

NORTH COAST YARD & GARDEN

HORTICULTURAL NEWS AND INFORMATION FOR THE OHIO GARDENER

BY ROGER S. BOLGER
Roger@RogerBolger.com



1 DECEMBER 2006
VOLUME 1, NUMBER 8

IN MY GARDEN

The last week has been wonderful and almost summer like with sunshine and high temperatures near 70° F. Gardeners were in high gear getting their yards cleaned up – mulching leaves to insulate perennial beds, giving lawns their winter fertilizer, cutting down the last of the perennials, pruning grapes and fruit trees, and putting up Christmas decorations. Hopefully your garden is ready for winter as well.

The last of the season's vegetables have found their way to the table. Brussels sprouts are much better fresh than frozen, especially picked and steamed within the hour. After a hard frost, the stored sugars enhance the mild cabbage - mustard flavor into a bittersweet autumn treat.

Fresh horseradish, dug from the garden and ground the same day, can not be compared to the stuff from a jar. I grind it medium-fine in a little bit of apple cider vinegar and some coarse salt. The acid in the vinegar regulates the spiciness of the horseradish – more vinegar, less heat. I minimize the amount of vinegar by straining the grounds and reusing the liquid on the next batch. The juice is like milk, and smells so sweet from the roots' stored sugars that I have to keep tasting it. The aroma of the ground horseradish flesh, on the other hand, can clear the sinuses like a shot of mace. The trial of preparing the horseradish pays off with a few months of



a seasoning so hot and sweet that I want the condiment more than the dish.

The final tomatoes of the year, picked when totally green and ripened on the kitchen counter, might as well be store-bought, as they are bland, plastic imitations of an honest, just-picked, sun-warmed fruit of the vine. But with eight more months before I can savor a tart, meaty-juicy fresh tomato, I will take what I can get.

WHAT'S NEW ON ROGERBOLGER.COM

This month there are more than twice as many free gardening fact sheets available. The [Books](#) page lists many references I enjoy and use to advise clients. For a limited time, all [back issues](#) of North Coast Yard & Garden are available for download. Don't forget to [email me](#) with your gardening questions for free advice. Check my [home page](#) often for the latest horticulture news. Recent stories include the announcement of 2007's All-American daylily, a new landscape tree that produces flowers and edible nuts, and the latest expansion of the emerald ash borer quarantine.

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

CARING FOR CHRISTMAS TREES

Nothing beats the look and fragrance of natural Christmas trees. Purchasing a “real” Christmas tree is actually beneficial to the environment because trees are farm-raised as a renewable resource, and the tree farm provides shelter for wildlife during the several years it takes to grow them to full size. Artificial trees are difficult to recycle and often end up in landfills. To get the most out of your holiday tree, follow these tips.

CUT CHRISTMAS TREES

The first decision to make is which species of tree you would like. Look at the various trees available to get a sense of the color, shape and texture that you prefer. In general, fir trees such as Fraser, balsam and Canaan firs have soft, short needles with plenty of fragrance. Douglasfirs are not true fir trees, but have a similar appearance with fainter aroma. Spruces have strong branches with short, stiff needles that can be painful while decorating the tree. White pines are very soft with extra long needles, but their branches are very flexible so that heavy ornaments will bend them considerably. Scotch pines have shorter needles and stronger branches than white pines, and they tend to be less dense, allowing more room for ornaments.

Select a tree that is still pliable and fresh. If you buy a tree off a lot, they will all have been cut at about the same time. Some trees will have dried out more than others, or will be likely to dry out faster in the home. Check the needles by brushing them with your hand, so that the needles bend. If a few needles break off it is all right, but avoid trees that lose several



needles. Next, check the base of the trunk for vertical cracks, which are a sign that the tree has dried rapidly on the lot. Even if the needles seem fresh, the tree will have difficulty absorbing adequate water with vertical cracks in the trunk. Gently but firmly tap the trunk on a solid surface. Some needles will fall off, but reject any tree that leaves a ring of hundreds of needles.

Once you have selected your tree and brought it home, cut at least one inch off the bottom of the trunk. Sap has dried in the vessels at the base of the trunk and will prevent the tree from absorbing water unless this section is removed. Often, cut Christmas trees will have branches almost all the way to the base of the trunk. You may need to saw or lop off some of these branches to allow the trunk to fit in a tree stand. Make sure that the branches are cut very close to the trunk, as branch stubs may interfere with the tree stand.

