

# The Green Thumb

Lawn and Garden News You Can Use

November 2008

## Protect Landscape Plants From Winter Injury

David Robson, horticulture educator

Wind, sun, and freezing temperatures take a toll on plants through the winter. Signs of winter injury include discolored cankers or sunscald on exposed limbs or at the trunk base, damage to the taproot and side roots, and injury to leaf and flower buds. In some cases, we see blackened sapwood and death of the entire plant.

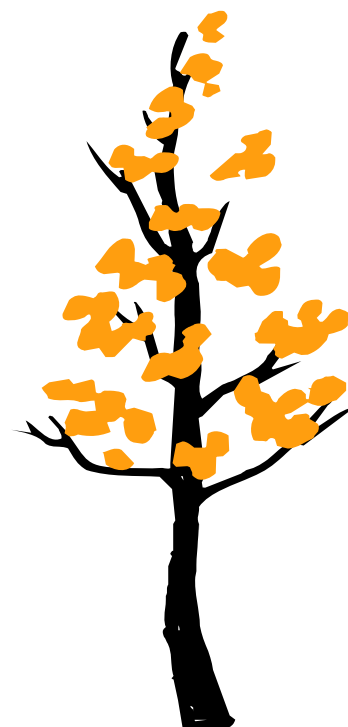
Frost cracks are the most common signs of winter injury. Frost cracks are vertical separations of bark and wood on the south or southwest sides of a trunk. The cracks may extend to the center of a tree and cause it to break apart under the weight of snow or ice.

Young, thin-barked trees can be protected from frost cracks by wrapping the trunks with sisal-kraft paper, strips of Burlap, or aluminum foil. A coat of whitewash or a 6-inch board tied upright on the south or southwest side of the trunk also can work.

Trees subject to frost crack (if they are planted in exposed locations) include apple, ash, beech, elm, horsechestnut, linden, London plane, maple, oak, poplar, sycamore, tulip tree, walnut, and willow. Boxwood, junipers, yews, and other multiple-stemmed evergreens that tend to develop frost cracks can spread, split apart, and break under a load of ice or snow. Protect these trees by tying the branches together with strong cord. Some plants, such as evergreens, should be protected from winter sun and drying winds. Barriers made of canvas, plastic, cheesecloth, burlap, or slat screens placed 2 feet away on the south or southwest sides are effective screens.

Put a 2- to 6-inch organic mulch over evergreen roots, around roses, and over fruit tree roots to prevent deep freezing. The mulch also protects against alternate thawing and freezing that can shear off feeder roots.

Several products are available to protect broadleaf and other evergreens from winter leaf burn. These include “no wilt” latex and such plastic anti-transparent sprays as Wilt-Pruf NCF, Vapor Gard, Exhalt 4-10, Dwax, Plant Shield, Stop-Wilt, or Plantcote. Apply these products to foliage in late fall and again during mid-winter when the temperature is above 40 degrees. As always, carefully read and follow all label directions.



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# Get Blueberry Beds Ready Now

Tony Bratsch, horticulture educator



Blueberries offer important nutritional benefits, and in the home landscape, they provide a spring show of flowers, fruit, and brilliant fall color. Blueberry plants can survive 25 or more years with proper care.

The planting site needs to be prepared in the fall so that the soil pH (acidity) can be reduced, thus allowing the plants to thrive. It can take up to a year for this soil chemical change to occur. As you prepare your planting area this fall, consider building permanent raised beds. Blueberries are sensitive to wet soil conditions. If your soil is heavy and predominately clay, or less than well drained as many Illinois soils are, the extra effort will be worth it.

Like rhododendron and azaleas, blueberries prefer an acid soil with a low pH of 4.7 to 5.2. Most Illinois soils have a higher pH. Depending on location, the pH can range from 5.5 (or lower) to 7.0 or higher, at which soils become alkaline.

The best way to reduce soil pH is by adding elemental sulfur. Peat moss, which is acidic, can also be added to the planting area to help reduce soil pH and add organic matter that is beneficial for blueberries.

Start by taking a soil test to determine the pH and the amount of sulfur needed for the planting area. Your local U of I Extension office can provide information on how to take a soil test and where to take the sample for analysis. You can also obtain a chart, based on soil type, to estimate the amount of sulfur needed, usually for every 100 square feet of bed area.

When purchasing sulfur, avoid aluminum sulfate because it can be toxic to plants. Instead, buy elemental sulfur which will be sold as a powder or in small pellets.

Evenly apply the sulfur across the planting area and deeply till in a couple of directions to maximize sulfur contact with soil particles. Do not apply more sulfur than the

soil test recommends. Remember, pH adjustments take time, and a spring re-test may be necessary to determine the effectiveness of the treatment.

