

NORTH COAST YARD & GARDEN

HORTICULTURAL NEWS AND INFORMATION FOR THE OHIO GARDENER

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IN MY GARDEN

We seem to have gone directly into winter when autumn is barely half over. Heavy clouds and rain have made the days as dark as the night. Except a two-day respite early this week, no days had more than 40% sun since mid-month, and six days registered 0% sunshine. We have had over 5 inches of rain in the last part of October, giving us the fifth-wettest October in Cleveland on record. Ice and frost have been a regular sight on plants and cars on several mornings. There are few annuals left that haven't withered, and some shrubs skipped their autumn color and dropped their leaves straight away. A mid-day thundershower on Saturday the 28th featured 3/8-inch graupel (snow pellets) that accumulated to an inch deep in places.

One bright spot has been the increase in bird activity at the feeders. The white-throated sparrows arrived early last month, but it wasn't until the 21st that juncos made their return appearance to the garden. This was right on schedule with previous years. Since then, both juncos and white-throats have been a daily fixture scratching and scavenging fallen seeds beneath the feeders. Around the same time, I saw two birds for the first time in my garden. A male hairy woodpecker, larger cousin of the downy woodpecker, has twice visited a tube-shaped mesh feeder filled with a nut mix. A few days later, a rufous-sided towhee arrived with the juncos and fed with them all morning.



I have a website that I encourage you to visit at <http://www.RogerBolger.com>. It features regularly updated news stories from the world of horticulture on the front page. Also included are the home page for this newsletter and a page of free garden fact sheets that can be viewed, downloaded or printed. The right sidebar has links to useful sites including AccuWeather.com, the Top 100 Gardening Websites, BuckeyeGardening.com, Ohio State University information sites, and emerald ash borer pages. I also list garden professionals and stores I recommend.

The "Free Advice" page lists questions and answers about gardening. I am delighted to take your questions and answer them at no charge. Email me your question through the link or at Roger@RogerBolger.com.

In the next week I will add a page of recommended gardening books and other gardening equipment as an Amazon.com associate. This exciting site is growing fast!

FEATURED SHRUB

CALLICARPA JAPONICA

Yellow leaves and purple flowers are one of my favorite garden color combinations. In spring, I have grape hyacinths (*Muscari*) blooming near the fresh butter yellow foliage of 'Goldmound' spirea. Round clumps of wild violets (*Viola sororia*) complement the yellow and green striped blades of hakone grass (*Hakonechloa macro aureola*). In summer, I enjoy deep violet blooms of 'Petit Faucon' clematis peeking out from the amber foliage of 'Rubidor' weigela. In autumn, I can enjoy this color combination on a single plant.

Japanese beautyberry (*Callicarpa japonica*) starts the year cut to within a few inches of the ground, but quickly grows to a four-foot mound of gracefully arching branches with dark green, almost bluish leaves. In July, clusters of tiny pink flowers appear where the leaves join the branches. These flowers are not very showy, and would be easy to miss if I weren't watching for them as an indicator of the future abundance of the spectacular fruit.

By September, the flower clusters have become coral-lavender clumps of fruits, resembling fantastical porcelain raspberries. But the real show comes a month later when the leaves lighten from dark green to chartreuse, making the purple knots of fruit pop out and demand closer inspection. The color combination is literally good enough to eat, because it is this time of year when I am constantly asked, "Are they edible?" (The berries are not toxic, but do not taste good to humans. Birds love them, and they ripen just in time to attract migrating species.)

Beautyberry will grow in any moist or well-drained soil. They will fruit and color well in



full sun or light shade. The visual effect is amplified if there is enough space to plant them *en masse*, and the cross-pollination ensures ample fruit. With age they tend to become leggy, and they only bloom and fruit on new wood, so it is best to cut them down in winter, or at least remove dead and overgrown branches.

My resident rabbits enjoy starting this job for me as they chew the branches back quite a bit. If you have rabbits and you are planting a new beautyberry, you may want to fence or cage the shrub for the first winter so it is not chewed down into the crown and killed. Deer do not seem to like beautyberry, but your deer may disagree. Once established, grazing animals should not be able to do enough damage to kill it.

I find that the color of the fruit and foliage is best on Japanese beautyberry, but other species are very similar. American beautyberry (*C. americana*) is the only non-Asian and is native to the U.S., but grows larger and has a coarser texture. *Callicarpa bodinieri* is very similar to *C. japonica* and is popular in British gardens. Purple beautyberry (*C. dichotoma*), is considered the most graceful, tends to be smaller than its Japanese cousin, and fruits well as a single specimen. Any of these species would be a wonderful addition to your garden with year-round interest.

