

Keep Toxic Holiday Decorations Away from Children, Pets

Martha Smith, horticulture educator



If you like to use plant material from your backyard for holiday decorating, be extra careful if small children or pets are in the home. Many of the plants we use for decorating have poisonous qualities.

Holly (*Ilex* species) are popular for their bright red berries. But if eaten, they can induce vomiting, diarrhea, and stupor. Reportedly, the berries are extremely bitter and unlikely to be eaten in great quantities.

Ivy foliage (*Hedera helix*) looks lovely when mixed in with holiday greenery. But, be aware of any berries. Berries contain saponins which can cause both a burning sensation in the throat and gastronomic upset with vomiting and diarrhea.

Jerusalem Cherry (*Solanum pseudocapsicum*) fruit or foliage should not be eaten.

Mistletoe (*Phoradendron* species) is a common holiday decoration. Eating a few berries can cause vomiting, diarrhea, and moderate stomach and intestinal pain. In severe cases, there may be labored breathing, dramatically lowered blood pressure, and heart failure.

Yew (*Taxus* species) foliage, bark, and twigs can be toxic if eaten. The seeds are poisonous, too.

Juniper berries are used to flavor gin and as a diuretic. Large or frequent doses may cause digestive irritation or kidney failure.

Bittersweet (*Celastrus scandens*) leaves, roots, and berries are potentially poisonous. They may cause vomiting, diarrhea, chills, and convulsions.

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Time to Mulch Strawberry Plants

Elizabeth Wahle, horticulture specialist

Mulching strawberry plants in the late fall helps prevent winter injury to the crowns and root system. While 6 to 8 inches of snow cover is the best protection, we don't always get the snow in Illinois. So, mulches are used to keep winter injury to a minimum.

The best mulching materials are weed-free straw from cereal grains (wheat, rye, or barley) and pine needles. Avoid hays because they contain the seed heads and other weed seeds that, once germinated, could become a serious weed problem the following spring. Oat straw, lawn clippings, and leaves are also not recommended because they readily compact and have a tendency to smother the strawberry plants.

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A Little Care Can Extend the Life of Garden Tools

David Robson, horticulture educator



Tools are an investment. Some are relatively inexpensive; others seem to cost an arm and a leg for their size. Protect your investment by properly cleaning all of your garden tools before storing them for winter. Most rust occurs during the off-season when tools aren't being used.

To clean rust and debris from metal parts, use a coarse grade of steel wool. Rust-dissolving compounds can be used to remove heavy oxidation residue. Replace damaged handles, and tighten screws. Sand, varnish, and paint tools as needed.

Re-grip handles if necessary (see below). Coat metal parts with oil, and then wipe with an oil-soaked cloth or spray with oil-like compounds. Wipe off excess buildup. Hang tools vertically to prevent freezing and thawing damage to parts.

Grips can be added to handles to reduce the “work” on your hands. Golf wrapping, rubber tubing, or fabric adhesive can be used for added grip. Check hardware, sporting goods, or fabric stores for materials.

Tools should be sharpened yearly for quality use. Pruners, loppers, saws, hoes, and lawn mower blades need a sharp edge to avoid tearing the plant. Use a file, wetting stone, or knife sharpener to get a good edge on the tool. Most hoes should be sharpened to a 30- to 45-degree angle. Try to match the original angle on pruners and loppers. The same applies for mower blades. Mower blades differ depending on types; mulcher mowers have a steeper angle than non-mulchers.

To keep your lawn and garden equipment in top shape, follow this maintenance schedule for winter storage.

MOWERS—Sharpen blades *at least* twice a year. If your mower is used to mulch leaves in the fall, you may need to sharpen the blades a couple more times. Drain gasoline in the fall or run the engine until no gasoline remains. If machines have oil, drain and replace with fresh oil. Check the oil level throughout the season. Clean the upper and lower mower decks of caked-on grass and soil. Remove rust and repaint if necessary. Coat the deck with oil to prevent rusting during the winter. Tighten bolts and screws that hold the handle in place.

HOSES—Thoroughly drain hoses. Check connectors and replace damaged ones. If connectors are non-brass, coat lightly with an oil-based product. Re-coil and hang hoses, preferably indoors. It helps to drain the hose on a slope to make sure all water is removed. Gather sprinklers and nozzles and dry thoroughly. Coat metal parts with an oil-based product and store indoors if possible. Replace gaskets as needed or at least every two years.

