



In the Garden

Holiday Gardening

Inside this issue:

Dig This...	1
Perfect Poinsettias	2
Using Antidessicants	3
For the Birds!	3
Try a Live Christmas Tree This Year	4
Holiday Gifts for Gardeners	5

Welcome to the last issue of *In the Garden* for 2009. It's been a strange year for gardeners in southwest Connecticut – a cool, wet summer; a warmer than normal fall; and late blight that decimated tomato crops, among other things. But gardeners are an optimistic bunch and most of us are already making plans for a bigger, better garden next year. And *In the Garden* will be there with you. We'll be taking a short break over the winter (although you'll see a brief, online issue in February) before our first

Spring issue in April. You'll also notice a different look to the newsletter next year – things are always changing here at *In the Garden!* But one thing that won't change is the mix of articles, product and plant reviews, how-to guides, and updates on local events.

In this issue we focus on the holiday season, with articles on –

- buying and caring for poinsettias,
- the do's and don't's of decorating with a live

Christmas tree,

- feeding wild birds,
- using antidessicants, and
- holiday gift ideas for gardeners.

Here's wishing all of you a fabulous holiday and pleasant gardening dreams!

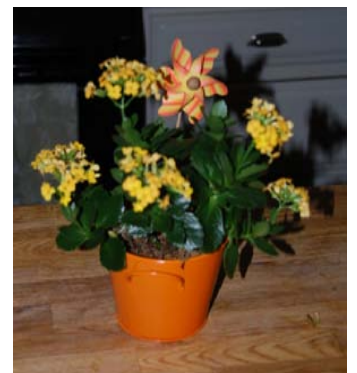
Monica Hemingway
Editor

We'd love to hear from you - send us an email at info@thegardenerslist.com.

Dig This...

As you luxuriate in the warm steam of your morning shower, think about your poor houseplants in the cool, dry air of your house. Most houseplants are tropicals – they enjoy the warmth and humidity of a shower as much as you do. So next time, leave

the water on a while longer (not too hot!) and give your houseplants a shower. It will water them, clean their leaves, and give them the humidity they crave.



Perfect Poinsettias

Poisonous Poinsettias?

Contrary to popular belief, poinsettias are not poisonous. Extensive testing by The Ohio State University, in cooperation with the Society of American Florists, clearly showed that poinsettias are not toxic, even at levels far in excess of what a person could possibly ingest. According to the POISINDEX Information Service, the primary information resource used by most poison control centers, a 50-pound child could safely eat over 500 poinsettia bracts without experiencing toxic effects. Of course, the child might have a bit of a stomach ache after eating that many “leaves”!



Poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) are one of the staples of the holiday season, appearing in stores late November in a wide range of colors, from the familiar red to pastel yellow and even vibrant bicolors. They're beautiful, easy to care for, and long-lasting – if you know how. To keep your poinsettias blooming brightly through the holidays, follow these simple tips.

Buying Your Poinsettia

- Contrary to common belief, the colored, leaf-shaped parts of the poinsettia are not the flowers. These are the bracts, and they should have little or no green around the edges.
- The true blooms are found at the base of the bracts. Buds should be tightly-clustered and have no yellow pollen (pollen indicates an older plant that may be past its prime).
- Avoid plants with yellow, greenish-white, missing, or drooping leaves, as well as plants with faded, torn, or discolored bracts. Foliage should be deep green and dense, and the plant should be stocky and well-branched. Look for a plant with a height that's roughly 2 ½ times the width of the pot.
- As with any plant, make sure your poinsettia is free from insects and diseases.
- Stay away from poinset-

tias on display in overcrowded conditions or those that are wrapped in protective sleeves. This is usually a sign that they haven't been properly cared for and they're likely to fade quickly.

- Look for a plant with relatively moist but not waterlogged soil. Wet soil can cause poinsettia roots to rot.
- Cover the plant before taking it home (e.g., with a protective paper or plastic sleeve), especially if temperatures are less than 50°F as exposure to cold can quickly kill a poinsettia.

Caring For Your Poinsettia

Light - Poinsettias need a minimum of 6 hours of bright (but not direct) sunlight each day. A sunny south, east, or west facing window is perfect. Turn the pot a quarter turn once a week to give each side of the plant enough light and to encourage symmetrical growth.

Temperature – Ideal temperatures for a poinsettia are between 65 and 70F, although slightly lower temperatures at night (down to 60F) help the plant maintain its brilliant color. Higher and lower temperatures will shorten the plant's life and cold (below 50F) may kill it. Generally speaking, if the temperature is comfortable for you, it's

comfortable for your poinsettia.