FEATURED HOUSEPLANT

SCHLUMBERGERA

When the dark, cold days of winter are upon us, any plant that produces flowers is welcome. Even better if they are extremely easy to grow and propagate. Holiday cactus, often referred to as Thanksgiving cactus, Christmas cactus, or Easter cactus, certainly deliver. This group of cool weather succulents is never stingy with red, pink, purple or white blooms. Some are now available with yellow flowers.

Holiday cacti are recognizable by their arching branches made up of unique flattened stem segments. These segments, called phylloclades, serve the same functions as leaves. *Schlumbergera x buckleyi* is the traditional and original Christmas cactus, and can be recognized by the scalloped edges of its segments. *Schlumbergera truncata* is more commonly seen, and has claw- or tooth-like points on the segments. These plants have been botanically reclassified many times, and may be listed under the genus names *Zygocactus* or *Epiphyllum*.

In nature, holiday cacti grow in tropical rainforests where there is a great deal of rain and humidity. Although they are cacti, they survive all this moisture because they are epiphytes and do not grow in the soil. Instead, they grow in debris that has accumulated in crooks of tree branches, where the rain can quickly drain away. They get all the nutrients they need from rain and additional debris that falls from the tree canopy above.

Their adaptation to a shady habitat makes them suitable for growing indoors. Give them moderate light in the summer and bright light in the winter. Even though they are epiphytic, they will do well in a well-



drained potting soil such as a cactus mix. Water sparingly, just enough to keep the soil barely moist, like a completely wrung-out sponge.

To get holiday cacti to bloom, mimic the dry season in their tropical habitat. Stop fertilizing and keep them in the dark 12 to 14 hours a day. Give only enough water to keep the stems from wrinkling. Keep the temperature no higher than 70°F during the day, and around 55°F at night. An unheated back room with southern or western exposure is ideal. After two months of these conditions the plants should reach full bloom.

If the flower buds fall off, it was either too warm, too dry, or was moved around too much. If you want to display the cactus for a holiday gathering and need to have it in a warm area, expect it to go out of bloom within days of your event.

To make new plants, take a four-segment piece of stem and put the bottom end about one inch down into moist potting soil. Keep the soil moist but not wet, and soon the cutting will have taken root and begin to grow. Holiday cacti may live for decades with proper care and become family heirlooms. Try growing new ones from grandma's cactus, or buy a new plant from a garden center and start a family memory.

FEATURED HOUSEPLANT

HIPPEASTRUM

One of the favorite flowers for the winter holidays is the amaryllis. The true amaryllis is *Amaryllis belladonna* from South Africa, while the commonly grown *Hippeastrum* is its South American cousin.

Pot up amaryllis now for blooms around Christmas. Plant the bulb in a small pot with $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ of the bulb above the soil surface. Keep the soil moist and put it in bright light, preferably a south-facing window. Do not fertilize until after blooming. Keep it warm, between 70° and 75°F until it blooms. Once in flower, cooler temperatures around 65°F will help the flowers last longer.

Amaryllis may not produce leaves until well after blooming. As soon as the flowers begin to fade, trim the stalk down close to the bulb, without cutting the surrounding leaves. Keep the plant in bright light and water and fertilize regularly to keep it actively growing. This is essential to get the bulb to rebloom next year. Once all danger of frost is past, the amaryllis can be gradually acclimated to bright sun and moved outdoors. Keep the outdoor plant well watered until August, then withhold water so the leaves die off and the bulb enters dormancy. Dig it out and store it for eight to ten weeks, and you will be ready to repot it to start the bloom cycle again.

Amaryllis are available in red, pink and white, and can produce huge flowers. They make a festive counterpoint to the traditional holiday poinsettias.



Amaryllis
Hippeastrum species

GARDEN CALENDAR

- Keep bird feeders and suet filled. Newly arriving migrants are establishing their routines now.
- Stake or tie up evergreens now so early wet snowstorms won't cause breakage.
- Protect tree bark with wraps or guards to prevent damage from deer rubbing antlers or rodents chewing bark.
- Top dress lawns with up to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch of compost or manure. This will enrich the soil and reduce thatch.
- Apply a dose of lawn fertilizer after your last mowing. The grass will store the nutrients in the roots for next spring.
- Sharpen mower blades after making the last cut.
- Keep leaves out of the pond and off the lawn. Decaying leaves will foul pond water and kill fish. Grass will be injured after several days under matted leaves, and will die after a few weeks.



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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