

# NORTH COAST YARD & GARDEN

## HORTICULTURAL NEWS AND INFORMATION FOR THE OHIO GARDENER

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### IN MY GARDEN

I like to plan some garden projects to do in November. If I don't have a project in mind, there will be a nice, balmy day perfect for working outdoors - especially for the kind of strenuous labor you can't even think about when it is ninety degrees in the shade. This year, there has been little opportunity to begin a November project. It is dark when work is over, and my days off have been the best predictor for rain.

Like many gardeners, the yard I see is not the yard I am looking at. I see all the things I could have done better, or differently. I see the stepping stones I haven't installed to get better access to the back of deep beds. I see the ninebark where I should have planted it years ago, and I resent it the space it occupies now. I see the gazebo that, no doubt, won't look half as good in reality as it does in my mind. This disparity between what is and what I should make it drives me more than anything to get garden projects started and finished, so I can begin the next thing.

That is why I don't like November. It is a time when last year's accomplishments disappear before the things not done. Even worse, the threat of Indian summer is Mother Nature's guilt trip, reminding me that I could still do one more thing, if only I didn't have a job, a family, and the rest of my life to attend to. The fact that the next nice day may be the last nice day for months to come makes trivial tasks feel



urgent, and makes complicated plans feel impossible.

Just as May is the fulfillment of the hopes and promises that first stirred in April, November is the confirmation of the threats and warnings that loomed in October - that this growing season is over, and things left undone must wait until next year. Winter will soon be upon us, and for the coming months, time in the garden will be spent shoveling snow and hoping the tender plants are well-protected.

If I had a greenhouse, November would carry at least some of the optimism of spring. Even though the days would still be dark and cold, I could still go somewhere to find the scent of earth, the heavy humidity in the air, and the feeling that I am once again in a garden, a place I have created where trees and flowers, water and insects, leaves and stones, despite their best efforts, must eventually come under my will, and live and grow harmoniously together.

## FEATURED PERENNIAL

### *DICTAMNUS ALBUS*

Years ago, as I read through some book on garden plants, I was intrigued by the story behind the name of the gas plant (*Dictamnus albus*). According to the book, the flowers of gas plant produce volatile oils that, on still nights, could be briefly ignited to produce a small blue flame. Any plant is made more interesting with a good story. But a story plus a demonstration with minor pyrotechnics makes the plant fascinating. When the opportunity came for me to purchase one in 2001, I had to have it. I could already hear friends and neighbors marveling over a poof of flame on a warm June evening. Since then I have tried to achieve the flaming flower trick, but without success. Still, gas plant is one of my favorite spring perennials.

*Dictamnus* grows to be about two feet tall and wide, with an additional foot of flower spikes in late May or early June. It is a slow growing plant, only reaching about eighteen inches in the five years I have grown it. It produces shiny, light green leaves held in a pinnate arrangement, with the leaves lining the stems like fibers on the shaft of a feather.

The leaves are strongly fragrant and smell of lemon when cut or crushed. This scent seems to be even more concentrated in the late-summer seed pods, which resemble a five-pointed crown. I use the pods with cut flowers for their unusual shape, deep red color, and strong scent.

*Dictamnus* is a member of the rue family, and like rue (*Ruta graveolens*), it can produce a serious skin rash on susceptible people when skin is exposed to sunlight. It is best to wear gloves and long sleeves when handling the plant, just in case.



The flowers have five elongated petals with the odd one pointing downward, in an arrangement similar to petals on a violet or pansy. Flowers may be white, pink, or rosy purple, and colored varieties have dark veins running through the petals. My plant is the pink variety, often listed as *Dictamnus albus* var. *roseus*. The flowers are so delicate and appealing that I am asked about the identity of this flower more often than any other.

*Dictamnus* does not transplant well, so choose the planting site carefully. It grows best in full sun, with soil that is moderately fertile and well-drained. It can be propagated by its seeds, but it is difficult to get them to sprout, and I have not been able to start new seedlings. Some commercial growers are successful in taking root cuttings when the parent plant is dormant, but dividing the plant often results in death. If you find *Dictamnus* for sale, buy a few extra – they are worth it.

## TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

### COMPOST

The secret to success in gardening is healthy, rich soil, and there is no better way to maintain the soil than with regular doses of compost. Gardeners call compost “black gold” for a reason – it provides plants with nutrients, keeps the soil structure loose and well-draining, and supports beneficial microorganisms that displace the fungi and bacteria that can cause disease.