Place poinsettias away from all drafts (both hot and cold) and never allow the leaves to touch a cold window as this can injure the leaves and cause premature leaf drop.

Water – Poinsettias like moist, but not wet, soil. Check the soil daily and water the plant whenever the surface feels dry to the touch. Add water until it drains out the bottom of the pot (if the plant is wrapped in decorative foil, punch holes in the bottom or cut the bottom off). Immediately discard any excess water in the saucer. Both over- and under-watering will cause poinsettias to wilt, lose leaves and bracts, and eventually die.

Fertilizer – Do not fertilize poinsettias while they are in bloom. If you want to keep your poinsettia past the holiday season, you may fertilize it once a month with a balanced, all-purpose fertilizer after it has finished blooming.

Using Antidesiccants

In late fall, many gardeners spray their evergreens with antidesiccants (also called antitranspirants). Why? To stop or reduce the amount of water lost through the leaves during the winter when the ground is frozen and the plant cannot take up enough water through its roots. The question some ask, though, is whether or not antidesiccants are really necessary. By siting the plant in a protected area, watering regularly, and mulching heavily, the plant may well be able to draw sufficient water from the ground throughout the cold season. But, if that doesn't describe the location or situa-

tion of your prized rhododendron or pieris, an antidesiccant may make the difference in spring between a healthy and floriferous plant or one that's shriveled and brown along the leaf margins.

Always read the directions carefully before using an antitranspirant. Some plants should never be sprayed with these products, including plants with a bluish waxy leaf coating. This coating is a natural antidesiccant that is washed away when sprayed with man-made antidesiccants, along with the bluish color. Only spray when temperatures are above



(Above) Rhododendron showing leaf damage after a winter without antidesiccant protection.

freezing. The best winter protection is achieved by spraying in late fall (here in southwestern Connecticut it's not too late to spray as temperatures are still quite mild) and again toward the end of winter (on a warmer day).

For The Birds

As winter arrives, so too do a number of wild birds that you may not have seen during the summer. To keep them healthy and safe, provide the kinds of feeders and food that they prefer, remove nearby cat hiding places, and keep your feeders clean. Birds are more likely to eat from feeders that are placed close to trees or large shrubs and are near a source of clean water. According to the National

Bird-Feeding Society, these are the birds you're most likely to see at some of the common feeder types here in southwest Connecticut.

Tube Feeder – chickadee, house and purple finch, American goldfinch, nuthatch, pine siskin, tufted titmouse

Hopper Feeder – chickadee, nuthatch, tufted titmouse, woodpecker

Platform Feeder – chickadee, mourning dove, grosbeak, blue jay, dark-eyed junco, nuthatch, sparrow, tufted titmouse, eastern towhee, woodpecker

Thistle / Nyger® Feeders – finches, pine siskin

Suet Feeder – nuthatch, woodpecker, Carolina wren



Learn more about feeding wild birds. Visit the National Bird-Feeding Society at www.birdfeeding.org

Try a Live Christmas Tree This Year

Ready to try something a little different this year? How about a live Christmas tree? Not only are they beautiful, they're an environmentally friendly alternative to the typical cut (i.e., dead) tree. But live trees take a little more effort and care if you want them to survive the holidays. Here's how to ensure your live tree provides not only a beautiful decorative accent over the holidays, but also a focal point in the garden for years to come.

- Buy a tree that will adapt well to your climate. Don't assume that just because it's sold in your area that it will grow there.
- Live trees are often sold balled and burlapped, although some are potted up or grown in containers.
- Live trees are very heavy. A six foot tall balled and burlapped tree will weigh as much as 250 pounds. Be sure you have help moving it (a dolly works well).
- Leave your tree outside for three or four days in an unheated, sheltered area (e.g., garage, enclosed porch) out of the wind and sun. Don't let it freeze. This process is necessary to slowly acclimatize the tree to warmer temperatures and avoid a sudden growth spurt when it's brought inside.
- Check the tree for in-

sects and insect egg masses. A friend of mine once found her gorgeous live tree, carefully placed in the living room, covered with shimmering gossamer threads. It was absolutely beautiful but the tiny spiders cascading down the tree were not welcome holiday guests!

