

NORTH COAST YARD & GARDEN

HORTICULTURAL NEWS AND INFORMATION FOR THE OHIO GARDENER

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IN MY GARDEN

Choosing Christmas gifts for the avid gardener is never easy. Gardeners are particular about the tools they use, often preferring a thirty-year-old tool that was grandma's favorite to the latest high-tech ergonomic model made with titanium steel. Garden ornaments may not suit their tastes, or fit in with their landscape styles. It is not always clear what plants gardeners like, don't already have in abundance, have suitable growing conditions for it, and enough space to grow it.

A lot of newspaper columns and magazine articles come out this time of year offering help finding gifts for gardeners. My favorite idea so far is a current tetanus shot. "Merry Christmas, you have a doctor appointment next week." If you don't think a needle will fill your gardener with holiday cheer, and you have no idea what he would like, here is my advice from my retail garden center experience and my own preferences as a gardener.

A gift card or gift certificate to a favorite local garden center is always a good solution. It could be used on tools, plants, seeds, mulch, statues, bird feeders, or something else, but it will definitely be used for something that she likes. The only caveat: make sure the recipient likes to shop at that garden center. The more passionate the gardener, the stronger the opinions she may have about the local establishments.

Books are another tricky category, since he may already have that book or a similar one, or may not be interested in that gardening topic. Again, gift cards come to the rescue, especially from online book-sellers with incredibly wide selections.

Gardeners always need gloves. If someone tells you he doesn't wear gloves in the yard, he is lying, either about the gloves or the gardening. Good high-quality gloves that help grip tool handles are great, but cheap gloves are necessary for messy jobs that might ruin them. Long leather gloves protect arms from rose thorns, and long rubber gloves help to clean out the pond. Gloves are a top gardener request.

Magazines and periodicals are another good choice. They are full of inspiring ideas to inspire activity in the yard, and they act as a good substitute when the weather is poor. They will also help the gardener stay informed about new plants, gadgets, styles and techniques.

Most lists of gift ideas I've seen include a "one day of labor" voucher, where you volunteer your muscle to help get the building, weeding or planting done. Do not *ever* surprise a gardener by working on her garden, or *you* will be surprised at how hard she can throw that trowel. Offer to help in her choice of task, and expect close and constant supervision. The real gift here is sharing time doing what she loves. Even if you are not a physically able to assist, your interest in her garden is what she will appreciate most.

FEATURED PEST

TETRANYCHUS URTICAE

When house plants come inside before the first frost of autumn, they usually bring unwanted passengers. One aggravating house plant pest is the tiny two-spotted spider mite (*Tetranychus urticae*), only half a millimeter long as adults. They get their common name for the extremely fine webbing they use as a barrier to protect themselves from predators. The webbing is often found on the underside of leaves and where the leaf attaches to the stem.

Spider mites feed by piercing the leaf tissue with their mouthparts and extracting the juices. This damage produces a tiny yellow spot, and where there are many mites feeding, the leaves become stippled. As the damage continues, the foliage turns a distinctive bronze color. Feeding takes the nutrients from plants, and heavily infested plants can be stunted or killed.

The two-spotted spider mite will feed on dozens of common house plants, and it prefers the warm and dry air found in heated homes. Spider mites can complete a life cycle in as little as five days, and each female can lay over 100 eggs. An unmated female can produce all-male offspring, resulting in a new colony from a single original mite. Once established, they are easily transferred from plant to plant by drafts, where plants touch each other, or even on the hands of the gardener.

Infestations can be a nuisance because many insecticides won't kill them. The simplest way to control spider mites is to wash them off leaves by spraying the leaf undersides with water from a hose. A sink with a sprayer attachment works indoors. Regularly misting plants keeps humidity high and discourages mites.



Photo: University of Missouri Extension

Horticultural oils and insecticidal soaps are also useful to smother the mites. It is necessary to thoroughly cover the plant to ensure all the tiny mites are coated. Soaps are the better option indoors since oils may stain nearby fabrics, walls and furniture.

Only a few insecticides work well on mites. Disulfoton granules in soil will protect against mites for up to 30 days. Neem oil is also effective, but take care to avoid home furnishings with the over spray. In extreme cases, spray with fenbutatin oxide outdoors when weather permits. Let it dry thoroughly before bringing the plant back indoors.

Avoid frustration by preventing spider mites. Buy only healthy plants from reputable sources, and keep new plants isolated from other plants for a few weeks until you are sure it is pest-free. If the population gets out of hand, it may spread to nearly all your house plants before it is noticed. Monitor your plants often to catch problems early. Some people throw all their plants away and start over to rid themselves of stubborn mite problems, but most plants easily recover from an infestation if it is caught early and treated appropriately.

