

NORTH COAST YARD & GARDEN

HORTICULTURAL NEWS AND INFORMATION FOR THE OHIO GARDENER

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IN MY GARDEN

The annual fall cleanup has begun in earnest. I like to keep the beds looking nice by clearing out plants with declining foliage. Hostas had brown leaves, crocosmias were turning yellow, and joe-pye weed (*Eupatorium*) had powdery mildew, so out they went. Some of the ornamental grasses had flopped over, so they were cut down too. The remaining tomatoes are all gone, as they just didn't thrive this year. I usually leave the seed heads on black-eyed susans (*Rudbeckia*) and coneflowers (*Echinacea*) as winter food for goldfinches. This year some patches were so dense that I cut them down to the basal leaves. Next spring I will thin out those patches to increase air circulation and prevent foliar disease.

The crop of berries for winter wildlife is coming in well. Chokecherries (*Aronia*) are brilliant red. The New Dawn climbing rose has dozens of hips this year, but there are few fruits on the rugosa rose, which I planted specifically for its hips. Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*) had bright red oval fruits in pairs along the stems, eaten up within a week. The last elderberries (*Sambucus*) and cornelian cherries (*Cornus mas*) have been consumed by the birds. In weedy areas, pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*) and nightshade (*Solanum dulcamara*) are producing human-deadly but bird-tasty berries. My sweetbay magnolia (*M. virginiana*) produced its first fruit this year. Bayberry (*Myrica pensylvanica*), cranberry



cotoneaster and crabapples are plentiful. Lavender fruits of the beautyberry (*Callicarpa*) are coming on in abundance, and will nicely set off the foliage when it turns chartreuse in coming weeks. Beautyberry is not a first choice for birds, but in January when their favorites are gone they will return for these nutritious but presumably non-tasty morsels.

I killed a section of lawn that was plagued with creeping bentgrass in late August, and planted turf-type tall fescue on September 17th. It is now up one or two inches, and looking good. The cooling weather has me concerned, but as long as there are no unseasonable hard frosts or freezes it should come in well. I expect to give it its first mowing in another week. Once leaves fall in earnest, it will be important to keep them picked up off the new grass. The seedlings will need as much light as they can get to establish a good root system and harden off for the winter. I will still fertilize this section of lawn when I put winter fertilizer on the rest of the lawn in a month. The new and old grass will store all the nutrients in the root system over winter, giving it a powerful boost in spring.

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

PLANTS FOR CLAY

A creek ran through our neighborhood's back yards 80 or 90 years ago, and when the lots were divided it was filled with clay. This makes the back very wet in the spring and very dry in the summer. Sometimes there is standing water from March to May, but by July the clay is rock hard with inch-wide cracks. When I first bought the property, I could amend the soil with compost, manure, and other organic matter to help the clay drain in wet weather and accept moisture in a drought. Now that it is planted up, I have to make do with the few inches of decent topsoil I have created.

It has been a challenge to find plants that will tolerate both extremes. Plants that took the water in spring wilted all summer, and plants that thrived in the heat rotted in the cold, damp winter soil. One year I read that some parts of the American prairies had a similar annual succession of wet and dry. Many prairie plants have extremely deep roots that can partially rot at the lowest ends in the wet spring, and then grow back in search of water in the dry summer. This cycle of roots thrusting down into the clay and then partially rotting also adds organic matter to the subsoil, improving drainage. I planted up a bed with prairie perennials, and some are my best performers to date.

- Bee balm (*Monarda*) – Taller varieties are best for the back of the border to hide leggy stems.
- Black-eyed susan (*Rudbeckia*) – Reliable performer and spreader. New plantings must be protected or rabbits will chew them to the ground.
- Blanketflower (*Gaillardia*) – Doesn't over-winter well for me, but the intense red and yellow patterns on the flowers are worth replanting each year.



- Coneflower (*Echinacea*) – New orange and yellow varieties add to the pinkish-purple and white. Another favorite for rabbit salad when first planted.
- Coreopsis – Wide variety of colors, shapes and sizes.
- Fringetree (*Chionanthus*) – Blooms with lacy white fronds in late spring. Females, if pollinated, produce one-inch bluish egg-shaped fruits for birds.
- Gayfeather (*Liatris*) – Purple or white flower spikes in late summer. Dependable with deep roots.
- Iris – Loves the wet and usually dies back in summer anyway.
- Maiden grass (*Miscanthus*) – Choose only one of the wide variety of colors and forms for your garden. If two or more types are planted it will cross-pollinate and produce many seedlings.
- Sedge (*Carex*) – Colorful foliage.
- Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*) – Host plant for the caterpillars of spicebush swallowtail butterflies. Butter yellow fall color, red berries relished by birds, and fragrant foliage.
- Stonecrop (*Sedum*) – Tolerates wet best with full sun.
- Sweet pepperbush (*Clethra alnifolia*) – Fragrant flowers and yellow fall foliage. Attracts bees and butterflies.
- Switchgrass (*Panicum*) – A native grass offered with red- or blue-tinged foliage. This grass always flops for me, but I found that cutting it to the ground in June produces a shorter, stiffer plant.