Purchasing compost is expensive, if it is even available. It is much easier to create your own compost right in your garden. If you have plenty of space, compost piles are simple to construct and use. There is no better time to begin than autumn, when nature provides a good supply of fallen leaves. Just heap leaves, stems, grass clippings, vegetable food scraps, old potting soil and decayed mulch together and let them sit for several months to a year. Natural processes will convert this organic matter into a crumbly dark brown substance loaded with nutrients and teeming with life. During this process, you may notice that the pile is very warm, and that clouds of water vapor rise from it when it is turned, or on chilly mornings. This heat is a by-product of the conversion process, and actually allows the reactions to take place more rapidly.

To speed the process, make sure all the material is finely chopped before adding it to the pile. The additional surface area allows the chemical and biological processes to progress more quickly. If you regularly turn the pile with a pitchfork, the infusion of oxygen and better mixing of ingredients will also produce faster results.

As the materials begin to resemble rich garden soil, you will want to use it in your garden as mulch, fertilizer, or soil amendment. Stop adding new material to



*-from OSU Extension fact sheet HYG-1189*

this pile and start a new pile nearby. This technique ensures you will have a place for garden waste as well as a source of finished compost. If you have lots of room, open piles provide easier access for turning, adding to the pile, and removing finished compost. Otherwise, many people build bins to contain the piles. These bins are often made with three compartments: one for fresh materials, one in the process of breaking down, and one with finished compost. They can be as simple as a ring of snow fencing or as elaborate as a concrete block structure with a roof. Plans for compost bins are available in books or on the internet. Ohio State University Extension fact sheet HYG-1189, titled “Composting At Home”, is a good place to start. Call your local county extension office to request a copy, or download it online at: <http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/1000/1189.html>.

If your garden is very small, it is possible to produce compost in small containers. The main difficulty is that they often lack the necessary volume, at least four cubic feet, to support a “hot” compost pile. Although most commercially-sold bins are larger than this, they might need to be half full, or even completely full, before the pile begins to heat up and create compost. While the material is breaking down, and until it is completely finished and used, there is no place to put fresh materials, especially if there is no space for a second compost bin. That said, a small, less-efficient compost system is better than none at all.

Maintain a balance of “brown” materials high in carbon, like leaves, stems, wood chips, straw and paper, with “green” materials high in nitrogen, like grass clippings, vegetable scraps, coffee grounds, and fresh manure. A ratio of 30 parts brown to one part green material will ensure the pile heats up sufficiently but does not begin to produce an ammonia smell. If smell becomes a problem, turn the pile and mix in more carbon-rich material. If the pile doesn’t heat up, turn the pile and mix in some nitrogen-rich material. Never put meat scraps in compost piles as they will attract pests like raccoons and rats.

Other problems can be caused by excessive water. Wet materials won’t heat up, and may create a rancid, rotten odor. If this happens, turn the pile to provide more air circulation and try to improve drainage. Because some moisture is necessary for decomposition processes to occur, aim for the consistency of a moist sponge.

Compost is easy to make and helps your garden grow. I haven’t put any non-diseased yard waste in the trash in ten years, and I have even been known to “borrow” clean grass clippings and leaves from my neighbors on trash day. No garden can ever have enough black gold.

## TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

### WINTER BIRD-FEEDING PREPARATION

Wild birds have the same needs in winter, but like people, they could use special help to get them. Water in liquid form is especially important. Though birds will eat snow if they must, it takes a tremendous

amount of their body heat to melt it into water. A heated birdbath or a birdbath with an add-on heater will keep water ice-free and attract more birds to your yard. You may be surprised to see birds bathing even on frigid days. Their feathers must be clean in order to keep them well-insulated at night, so an occasional winter bath is necessary for survival.

Keep feeders filled with high-energy foods like black oil sunflower, nyjer, and suet. They need the extra calories to maintain their body temperature. Consider putting up roosting boxes, which look like bird houses with the hole at the bottom. Even birds of different species will flock together at night in these boxes to stay warm.

## GARDEN CALENDAR

- Protect garden ornaments from snow and ice by storing or covering them. Pack pots and fountains with balled up newspaper to prevent water from collecting in the cover.
- Add fallen leaves and plant debris to the compost pile. Do not add any material from diseased plants as they may reinfect plants next year.
- Drain and store hoses for the winter.
- Thoroughly clean and oil your garden sprayer. Replace any worn out parts.
- Store pesticides in a secure, well-ventilated area. Keep liquid pesticides from freezing.
- Remove dead, damaged or diseased wood as soon as it is noticed.



**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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