ROTOTILLERS—Thoroughly clean, making sure you remove all caked-on soil. Change the oil and drain the gasoline. Overhaul the engine if needed.

HAND TOOLS—Inspect completely. Replace handles or blades if necessary. Make sure implements are clean and free from pitch, resin, and soil. Coat metal parts with an oil-based product. Tighten screws and springs. Hang vertically to store.

Finally, make a list of replacement tools and look for sales. Many stores discount their tools in the fall to avoid carrying them through the off season.

Tools also make great gifts. Just make sure you ask that special person what tools are needed rather than give an item that is unnecessary or unusable.

Question Corner

Q. With all the talk about contaminated spinach, I'm wondering if it's safe to put manure on my vegetable garden.

A. Martha Smith, Extension horticulture educator, says that animal manures have long been used as a soil amendment to provide nutrients to crops. Besides feeding the plants, manures also improve soil health.

The concern deals with contaminants found in manures that are used as fertilizer around edible crops. Salmonella, E. coli, and other pathogens can be found in animal manures. For this reason, you need to handle manure cautiously when using it around food crops.

Rather than using raw manures, use manure that has been well composted. Also, do not use manures from meat eaters such as cats, dogs, or humans.

When handling fresh manures, wear protective gloves, a long-sleeve shirt, pants, and closed-toe shoes.

Compost fresh manures with other materials at a carbon-to-nitrogen ratio between 25:1 and 40:1. Keep the temperature of this mixture between 131°F. and 170°F. for 15 days, turning the pile a minimum of five times. High temperatures over time are required to kill the contaminants.

For more information on backyard composting visit: <http://web.extension.uiuc.edu/homecompost/>



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Timing of the mulch application is critical. Strawberry leaves are still active well into late autumn, and applying mulch too early in the fall can reduce the plant's ability to produce and store food reserves needed for winter survival. If the mulch is applied too soon, before plants are dormant, the mulch can cause rotting of the leaves and crowns. If mulch is delayed too late, low temperatures could damage crowns.

The best time to apply mulch is after the strawberry plants have experienced several light frosts, but before temperatures drop to 20 degrees, at which point injury can occur. After several light frosts, the leaves attached to the crown should begin to flatten out, signaling the time to mulch. In Illinois, this is usually the last of November.

Apply mulch 3 to 4 inches deep over the plant rows. One bale of straw pulled apart should cover about 100 square feet. In the spring when temperatures begin to warm, remove the mulch as soon as there are signs of new leaf growth under it. The mulch can be forked off or hand removed, and placed in the row middles or aisles. But, don't remove all the mulch. Keep approximately one-fourth of the mulch in the planting row to aid in weed control, moisture conservation, and to keep the berries free of splashed dirt. The strawberry plants will be able to grow through this light covering of mulch.

The mulch in the aisle makes the strawberry bed much more accessible during wet weather, and it also helps smother weeds. Mulch kept in the aisle is also readily available should you need to re-cover the plants during cold periods in the spring. Strawberry plants should be re-covered any time the temperature is expected to drop below 32 degrees, then uncovered again as soon as temperatures rise above freezing.

Ornamental Grass: To Cut or Not to Cut

David Robson, horticulture educator



The foliage of warm-season ornamental grasses like Miscanthus turn brown with the first heavy freeze in the late fall. When this occurs, you have two choices. You can either let the dry foliage stand through the winter as a unique feature

in the landscape, or you can cut the ornamental grass foliage to a 4-inch height.

Ornamental grasses need to be cut back sometime during the dormant season. If you leave the grass standing through the winter, it needs to be cut back by early March before new spring growth starts. If you don't cut it back, spring growth will be delayed, and the plants will look messy as the growing season progresses.

That being said, not all grasses need to be cut back. New plantings of cool-season grasses may not need clipping until the end of their second growing season. In some situations, cool-season grasses may not require cutting back if they maintain an acceptable appearance.

Most grasses should be cut back to within a few inches of the ground. In a small garden, hand pruners work well. In larger areas, a string trimmer or electric hedge trimmers can do an adequate job.

For more information about ornamental grasses, log on to <http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/grasses/>.



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