WINTER CARE OF HOUSEPLANTS

This is the time of year some plants get spindly, the leaves turn yellow and drop, and they may have insects. Outdoor plants brought indoors for the winter, typically show these symptoms. I've been cleaning up yellowed, fallen leaves for nearly two months now on geraniums and a hibiscus I brought indoors. Don't get worried, it is actually normal for them to do this. All summer they survived outdoors in bright sunlight and this past summer, intense heat for an extended period of time. When you bring them indoors they have to adjust to lower light levels and cooler temperatures. You can cut back your geraniums and other annuals you are overwintering in containers.

Now is a good time to repot any houseplants with roots coming out of the drainage holes. Choose a pot one size larger than the current pot, remove the plant, prune off any roots that might need trimmed, and repot using fresh potting soil. A sunny window is an ideal spot for sun-loving houseplants, but be sure the plants aren't too close to the glass or they could be damaged by the cold. I've had plants suffer cold damage from being too close to a window. The leaves turn brown and get limp. Keep plants away from heating vents which are often located underneath windows. Plants are prone to drying out quickly. You can place a humidifier near the plants or place plants on a tray of moist pebbles. Adding humidity is especially useful in homes with forced air heat. When watering your plants, feel the temperature of the water. Often in winter it may come out of the tap cold, which can then shock the roots of your tropical houseplants. Lukewarm water is ideal for watering your plants. As with any houseplant, don't overwater African violets or a poinsettia. A good way to water African Violets is to put some water in the saucer, which can then be absorbed through the holes in the bottom of pots. This also helps keep water off the leaves of these plants, avoiding spotting. Just make sure the plants don't sit in the water for more than an hour or two.

Overwintering plants such as hibiscus and geraniums are often attacked by whiteflies. These are small, white, moth-like insects that will rise in a flutter when a plant is moved. The immature forms live on the undersides of leaves and suck the plant's juices. If left unchecked, they can cause leaf die-back. Spray plants with insecticidal soap to control them following all label directions for proper and safe use. Aphids and spider mites may become a...
CHRISTMAS TREES AND THE DROUGHT OF 2012

On the warm afternoon of December 2, we set out to find the perfect Christmas tree at a local tree farm. With my husband and two young boys, I was ready to pick out the family Christmas tree. The husband was a bit less enthused as I, as he kept saying, as we walked all over the farm, “what about this one” or “let’s get this one.” He just wanted to get a tree and go home. I, on the other hand, wanted to look over every tree on the farm. I was looking for a 7’ tree that was full and dark green. The drought of 2012 really took its toll on the trees. Some trees had a lot of dry, brown inner needles and a yellow cast to them. What bothered me the most was seeing all the dead saplings. Most tree farms replant the following spring to replace trees that were cut during the holiday season, but 2012 was extremely hard on young trees and loss was high. My guess is thousands of dollars and hours and hours of time were lost due to the drought at just this one tree farm. The effects of the drought were noticeable in lawns, gardens, landscapes, corn and bean fields, hay fields and livestock water sources, but sometimes we forget about Christmas tree farms and the hardships those farmers face. All farmers in the areas affected by drought had it rough in 2012. When you reflect back on 2012 and give thanks, remember to thank a farmer.

Justin, our five year old enjoyed checking out all the trees at the farm, and both boys were entertained by the tree farm’s family dog that followed us around. After 45 minutes of searching, I finally found one that I thought I could be happy with. My husband was relieved that I finally found one! He just doesn’t get the enjoyment out of tree searching like I do, but he was touched by the effects of the drought and what he saw at the farm. If you think losing a shrub or two in your landscape was hard this year, visit a tree farm and you’ll really see and feel what tree loss is like.

