especially true for chrysanthemums. One exception is spring bulbs.
- Before leaving the store, be sure the plant is wrapped in either plastic or paper. This extra measure protects the plant from low temperatures and drafts, makes handling easier, and prevents the plant from becoming damaged. Also, avoid leaving the plant in the car to prevent it from freezing.

Once you get your bundle of color home, place it in a draft-free location away from high temperatures—NOT on top of your television set, which can be too warm when the TV is in use.

To receive
The Green Thumb
by mail, contact
your local
U of I Extension office.

www.extension.uiuc.edu



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
EXTENSION

Continued on Page 3

Storing Vegetable Garden Seed

Tony Bratsch, horticulture educator



The new seed catalogs are starting to arrive in the mail, and it is a good time to take stock of leftover seed before you place an order. Carry-over seed can and should be used before its viability declines, especially given the cost of buying new seed each year. As you go through older supplies, evaluate what crop seeds you have on hand, how much is left, and whether it is enough for your 2009 garden. Try to determine the age of seed by the packing dates on the package, and also consider conducting germination tests.

Keep in mind that seed is alive even while in its resting or dormant state. Viability of stored seed is affected by two main factors: seed moisture and storage temperature. These factors interact with natural seed longevity, which varies among species. So when you evaluate aging seed stock, how and where you kept your seeds are important considerations, as well as knowing the natural seed life expectancy.

The combination of high seed moisture and either high or low storage temperature is especially detrimental to seed longevity. Low seed moisture means longer life, particularly when it is exposed to fluctuating temperatures. Silica gel and calcium chloride are good mediums to dry seed and control humidity in a damp storage environment. Just make sure the seed does not come into direct seed contact with these materials.

Cool, consistent basement or refrigerator storage is preferable to attic or outdoor garden shed storage. Periods of high temperature exposure, such as a seed packet left in direct sun or in a hot shed, can significantly reduce seed longevity or kill it outright. For many species, sub-freezing temperatures can be detrimental. Ideal seed storage temperatures are between 40 to 50 degrees F, with desirable seed moisture for most crops around 10 to 12 percent. Lower moisture of 5 to

6 percent is better for long-term storage in airtight containers, with the exception of okra and bean seed; these two can develop hard seed coats and not germinate well if kept below 10 percent moisture.

Relative life expectancy under favorable storage conditions for certain crop groups is as follows: legumes (beans) 3 to 4 years; crucifers (broccoli, cauliflower) 4 to 5 years; corn 2 to 3 years; lettuce, endive and chicory 4 to 5 years; spinach, beets, carrots and chard 2 to 3 years; cucurbits (melons, squash) 4 to 5 years; tomatoes 4 years; peppers 2 years; onion, parsley, parsnip and salsify 1 year. As any seed gets older, the percent germination declines at varying rates depending on conditions and species.

Seed packages state percent germination on the package as well as the year that the lot was packed. New seed usually tests between 85 to 99 percent germination. Even under ideal storage conditions, germination of any seed lot declines with time, as well as the vigor and rate of germination, so it is best to test percent seed viability if you have doubts. This can easily be done by wrapping some seeds in a wet paper towel, keeping them moist and warm (65 to 70 F) over a period of three to seven days and counting germinated seeds. If the percentage is low or germination is slow or variable, it is best to discard the lot. A weakened seed, even though it germinates, makes for a weak seedling and poor early growth.

Properly storing and using older seed is a great way to save on garden seed costs, though it should always be evaluated before planting. A poor stand in the garden results in lost growing time if it needs replanting, and often a planting delay beyond the ideal window of time. For more information, pick up the book, *Vegetable Gardening in the Midwest*, available from your local U of I Extension office or visit the *Watch Your Garden Grow* website at www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/veggies/.

Question Corner

Answer provided by David Robson, U of I Extension horticulture educator

Q. I think my plants have mealybugs. How can I get rid of the pests?

A. White, cottony masses about 1/8 inch in diameter on the stems and leaves of your houseplants may be an indication of an infestation of mealybugs.