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

LIVE CHRISTMAS TREES

Gardeners find it hard to just throw away a plant. Even Christmas trees are hard on some people's consciences since they regret having a tree killed for their holiday celebration. Most gardeners, at some point or another, decide that they would like to have a live Christmas tree in their house that can be planted in the yard after the holidays. The tree would then grow over the years, and serve as a living reminder of the occasion and the time that has passed since. I suggest you resist this temptation.

I really like needled evergreens in the landscape, and I enjoy decorating them, even outdoors, for Christmas. If you want to add a pine, spruce or fir to your garden, I would recommend that you just choose a tree to go straight in the yard. Get a separate, cut tree for indoors. Cut Christmas trees are grown as a renewable resource, they help keep nurseries in business, and they provide habitat for wildlife as they grow. They are more easily recycled than artificial Christmas trees. Cut trees are regularly sheared to provide a symmetrical shape and dense branching on the outside of the tree. This is a different treatment than landscape trees receive. A tree grown for the Christmas tree market will have too many small branches and too few main branches to make a good landscape specimen. A landscape quality tree will be long-lived, but will not have the density of a cut tree.

Aesthetics aside, I don't recommend using live trees for Christmas because it is a tremendous amount of work, and it is very difficult to keep the tree from losing frost hardiness while indoors. If you would like to try anyway, please follow these instructions carefully.



Weeping Norway spruce
(*Picea abies* f. *pendula* 'Frohberg')

A live tree will have a very heavy root ball wrapped in burlap. A five-foot tree will have a root ball weighing about 150 pounds. Never lift the tree by its trunk as the weight of the soil can easily break or tear the roots that support it. The tree should be lifted by the root ball, or very carefully rolled on its rootball over short distances.

The planting hole must be prepared right away before the ground is frozen. Dig a hole that is the same depth as the root ball and twice as wide. Store the excavated soil in a location where it will not freeze. Fill the open hole with wood mulch to keep it from collapsing or filling up, and also to prevent injuries from stepping in an open hole.

Store the tree outdoors in a location sheltered from direct sun and wind. Keep the root ball moist, but not wet. Seven days before you plan to bring the tree indoors, move it to an unheated shed or garage

where it can gradually become used to warmer temperatures.

Once the tree is brought into the house, it will need to sit in a large waterproof tub to keep moisture and soil from damaging the floor. Like cut Christmas trees, it should be placed away from all heat sources and open flames, including candles, heating vents, fireplaces and space heaters. Use Christmas lights that give off only minimal heat. It is critical to keep a live tree as cool as possible to prevent it from breaking dormancy and losing its cold hardiness. Even with this careful treatment, *do not keep the tree indoors for more than three days.*

After the holiday, move the tree back to the unheated location for a week to gradually acclimate it to the cold once again. Keep it just above freezing for at least the first few days. Then after seven days in the outbuilding, move it into a sheltered location for another few days, out of direct sun and protected from the wind. Then the tree will be ready to be planted in full exposure, in the planting hole you created.

Remove the mulch from the hole and set it aside. Remove the burlap and metal cage from the root ball and gently roll or slide the tree into position in the hole. Backfill with the unfrozen soil that was stored since the hole was dug, and then cover the planting hole with the mulch. Water the planting hole well to help the soil settle and remove air pockets. The next time the temperature gets above forty degrees, apply an anti-

dessicant to the needles to help prevent the tree from drying in winter winds.

After all that heavy lifting to move the tree up to six times before planting, and having it indoors for only a few days, you understand why I recommend planting one tree in the yard and using a second cut tree in the house.

GARDEN CALENDAR

- Use a good ice melter in moderation. Ice melters can damage concrete and plants if used excessively. Protect evergreens near roads from salt spray with a burlap barrier.
- Prepare a planting hole now for a live Christmas tree.
- Check stored vegetables and flower bulbs for signs of rot. Discard bad ones before they infect the rest.
- Spray evergreens with an anti-desiccant
- Mulch perennials after the ground freezes with airy mulch like bark mulch or oak leaves. Avoid leaves that get soggy and matted as they may promote rot in the crown.
- Keep poinsettias properly watered, in moderate temperatures and under adequate light.
- Monitor houseplants regularly for proper watering and insect problems.
- Keep cut and live indoor Christmas trees cool and watered.
- Record the season's ideas, successes and failures in a garden journal.



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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