Trees in the field look much smaller than when they are set up in your house. The tree I selected was plenty big. We got it home and placed it in a stand of water, and then the decorating began. Jason, the two year old, had no interest in decorating the tree, but Justin did. I have a metal container that I keep “special” ornaments in, ornaments that each have their own story. They are in a metal container so they will hopefully be protected during a fire or flood. Justin carefully took the ornaments out and as we hung them on the tree, he asked where each one came from. “This one came from my trip this summer to a conference in Charleston, and this one from a horticulture trip to Costa Rica, this one from Cape Cod with your Aunt Jana, Grammy and Nana in 2003, this one from Hawaii, and this one from my trip to a national conference in Oregon with Darla,” I told him. He found ornaments I made back in Junior High and wanted to know the story behind them. “This one I made with my seventh grade teacher Mrs. Cunningham” I told him, “and this one I made when I was in the sixth grade, and this one I was given when I was just your age-5 years old.” Then he took out some that said baby’s 1st Christmas. “This one you received when you were born and that one Jason got when he was born”. He pulled some more out, some with David and my name on it. “These ornaments your dad and I got the year we got married”. He got some more out, and asked “where did these come from?” “Those were made by Grammy” (my mom, Nyalin Barnes, a Master Gardener from Mtn. Grove, MO), I told him. “She made a lot of these ornaments”. Then he found some given to me by my grandmother on my mom’s side and one from my great grandmother on my dad’s side given to me in 1983. He learned a lot about Christmas trees and the history of the Christmas ornaments that day, just like I did from my mom when I was that age, and she did from her mom. When little Jason is ready, I will repeat the story of each ornament all over again. I hope you all had a joyous holiday season!
WINTER FEEDING OF BIRDS

One of my favorite winter past times is feeding and watching winter birds. I get this from my mom who got me started on this as a kid on our farm in southern Missouri. We had a tree in our yard where we hung bird feeders and would watch the birds out the window. This year we had some winter birds appear in our backyard in November and my boys got excited to get the feeder up. Justin was interested in knowing what species the birds were. He is now into knowing the “species” or “variety” of everything. I wonder where he gets that from. He has even asked me what variety of kiwi we were eating for breakfast, to which I respond, “I don’t know, it’s a kiwi, just eat it.”

Watching the birds in your garden and at feeders is a pleasurable way to enjoy nature through a cold winter. On snowy days, their liveliness, colors and sounds bring joy and fascination. For the greatest variety and number of birds, try a variety of feeding spots and feeders. Start with one or two feeders and increase the number as you learn which foods and feeders the birds prefer. Place the feeders so you can watch them easily from a convenient window. Also, when the feeders are in sight, you'll see when they need to be filled or cleaned. Hang feeders near shrubs or trees so birds have nearby cover and can escape from predators such as hawks and cats. I witnessed a hawk swoop down in my backyard and kill a bird last winter. It had been sitting on a power line checking out the prey below feeding on seed beneath a tree. Then it flew down, attacked it, and ate it.

Squirrels are a major pest of bird feeders. I don't like the squirrels swiping the birds food, but I guess they have to eat too. In some areas, raccoons are a problem. Luckily, there are several types of feeders and tips about placement that will help deter visits by uninvited guests. To prevent squirrels from reaching the feeder, use one that includes an attached baffle or that has a funnel-shaped top. You can also buy baffles separately and attach them to your favorite feeder. Elevate the feeder at least five feet off the ground. Place it eight to 10 feet from the nearest building and overhanging tree branches. If larger birds such as grackles are a problem, choose feeders designed for small birds, such as a thistle tube or hanging globe. If you have a cat, keep it inside during the day, especially at times when birds visit the feeders.

Black oil sunflower seeds are relished by chickadees, evening grosbeaks, cardinals and finches, and are less attractive to non-native sparrows and starlings. White proso millet is the best small seed, especially attractive to juncos and sparrows in winter. Goldfinches prefer thistle seed (also called niger), which also attracts house finches. Birds have four basic needs: food, water, shelter from predators and the elements, and safe nesting places. In addition to setting out feeders to provide food, you can help birds meet their needs in the following ways:

♦️ As you clean up, leave a brush pile that birds can use for cover.
♦️ Leave seeds and fruits on plants such as sunflowers (for jays and chickadees); cosmos, chicory and evening primrose (for goldfinches); and grapes (for cedar waxwings).
♦️ Provide fresh water in a shallow container. Water should be no more than two inches deep. In winter, it is especially important to keep the water ice-free by changing it frequently or by using an immersion-type water heater designed for outdoor use.
♦️ Landscapes with abundant trees and shrubs, and a relatively small lawn, are most attractive to birds. To enhance your garden with plants that provide natural food and shelter, develop a landscape plan this winter in preparation for spring planting.