- Place the tree in a cool location in your home, away from heating ducts, fireplaces, or radiators.
- Put the tree in a large pot or tub (nothing with drainage holes!). If necessary, stabilize the tree with rocks, bricks, or mulch. Do not remove the burlap, twine/strapping, or pot.
- Keep the root ball moist but not soggy. Unlike a cut tree, you probably do not need to water the tree every day. Mulch packed around the root ball will help keep a balled and burlapped root ball moist. Do not add fertilizer or any nutrients to the water.
- Decorate the tree with care so as to not damage any branches. If you use lights, use LED lights that don't give off heat.
- Keep the tree inside for no more than 10 days (some experts suggest only 4 days).
- After Christmas, place the tree back outside in a sheltered location for a few days to allow it to acclimatize to the cooler temperatures.
- At this point you can plant the tree. If the ground isn't frozen, dig a hole about twice as wide as the root ball and 1" – 2" shallower than the root ball is tall. If you were planning ahead, you would have dug the planting hole while temperatures were more moderate and saved the soil in a protected location so that it doesn't freeze (a wheelbarrow in the garage works well for this).
- If the ground is frozen and you can't dig a planting hole, place the tree in a protected area and carefully pack straw, bags of leaves, or mulch around the root ball to prevent it from freezing. Make sure you keep the root ball moist until the tree can be planted.
- If the tree is in a pot, carefully remove the pot before planting. For a balled and burlapped tree, remove any jute twine around the tree trunk (if the twine is nylon, remove it all), cut off the wire basket (if there is one), and pull back the top 1/3 of the burlap before placing the root ball in the planting hole (keep the root ball intact).
- Back fill with the soil you removed from the planting hole and water thoroughly (but don't flood the planting hole, particularly if the ground is frozen as this can create a ball of ice in the root



Christmas Trees (Continued)

ball from freezing.

- If you can, stake the tree to stop it from rocking back and forth in the ground over the winter.



Holiday Gifts For Gardeners

With the garden put to rest for the year, gardeners are already thinking about next year.... Here are some wonderful gift ideas for the gardener on your list – or for yourself!

Potlifter—This is one of those tools you don't think you need – until you need it. It's a simple contraption that allows two people to easily move anything heavy, from large pots to bags of mulch, tree stumps, and large rocks. www.potlifter.com
\$29.95

Wildflower Seed Balls—These clay balls are packed with wildflower seeds. To start a wildflower garden, simply toss the ball onto the ground and water well. That's it! The ball will shatter and scatter clay-covered seeds in all directions. The clay prevents wind and birds from taking the seeds and before you know it, seedlings

will emerge. There are also balls filled with seeds for plants that attract hummingbirds. Each package comes with about 16 seed balls. www.gardeners.com
\$16.95

Gardener's Journal – The Gardener's Journal from Lee Valley is a ten-year perpetual diary that you can start at any time. There are separate pages for each day of the year, along with reference material, charts, and plenty of pages to list your inventory of perennials, plantings, harvests, etc., draw garden plans, and track changes to your garden. It's fascinating to read about what happened in your garden years ago and compare that with today. Hardcover. www.leevalley.com
\$39.50

Hori Hori Knife—This is probably the tool I use most in my garden. A cross between a knife and a trowel, I've used this tool for planting, edging, trans-planting, cutting through roots, removing deep-rooted weeds, dividing perennials, etc. Traditionally used in Japan to collect specimens for bonsai (*hori* means "digging"), the Lee Valley hori hori has a heavy steel blade that is dished, with a serrated edge on one side and a sharpened edge on the other. www.leevalley.com
\$28.50 for stainless steel, including a belt sheath.

Egg Bird Feeder—Tired of the same old bird feeders? The J Schatz Egg Bird Feeder is like a piece of functional modern art for the garden. It comes in eight bright, glossy colors, holds 8 cups of



Continued on page 6....

The Gardeners' List

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We're on the Web! Visit us at www.thegardenerslist.com, read our blog at www.gardenjunkiesblog.com, or follow us on Twitter @GardenJunkie!

Local gardening resources for Stamford, Greenwich, Norwalk and surrounding areas

In the Garden is a publication of The Gardeners' List, a website created specifically to serve gardeners in lower Fairfield County, CT. www.thegardenerslist.com provides information and resources of interest to gardeners of all types, from first-timers to those who have been gardening their entire life. The website includes listings and reviews of local gardening-related providers, a plant exchange forum, and information on everything from invasive plants to Master Gardening programs to soil testing, growing from seeds, and green gardening. If you're not sure where to find something for your garden, just look at The Gardeners' List!

Holiday Gifts for Gardeners (Continued)

birdseed, and stands up to even extreme weather conditions. Not into eggs? There's also the incredible mobile bird feeder collection. A little pricy but a gorgeous and unusual addition to the garden. www.jschatz.com
\$135—\$185

Matchstick Garden—The Matchstick Garden is a real match book in which each match has seeds glued to its tip. Simple tear off a match, plant it in soil (in the garden or a pot), add a little water, and watch it grow. A fun stocking stuffer.

www.ahamodernliving.com
\$2.50

