

NORTH COAST YARD & GARDEN

HORTICULTURAL NEWS AND INFORMATION FOR THE OHIO GARDENER

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IN MY GARDEN

Hopefully you've recovered from the holidays and managed to put some thought into ideas for next year's garden. Seed manufacturers and nurseries are delighted to help us make plans for the coming season by sending us catalogs filled with new and enchanting plants that we just have to try. Don't they realize that we have limited space and limited budgets?

When I get my catalogs, I start looking through them and marking the plants that I would like to try. Later, when I think that I have seen most of the catalogs and have some pretty good ideas about what I want to buy, I go over the marked items in each catalog again, and write out a list of items to order. I paper clip this sheet to the front cover of the catalog and move on to the next one. Once I have a list for each company, I know that I am ready to start placing my orders.

Plants usually don't ship until the weather is nearly right for planting, but seeds may arrive a lot earlier than you are ready to plant them. Keep all your seeds together in a cool, dry place until it is time to plant. I keep my seed packets in an index card file box, and sort the seeds by planting date. I write the date to plant the seeds on the front of the packet, and this way I make sure I don't forget something. There is a calendar of dates to start various types of flower and vegetable seeds available for download at www.RogerBolger.com.



The bright side of not being able to grow everything that we would like is that we always have something to discuss with other gardeners. If your neighbor has tried some of the plants that pique your interest, you can ask her how they did in her yard and would she recommend them. Maybe there is something she would have done differently that could help you have better luck with the plant. Maybe she has never grown it either, but knows someone else who can answer your questions.

One of the things I like best about gardening is that there is always something new to try and a different way of doing what has been done before. I can grow plants from around the world, or plants that come from right in my town. There are plants that were grown by pioneers and people in the middle ages, and there are brand new breeds and varieties that didn't even exist a few years ago. When you look through your catalogs, indulge your curiosity and treat yourself to a new plant.

FEATURED HOUSE PLANT

PHALAENOPSIS

One of the easiest houseplants to grow is also one of the most beautiful – the moth orchid (*Phalaenopsis*). Moth orchids are inexpensive and easily found for sale. The flowers can last a long time, usually more than one month. Their natural blooming period is late winter into spring, but growers adjust conditions so that blooming moth orchids are available year round.

Moth orchids are most often colored in variations of pink and white, although some bred varieties have yellow or red in them. The flower stem will usually have several buds on it which will open from the bottom up. Faded flowers should be removed by lightly snapping them off the flower stem. After the last bloom is finished, cut the flower stalk all the way down to the main stem, being careful not to nick the leaves.

Moth orchids are epiphytes, meaning they do not grow in soil. They are usually potted in a bark mix, sometimes with charcoal, vermiculite, perlite, or volcanic rock included. This porous mixture allows water to drain away but keeps the humidity high around the roots. As the bark mix decomposes, it becomes progressively finer and will soon begin to keep the roots too wet. This may occur after one to two



years. Repot the plant with new orchid potting mix after flowering has finished. Roots should be firm and cream colored. Black or dark brown roots that easily break are rotted and must be removed.

The potting mix should be kept moist but never wet. Moth orchids thrive under high humidity around 60 to 70 percent. Winter homes are generally much drier, so mist the mix regularly or set the pot on a tray of moistened pebbles. Avoid over watering as the roots will quickly begin to rot. Use a water soluble fertilizer labeled for orchids as directed on the package label.

Provide moth orchids with moderate to bright light, but no direct sun. The leaves should be firm and medium green in color. Dark green leaves that feel limp are a sign that the plant is not getting enough light. Insufficient light will prevent reblooming. Reblooming is also encouraged by providing nighttime temperatures in the lower 60s, and daytime temperatures above 75° F.

It may sound complicated, but moth orchids really are easy to grow, and most problems are caused by watering the plant too much. A little “benign neglect” will allow your orchid to produce long-lasting blooms once or twice a year, beautifying your home and impressing your friends with your orchid growing skills.

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

PRUNING TREES AND SHRUBS

Late winter and early spring are a good time to prune many common deciduous trees and shrubs. With the leaves off the plant, it is easier to see the underlying structure and find branches to remove. Plants that bloom in the spring should not be pruned at this time of year because the blooms will be reduced, but summer blooming and non-blooming shrubs and trees are fine to trim as long as the branches are not frozen.