Choose a tree stand that is sturdy and rated to hold the height and weight of tree you have selected. The stand should also be able to hold at least one gallon of water. Once the fresh cut has been made to the trunk, the tree needs to be in water all the time. The tree will absorb a lot of water in the first few days it is put up, and it is possible that the tree may need to be watered hourly the first day. Check the water level regularly, several times a day the first week and at least twice a day the entire time it is in the house. If the base of the tree is out of water for six hours, another fresh cut must be made. Try to avoid ever letting the trunk sit out of water, but an hour or two should be all right as long as it is not a regular occurrence. You do not want to have to undecorate the tree to make a fresh cut on the trunk, and then redecorate it over again!

I have heard many “secret ingredients” to add to the Christmas tree water to help the tree last longer. These include aspirin, flower preservative, Ironite, sugar, Sprite or 7-Up, and many others. I recommend using plain water. Using an additive sometimes makes people complacent and they neglect to top off the water as often as they should. Sugar and sugary sodas can actually spoil in the stand and produce a foul odor. Ironite may produce rusty water that could stain carpets if spilled. The best practice is to keep the tree stand full of good clean water all the time.

A well-watered tree will actually resist burning, but it is always wise to be careful about fires. Never put the tree near candles, a fireplace, or space heater. Keep the tree away from hot air vents or furnace registers as this will dry the tree faster than the trunk can absorb more water. Always turn the lights off when you are away from home or asleep.

After the holidays, dispose of the Christmas tree by chipping it for mulch. Setting the tree out in the yard until spring allows it to provide shelter for wildlife. If you have a large pond, the tree can be weighted and dropped in the pond to provide shelter for fish and other aquatic life. It will gradually break down and return to the soil.

FEATURED HOUSEPLANT

EUPHORBIA PULCHERREMA

Poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrema*) have been associated with Christmas for centuries. Missionaries to Mexico used this December-flowering plant to decorate their churches during Advent before they were introduced to this country by the first U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Joel Poinsett. Greenhouse growers now produce millions of poinsettias each year, in many colors besides the native red.



Poinsettias prefer bright, indirect sunlight, temperatures around 68° F during the day and 62° F at night, and soil that is moist but not wet. These simple requirements are easy to neglect during the holidays, causing poinsettias to fade or die before their time. Pay attention to the following common errors to keep your plant healthy.

Poinsettias are sensitive to cold. Purchase poinsettias at the last stop of your shopping trip so they are not left in a chilly vehicle. Exposure to temperatures below freezing will cause the leaves to turn black and fall off within 24 hours. Temperatures below 50°F can damage the plant, although less dramatically. Excessive heat is just as bad, especially air from heating vents. The warm, dry air will cause the leaf tips to turn brown and the color to fade.

Poinsettias are often wrapped in foil, or displayed in a decorative pot without drainage. Make sure that no excess water remains in the container after each watering, or the poinsettia will soon wilt and drop its lower leaves. A wilting poinsettia may also be under watered. If the soil is dry and the pot is light, it needs water. If the pot is heavy and the soil is wet, provide better drainage and let the soil dry before watering again.

Contrary to popular belief, poinsettias are not poisonous. After World War I a rumor began to circulate that a child died after eating a poinsettia leaf. Eventually the story was shown to be false, but by then the tale had become common knowledge. While poinsettia sap is mildly irritating and might cause a rash on sensitive areas, a fifty pound child or pet could eat 500 leaves and suffer nothing worse than a stomach ache.

Choose a poinsettia with dark green leaves and dense foliage. Avoid plants with faded, yellowish, torn or sagging leaves. The

small yellow flowers in the center of the red bracts should be tightly clustered. If they have dropped or are shedding yellow pollen grains, the plant is not fresh. Inspect the poinsettia closely to make sure it is free of disease and insects.

Display poinsettias in groups, or with other houseplants. Small-leaved plants like ferns and ivies make good companions. Display poinsettias prominently during gatherings, but be sure to return them to appropriate lighting and temperatures the next day.

GARDEN CALENDAR

- Prepare a planting hole now for a live Christmas tree.
- Prepare your snow blower now so it is ready for the first winter storm.
- Protect garden ornaments from snow and ice by moving them to shelter or covering them.
- Water new evergreens before the ground freezes.
- Spray evergreens with an anti-desiccant to prevent foliage from drying in winter winds.
- Spray trees and shrubs with dormant oil to kill overwintering insects.
- Cut evergreen boughs for holiday decorations.
- Water houseplants less often as daylight decreases and growth slows down.
- Gifts for gardeners: quality tools, garden ornaments, gift certificates.
- Keep cut Christmas trees cool and watered.



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.

© 2006 ROGER S. BOLGER. NORTH COAST YARD AND GARDEN IS PUBLISHED TWICE A MONTH. ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION (24 ISSUES) IS \$20 VIA EMAIL, \$45 FOR US MAIL. SEND CHECK OR MONEY ORDER (PAYABLE TO **ROGER S. BOLGER**) TO: 4200 WEST 229TH ST, FAIRVIEW PARK, OH, 44126