MISSOURI MASTER GARDENER ASSOCIATION UPDATE

The Missouri Master Gardener Association has been up and running for over a year now. Twenty chapters out of 58 are now members, with a membership of 1,067 out of nearly 4,000 Master Gardeners statewide. Information about the association and bylaws can be found on their website www.momga.org. Master Gardener core training will soon be offered online, possibly in January or February 2013. Cost will be about $175 for those that plan to volunteer with a Master Gardener group or around $350 for those that do not. The State Master Gardener Conference will be held next September in Springfield. St. Louis has volunteered to host the 2014 conference. Advanced training classes are usually offered at these conferences. Thank-you to all who turned in volunteer hours for 2012!
GARDEN TIPS FOR JANUARY

ORNAMENTALS:
- Brush off heavy snow from trees and shrubs. To reduce injury, allow ice to melt naturally from plants.
- Limbs damaged by ice or snow should be pruned off promptly to prevent bark from tearing.
- Check stored summer bulbs such as dahlias, canna’s, and gladiolus to be sure they are not rotting or drying out.
- Sow pansy seeds indoors.

HOUSEPLANTS:
- Wash dust off plant leaves on a regular basis. This allows the leaves to gather light more efficiently and will result in better growth.
- Set pots of humidity-loving house plants on trays filled with pebbles and water.
- Kill mealy bugs on plants by wiping them off with a cotton ball soaked in rubbing alcohol.
- Insecticidal soap sprays can be safely applied to most house plants for the control of many insect pests.
- To clean heavily encrusted clay pots, scrub them with a steel wool pad after they have soaked overnight in a solution consisting of 1 gallon of water, and one cup each of white vinegar and household bleach.

MISCELLANEOUS:
- Store wood ashes in sealed, fireproof containers. Apply a dusting around lilacs, baby’s breath, asters, lilies, and roses in spring. Do not apply to acid-loving plants. Excess ashes may be composted.
- Check fruit trees for evidence of rodent injury to bark.
- Avoid foot traffic on frozen lawns as this may injure turf grasses.
- Christmas tree boughs can be used to mulch garden perennials.
- If you didn’t get your bulbs planted before the ground froze, plant them immediately in individual peat pots and place the pots in flats. Set them outside where it is cold and bury the bulbs under thick blankets of leaves. Transplant them into the garden any time weather permits.
- Seed and nursery catalogs arrive. While reviewing garden catalogs, look for plants with improved insect, disease, and drought-tolerance.
- Old Christmas trees can be recycled outdoors as a feeding station for birds. String garlands of peanuts, popcorn, cranberries, and fruits through their boughs.

-Missouri Botanical Garden-

MU EXTENSION UPDATE

In September, it was announced that University of Missouri Extension will reorganize its regions effective January 1, 2013. Vice Provost and Director of Extension Michael Ouart unveiled the reorganized regions of Missouri. There will no longer be a central or south-central region, and Kansas City and St. Louis will be in a region called the “Urban Region”. The northeast region of Missouri will go from 16 counties to 20 and will now include Audrain, Boone, Chariton and Howard. There will be three of us doing horticulture work. I have 100 percent horticulture duties and will continue to serve my current counties except for Linn. Linn County is getting a plant science specialist that will have 60 percent horticulture duties and will most likely cover Linn and the southernmost counties in our new region. This person will have 40 percent agronomy responsibilities. Max Glover, is the plant science specialist in Shelby county, and has both agronomy and horticulture responsibilities. He will most likely cover Audrain county for horticulture in addition to his current counties.

UPCOMING EVENTS

July 15-20, 2013: NEMO Fair, Kirksville, MO.
September 2013: International Master Gardener Conference, Cruise to Alaska. For more info go to: http://www.uaex.edu/imgc2013/.
September 20-22, 2013: Missouri State Master Gardener Conference, Springfield, MO.

Garden Talk!

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