While adding the sulfur, also add organic matter such as peat or compost to the soil. In addition, fertilizer containing phosphorus and potassium should be applied, depending on soil test starting levels. A general analysis fertilizer such as 12-12-12 can be used, and 1 to 2 pounds of this material per 100 square feet is a good base application if starting phosphorus and potassium is unknown. Spade and till organic and fertilizer amendments in deeply; this can be done when adding sulfur.

Next, determine your planting bed and pathway layout. Using soil from the pathways, form the raised beds 4 to 5 feet wide, and 4 to 8 inches high. Pathways between beds can be 12 to 15 inches wide. To ensure water will not be “held up” by the beds if they are on a slope, orient beds with the slope and not across it. Beds should be raked flat across the top. Use newspaper, straw, or bark chips to fill in the shoveled pathways.

If pH has been reduced in the spring, you will be able to plant your blueberries in the well-drained, raised beds without having to wait until wet spring soils are dry enough to till.

Because soils tend to revert back to their natural pH over time, a soil test should be taken every few years. Apply sulfur on the soil surface to keep pH low. Blueberries also need regular fertilization, and a fertilizer such as ammonium sulfate is a good choice because it provides both nitrogen and sulfur.

More information can be found in *Small Fruits in the Home Garden*, circular 1343, from your local U of I Extension office. Or, visit the website, *Small Fruit Crops for the Backyard*, [www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/fruit](http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/fruit).

# Question Corner

Answers provided by Martha Smith, U of I Extension horticulture educator

**Q.** I live south of Murphysboro and have many gardens. I've had an agapanthus for many years; I put it out in the summer in almost full sun; bring it in in the fall. I have lots of leaves but no bloom, ever! I also have the same problem with a new plant, a seashell vine. It climbed up a pipe, and the leaves were numerous but very few flowers. Any ideas for me to try?

**A.** Unfortunately, more information is needed about these plants. You say you have had your agapanthus for years and put it out in the summer; so, we're assuming it is in a container. If it has been in the same container for years, it may be pot bound and needs to be divided. You also want to avoid high nitrogen fertilizers since nitrogen promotes green leafy growth rather than flowers.

The problem with common names like Seashell vine is the same plant may be commonly called something else in another state. A search did not lead to anything with a common name of Seashell Vine—instead it lead to two very different plants. *Vigna caracalla*, commonly called corkscrew flower, and *Phaseolus carcalla*, commonly called snail flower. Both are vines. Without knowing exactly what you have, it is difficult to answer your question. References did say that if you fertilize snail flower too much, it will only produce vegetative growth, not floral growth.

**Q.** I have some leftover grass seed and fertilizer that were used on my lawn. Can I keep these through the winter and use them again next spring?

**A.** Most lawn and garden products will still be viable next season provided they are properly stored. Keep grass seed cool and dry. Securely seal opened fertilizer bags so that moisture is not absorbed from the air. Also, store bags in an area where they will be protected from moisture. Pesticide products, especially liquid formulations, should not be allowed to freeze. Put them in a secure storage location away from direct heat or flame, and where children or pets cannot access them. Check the product labels for more precautions.



## Don't Forget . . .

November is the time to apply a winterizer to your lawn.

Winterizers are put on after the last mowing of the year. Since that's difficult to predict, we suggest applying the winterizer on the Saturday before Thanksgiving.

For complete details, pick up the *Fall Lawn Care Guide* at your local U of I Extension office.

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Send your lawn and garden questions to:

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# Native Trees for Your Landscape

Ed Billingsley, guest columnist



Fall is a good time to plant trees, and native trees will thrive in the home landscape. Here are just a few to consider.

River birch, *Betula nigra*, are not bothered by the borer that attacks white birch. They make great clump plantings and survive in wet soil conditions. Their papery bark is an added bonus.

The sugar maple, also called hard maple, *Acer saccharum*, is a slow-growing tree with brilliant yellow fall color. It can survive ice storms and provide decades of great shade.

Black gum, also called the Black Tupelo, *Nyssa sylvatica*, is an attractive shade tree with glossy summer foliage and brilliant fall leaf color. This tree does bear fruit in the fall, so plant it in a corner away from the sidewalk.

Sassafras, *Sassafras albidum*, is an aromatic tree with various leaf shapes. This fast-growing tree is somewhat brittle in wind and ice. Its diverse fall leaf color of yellow, orange, or red is attractive. It does produce fruit that is eaten by birds in the fall, but the fruit is not messy. The tree needs little pruning to direct its growth.

White and green ash trees have been long-time favorites, but the threat of emerald ash borer is serious. So, these trees are not the best choice.

Native trees are adapted to the climate and growing conditions of the region. That means they are more likely to survive and thrive than trees not common to the area.

For more information, log on to *Selecting Trees for Your Home*, [www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/treeselector/](http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/treeselector/)



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