Mealybugs suck the sap out of the plant. Much of the sap is not used by the insect but is excreted as a syrupy solution that makes lower leaves and other surfaces under the plant glossy and sticky. A black mold, called sooty mold, may eventually grow on this syrupy material, especially if the plant is in a high-humidity area.

Plants commonly attacked by mealybugs include African violets, sinnigias and other gesneriads, cacti, jade plant and other succulents, avocado, citrus, coleus, palms, and schefflera. Infested plants grow slowly, if at all, and frequently have distorted leaves that drop from the plant. Heavy infestations are often fatal. To prevent healthy plants from a similar fate, separate them from the infested plants.

You can treat small plants with light infestations by dabbing each mealybug with a cotton swab dipped in rubbing alcohol. Be sure to touch only the insect. Alcohol on leaf tissue will usually cause drying, often resulting in a dead spot on the leaf.

Treatments should be repeated weekly for about two months. Don't use too much alcohol and avoid dabbing the growing point.

Spraying infested plants with insecticidal soap or an insecticide is also effective. Contact your local U of I Extension office for chemical recommendations. Treat the plants every 10 days to two weeks for two to three months. Large masses of mealybugs at junctures of the leaf and stem and at other locations should be physically removed since young mealybugs within these masses will be protected from the insecticide.

Plants such as cacti and other succulents growing in loose soil should also be checked for mealybugs on the roots and underground stems.

Treat root infestations every two weeks for two months. Water the plant to thoroughly moisten the soil. Apply an insecticide, diluted with water as directed on the label, to the soil until the solution runs out of the bottom drainage holes. After two months, check the roots for any infestation and repot.

As with any insecticide, read and follow all label directions.



Send your lawn and garden questions to:

The Green Thumb
c/o Annette Campbell
U of I Extension
1212 Route 14 West
Benton, IL 62812

E-mail:
mdcampbe@uiuc.edu

From Page 1



Make sure the plant has proper drainage. If there is decorative foil, punch holes in the bottom so that the plant does not sit in water. Check to see if the plant is dry and, if so, water at the soil level. Avoid getting water on the flowers and leaves. Toss excess water that drains into the saucer.

Use city or well water, not softened water. Some plants are sensitive to salts used in water softeners. If possible, let the water stand overnight before using. Misting is not necessary. Remove yellow leaves and faded flowers before they die.

Pruning on a frequent basis can promote a longer blooming period. For most blooming potted plants, fertilizing is not necessary while the plant is in bloom.

Holly for Your Landscape

Ed Billingsley, guest columnist



This time of year brings attention to the evergreen holly plant. If you don't have holly in your yard, you may find that it makes a nice addition to the landscape.

Holly plants prefer a well-drained site. The site should also be in full sun for at least six hours a day. Hollies grow nearly 1 foot a year if planted in a good location. Hollies are not as cold hardy as many think, so pick varieties that will survive our winters.

These plants are dioecious, meaning they have the male and female reproductive structures on separate plants. So to produce red berries, both a male and female plant are required. Some nurseries are now planting a male and female in the same pot. That way, the pollinator is already there with the female when they are planted.

If you are interested in shrubs, consider the 'China Girl' and 'China Boy' cultivars.

The female 'China Girl' will have the red berries and the male 'China Boy' will have only lush foliage. It is best to have at least three to five plants if you want branches for holiday decorating.

If you want a tree, consider an American holly. It spreads 8 to 15 feet and can grow nearly 30 feet tall. Many homeowners keep the tree pruned in a compact form, but it can be allowed to grow freely.

Holly is a nice glossy broadleaf evergreen that provides green leaves of shiny luster all year long. A word of caution—remember that holly berries are considered poisonous, so keep small children and pets away from them.



Inside this Issue

Brighten the Winter Blues
With a Blooming Plant

Storing Vegetable Seed

Question Corner

Holly for Your Landscape

The information in this newsletter is for educational purposes only. References to commercial products and trade names do not constitute endorsement by the University of Illinois and do not imply discrimination against other similar products that are not listed.

University of Illinois~U.S. Department of Agriculture~Local Extension Councils Cooperating
University of Illinois Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.

If you need special dietary or disability accommodations to participate in any programs listed in this newsletter, please contact your local U of I Extension office.