FEATURED INSECT

PRAYING MANTIS

Since I try to attract wildlife to the yard, I avoid using insecticides as much as possible. Insects form the basis of the food chain for larger animals like frogs, toads, birds and mammals. Some insects are appealing in their own right, such as butterflies, lightning bugs, and singing crickets and katydids. The praying mantis is one of my favorite interesting insects. They are large, easy to observe, and exhibit fascinating behaviors. Ohio has three common mantises: Carolina mantis (*Stagmomantis carolina*), the smallest and only native species; European mantis (*Mantis religiosa*); and Chinese mantis (*Tenodera aridifolia sinensis*), the largest species, reaching six inches long. Contrary to popular belief, none are endangered, nor are they protected by Ohio or federal law. Each year I purchase some mantis egg cases to ensure I will find some in my garden. Nearly all egg cases sold commercially are Chinese mantises.

The name “mantis” is Greek for “diviner” or “prophet”, most likely due to its posture that resembles hands folded in prayer. The term “mantid” means the same as mantis, and this name is becoming more common as it is easier to say “mantids” than “mantises”. Technically, the plural of mantis is “mantes,” but “mantises” is also acceptable. They are sometimes referred to as “preying” mantises due to their hunting skills.

Often considered a beneficial insect, mantises are really neutral because they feed primarily on crickets, bees, spiders and predatory wasps, rather than plant-damaging bugs. They have also been known to eat butterflies, frogs, toads, and newts. There have been a few documented

cases of a mantis killing and eating mice and hummingbirds. They typically wait in ambush until their victim is close enough to grasp in their forelegs. Sometimes they will gently undulate as if mimicking a leaf swaying in the wind. Now and then they will stalk up on their prey. Their forelegs strike quicker than the human eye can follow, faster than one-twentieth of a second. The unlucky victim is immediately impaled on the spines lining the grasping leg parts, and then its neck is chewed to dispatch it with minimal struggle.



Chinese mantises mating
Tenodera aridifolia sinensis

This has been a good year to be a mantis in my garden. I will normally find two or three of the hundreds that hatched in mid-spring. This week I found at least six different mantises within hours in different parts of the yard. One pair of Chinese mantises was found mating on a boxwood shrub. I checked on the couple regularly for the rest of the afternoon to see if the female would indeed devour the male, but at the last check both lovers were intact. Further research revealed that female mantises are far more likely to eat their mate when underfed in captivity. Wild mantises are likely to attack each other only when surprised by a paramour's sudden appearance.

After mating, the female creates a foamy egg case, or ootheca, that soon hardens, containing up to three hundred eggs ready to hatch next spring. The typical female will create two egg cases in one year, but if

food is plentiful they may produce several more. All adults die in late autumn. The young nymphs begin as tiny adults (without wings) less than a fifth of an inch long, but feed voraciously as they grow through several molts before reaching maturity. Individual mantises among our three species may be green or brown, and little information exists on why they may be one color or another. European mantises seem to be green if the conditions before molting were wet, but dry conditions may turn the same mantis brown on its next molt. This provides better camouflage as plentiful rain produces lush greenery, while droughty weather causes many plants to turn brown.



Mantises are so interesting that some people will purchase egg cases or capture wild mantises to keep as pets. They must be housed singly to avoid cannibalism, and should be fed regularly with crickets or wild-caught insects. A twig will provide a space to perch and a place where it can molt its skin. Their responsiveness to their keepers and environment make them fascinating to observe and an excellent way to teach children to appreciate nature.

GARDEN CALENDAR

- Our first frost occurs by October 30th 50% of the time. This year experts predict an early frost.
- Harvest above-ground vegetables before frost. Watch the weather forecast and expect frost if the predicted low is below 38°F.
- Cut back perennials when the leaves wilt or turn brown.
- Discard diseased plants and leaves, do not compost them.
- Apply lime and other soil amendments to empty beds as needed.
- Fertilize trees and shrubs once their leaves turn color and they have gone dormant. These nutrients will be stored in the roots for next spring.
- Plant new trees and shrubs to take advantage of end-of-season bargains.
- Stake new trees if they will be exposed to winter winds.
- Water new plants if the weather is dry. Keep the soil slightly moist.
- Leave ornamental grasses uncut for added interest in the winter landscape.
- October is the best month to plant spring-blooming bulbs.
- Lift tender bulbs like dahlias and gladiolus after frost. Let the bulbs dry for a couple days, and then remove excess soil, loose roots or stems. Store in peat moss or shredded newspaper, in a dark, cool, dry place with good air circulation.
- Take cuttings of geraniums, coleus, begonias and other frost-tender plants for winter houseplants.
- Stop fertilizing houseplants until spring.
- Begin gradually lowering the cutting height on the lawnmower, eventually reaching 1½ - 2 inches.



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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