

NORTH COAST YARD & GARDEN

HORTICULTURAL NEWS AND INFORMATION FOR THE OHIO GARDENER

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IN MY GARDEN

The return of spring offers the chance to reestablish a benevolent dictatorship over the garden. Like most despots, my leadership is fickle. I will take affirmative action for a favored perennial. It will have all obstacles swept from its path, and will receive fertilizer and water like manna from heaven. If the same perennial should take hold, prosper, and begin to encroach upon the arbitrary boundaries I have established, I may issue a decree of containment, forcing the parent plant to watch as its children and grandchildren are casually executed. If the plant becomes an aggressor and begins invading its peaceful neighbors, I quickly declare total war, advocating the genocide of the species as a final solution to its weedy endeavors.

It sounds harsh, but rest assured, my goals are benign. I envision a perfect garden, a utopia where I grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, where plants live in harmony, are arrayed in splendor, and bear fruit. Then I can walk in my garden in the cool of the day, and see that it is good. Other gardeners will sing hymns of praise to my glorious creation.

I know that this will never come to pass. The wet Ohio clay that floods in spring will become cracked and parched in summer. I know that I will spend my days on my belly, eating dust, battling thorns and thistles, wiping the sweat from my face and believing that the ground is cursed. Late

frosts will destroy blossoms and crops, and I will be plagued with blights and insects. What else can I do but vent my wrath on the weeds, crush slugs beneath my heel, and rain malathion down upon the beetles? The ungrateful plants that are ungrateful to me should rightfully be wiped from the face of the earth.



My dream of establishing paradise in my backyard continues, but my megalomania has tempered. I can not spend eternity in my garden. Predatory insects serve as my messengers as they feed on aphids, mites and caterpillars. I must stay my hand with the pesticides so that I do not destroy the righteous with the wicked. If a leaf or branch is diseased, I will cut off the offending limb before the whole tree is destroyed. Spreading plants that creep along the ground exclude weeds, so that a stray seed will not find fertile ground. Some forces of nature can be bent, if only slightly, to more closely align with my plans. Maybe then, my will shall be done.

FEATURED SHRUB

LINDERA BENZOIN



Spicebush is one of my favorite shrubs. It is native to Ohio and eastern North America, and it is one of the first shrubs to bloom in my landscape. Like many of the spring-blooming witch hazels (*Hamamelis vernalis*), it has fragrant yellow flowers that appear early in the season, fragrant wood, fruit and foliage, and the leaves turn a brilliant yellow in the fall. Both prefer full sun or slight shade and require moist conditions. Spicebush, however, is in the laurel family, which includes cinnamon, bay laurel (the source of bay leaves), avocados and sassafras. Witch hazels form a family of their own.

The greenish-yellow flowers appear a few days after the flowers of cornelian cherry dogwood (*Cornus mas*), and resemble cornelian flowers closely. Both flowers are little chartreuse puffballs that line the bare stems. Even the fruit of spicebush looks like cornelian cherries: shiny dark red elongated berries, smaller than the *Cornus* fruits but equally favored by birds. Spicebush and cornelian cherry are also in separate families.

Spicebush is dioecious, meaning that individual plants form all male or all female

flowers. My shrub is female because I do get berries, so a male spicebush must be close enough for insects to carry pollen.



The leaves give off a spicy fragrance, as do the flowers, stems and fruit. Its scent is similar to cinnamon, and a bit peppery, but more mellow than either one. It is closer to the scent of bayberry (*Myrica pensylvanica*), but cleaner, sweeter and crisper. Every time I pass by the bush, I have to stroke its leaves to release its aroma. The fruit is edible, and was sometimes dried and powdered as a substitute for allspice. Some people make tea from the twigs, especially in spring when the shrub is in bloom, since the rising sap and flower nectar is said to make the tea sweeter. Some folks used to enjoy chewing the young bark for its sweet and spicy flavor.

Spicebush is a host plant for caterpillars of spicebush swallowtail (*Papilio cresphontes*) and eastern tiger swallowtail (*Papilio glaucus*) butterflies. I was first interested in this shrub to attract the butterflies, but it makes an excellent addition to any landscape. It is one of the first shrubs to bloom in spring. The leaves turn a clear, bright butter-yellow in the fall. When the leaves fall off, the bright berries provide interest until robins, mockingbirds and catbirds pluck it clean.