The first step to pruning is to remove the three Ds – anything dead, damaged or diseased. These problems can actually be removed any time of year as they are already an undesirable part of the plant.

From the remaining healthy growth, the general rule is to remove no more than a quarter of the branches in a single year. For seriously overgrown trees and shrubs, this means the pruner-wielding gardener must prioritize.

For trees, the first step is to select a leader. This will be the main trunk of the tree as it grows, and it should be relatively straight and centered and without any narrow forks. Competing leaders should be trimmed out, all the way back to the major branch or trunk. This will control the growth pattern of the tree and ensure that it retains its normal natural shape. It will also prevent a weak multiple-trunk situation that is likely to split under heavy wind or snow loads.

If less than 25% of the tree was removed on the first step, the second step is to remove any branches that rub against each other, and branches that cross back through the tree instead of growing outward from the trunk. These branches

should be cut back all the way to the major branch or trunk from which they arise. Removing these branches not only preserves the natural shape and growing habit of the tree, but it also allows better air circulation and more light to penetrate to the center of the tree.

If the tree still has at least 75% of its branches remaining, the last step is to remove all weak growth. This includes suckers, the pencil-thin sprouts that arise from the roots near the trunk of certain species of tree. Cut these off at least an inch or so under the soil surface to discourage regrowth. Watersprouts are also thin pencil-like branches that grow straight up, but they arise from the tops of horizontal branches instead of roots. Trim watersprouts completely down to the parent limb. If there are any branches in the tree that seem to be right on top of each other and compete for the same space, remove the weaker branch back to its source on the trunk or a major branch.

Now your overgrown tree has been relieved of its congestion and its under-performing components. If a quarter of the tree was removed before completing these steps, just finish the task in the next year or two. Prioritizing corrects the most important problems immediately, with only minor problems remaining until next year.

Tangled overgrown shrubs may require a different approach. If the shrub has a single stem and grows like a small tree, use the steps outlined above as if it were a tree. Most shrubs are multistemmed, with several shoots that emerge from the ground, so there is no single leader or even a true center of the shrub.

Overgrown multistemmed shrubs are thinned out by a process called rejuvenation. The oldest, thickest stems on

a shrub usually have the fewest leaves and flowers, and don't contribute much to the shape and appearance of the plant. The younger shoots grow more vigorously and produce lots of booms. The idea is to remove old stems and encourage new young stems, thus the name rejuvenation.

As with trees, no more than a quarter of the plant should be removed in one year. The way this is achieved is to remove one third of the thickest, largest, oldest stems in the shrub. Try to remove them evenly throughout the bush so it retains its shape. The loss of these shoots will allow more light and air into the center of the shrub and encourage new shoots to sprout. For the next two years, remove another third of the oldest stems, so that after three years all the old growth is gone and the new growth has come up in stages.

These techniques work for the majority of deciduous trees and shrubs. After following these procedures, only light trimming should be necessary from time to time to remove misdirected branches before they become a problem. There are different times and special techniques for pruning certain plants, such as needed evergreens, clematis, roses, fruit trees, bramble berries, grapes, topiaries and espaliers. Some plants have different growth patterns that do not respond well to the treatments described. Others are pruned a specific way to produce more fruit or create an unnatural shape. These methods will be the topic of future articles.

GARDEN CALENDAR

- Check stored vegetables and flower bulbs for rot, removing any moist or slimy bulbs before they infect the rest.
- Carrots, parsnips and some other root crops can still be harvested if they linger in your vegetable bed.
- Keep the pond from freezing over entirely to allow decomposition gases to escape and prevent fish toxicity.
- Wash out empty pots and planters to get them ready for spring planting.
- Clean and sharpen shovels, pruners and other garden tools.
- Have your lawnmower, tractor and other power tools serviced.
- Get caught up on your garden reading.
- Try sawdust, sand or kitty litter instead of salt on your pavement.
- Keep working on plans for vegetable gardens, new beds, and plants to try next spring and summer.
- Avoid walking on frozen grass or plants to prevent crown damage.
- Inspect perennial beds for heaved plants. Don't push them back into the ground now. Place mulch around them and replant them at the correct depth in March or April.
- Cut some branches from spring-flowering shrubs, put them in water like cut flowers, and bring them indoors to enjoy a show of forced blooms. It will take a few weeks for flowers to open. Try azalea, forsythia, pussywillow, crabapple, fruit trees or dogwood.



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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