FEATURED DISORDER

WINTER KILL

The most frequent problem I am seeing in gardens now is winter die back, especially on broadleaved evergreens. When the ground is frozen, roots can not absorb water to replace moisture lost from the leaves. Leaves exposed to winter winds are likely to dry out and begin to die back from the tips. If the drying continues long enough, the stems and buds can also dry out and die. Winter die back seldom kills the plant. Even if some branches die, the effect is the same as a light pruning. The dead parts can be trimmed out as the rest of the plant puts out new growth.

Since our last winter began with very mild temperatures that continued through to late January, plants were less prepared than they should have been for the typical winter cold. Every winter produces some die back, but this weather pattern seemed to cause more damage than usual.

Freeze dried leaves are generally still green, but definitely dry, and often crispy. On rhododendrons, the leaves start to dry around the outer margins, turning the affected areas red, brown or purple. These leaves will turn brown and fall off as the plant growth resumes in spring.



Daffodils and other spring-flowering bulbs that had sent up their leaves in January had the ends of their strappy leaves browned and shriveled. Those parts of the leaves that stuck out above the snow were unprotected from wind damage, while the sunlight and reflected sun off the snow increased the drying effects. They will still bloom normally.



Small evergreens such as low shrubby junipers, also present browned tips attached to healthy foliage. In some cases this was on branches that poked up through the snow cover. Sometimes the weight of the snow cracks or breaks the stems enough to turn the branches brown even though they are still mostly attached. Trim off any dead or damaged twigs and the bush will look fine again.



TURF TALK

Forsythias are in full bloom so it is time to apply fertilizer with crabgrass preventer to the lawn. Remember to keep crabgrass preventer away from areas you want to put grass seed, or it will kill the young sprouts.

Fertilizer is a big help to spring lawns, especially those that have been damaged by snow mold. The heavy snow cover from the Valentine's Day storm persisted long enough to promote mold, and some lawns have temporary bare patches. Fertilizer will get the grass growing again and the spots will quickly fill in.

The lawnmower is in for some heavy work, so it is a good idea to have it serviced soon. At the very least, sharpen the blades to the lawn is cut, not torn. Spring lawns grow quickly, so be prepared to mow up to twice a week. Have the blades sharpened again when the growth slows in early summer, or if the grass blades look shredded on the ends. Tall fescue lawns seem to be harder on mower blades, so be vigilant with this routine maintenance. Even healthy lawns take on a brownish haze when the mower blades are dull.

GARDEN CALENDAR

- April is National Lawn and Garden Month and National Landscape Architecture Month
- National Gardening Week is the 2nd full week of April, the 8th – 14th.

- April 1st is National Replot your Plant Day.
- Start seeds indoors for eggplants, lettuce, peppers, basil, tomatoes and collards.
- Sow seeds outdoors for peas, spinach, collards, broccoli, cauliflower, kale, cabbage and parsley.
- Transplant broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts and parsley to the outdoor garden.
- Protect transplants from heavy frost and freezes with row covers.
- Divide summer-blooming perennials as they begin to grow.
- Plant trees and shrubs in April while they are still dormant.
- Purchase annuals and vegetables for planting after frost
- Resume fertilizing houseplants now that there is more than 12 hours of daylight.
- Apply lawn fertilizer with crabgrass preventer while forsythia is in bloom. Make sure no crabgrass preventer is applied where you plan to plant turf grass.
- Sharpen mower blades before the first cutting.
- Sow grass seed in bare spots
- Hummingbirds begin to return to the North Coast around April 15th, so have nectar feeders filled and out in the garden by then.
- Keep nyjer (thistle) feeders full as goldfinches will soon begin to molt into their bright yellow summer plumage.



ROGER S. BOLGER HAS OVER TEN YEARS OF PROFESSIONAL HORTICULTURAL EXPERIENCE AND HAS GARDENED ALL HIS LIFE IN NORTHEAST OHIO. HE HAS GIVEN DOZENS OF GARDENING TALKS AND SPECIALIZES IN WOODY PLANTS, PERENNIALS, TURF, ENTOMOLOGY, INTEGRATED PEST MANAGEMENT, ORGANIC GARDENING, PONDS AND BACKYARD WILDLIFE.

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