

ASK THE AG TEAM, for the week of December 30, 2007

Pineapples –by *Tim Baker, Horticulture Specialist, University of Missouri Extension*

Are you looking for something interesting to try as a houseplant? You might consider a pineapple. Not only will this make a fairly large, attractive plant, but if you're fortunate, you might even get a pineapple to eat.

Pineapples are native to South America, and were quickly found by early European explorers. Columbus noted them as early as 1493. The Portuguese were fond of this "new" fruit, and they spread it around the world, including Africa and India. By the end of the 16th century, it was widely grown in many tropical countries.

Pineapples belong to a group of tropical American plants in the family Bromeliaceae, which is commonly known as the pineapple family. This family also includes plants as diverse as Spanish moss and the many bromeliad house plants. Most of the plants in this family live in trees, located on the branches and rooted in pockets of decaying leaves and other organic matter. The pineapple, however, is one of the few plants in this family that grows in the soil.

The leaves of pineapples are stiff and sword-shaped, and have spiny teeth along the leaf margins. The leaves form an elongated rosette, with the fruit rising from the center of the rosette on a stiff stem. These plants grow about three feet high.

Pineapple plants may be grown from the crown of the fruit that you purchase from the store. The crown looks like a miniature plant on top the fruit. Twist or cut the crown off, and clean off any fruit pulp that might be clinging to the base. Then pull off a few of the short lower leaves to expose the base of the stem. Put the bottom inch of the stem into a container with clean potting soil, and place in a sunny indoor location.

Generally, the plant will not need much water during the rooting stage. Keep the soil slightly moist, and the humidity high. The plant should get as much sunlight as possible. This is in contrast to other bromeliads, which do not like direct sunlight.

Roots should form within four to six weeks. After roots form, you may fertilize the new plant with any common fertilizer used for house plants. Pineapples do like high humidity, so you may want to mist the leaves periodically.

After the plant has grown for a minimum of 14 months and is at least 24 inches tall, a flower bud will start to form. This does not, however, guarantee that you will have a pineapple growing soon. You will have to find a method to force flowering and fruiting. One way is to cover the plant with a large, clear plastic bag. Place at least five ripe (but not rotten) apples inside the bag with the pineapple. Ripening apples give off ethylene gas, which helps stimulate flower formation in the pineapple. You will need to do this for several weeks, taking care to remove any apples that begin to rot. If this treatment is successful, flower shoots should appear in about three to four months. These flowers are small, and purplish-blue in color. Each flower will last only one day, but the entire blooming process will take several weeks.

If everything works well to this point, you will eventually see a fruit start to develop. In about six months after the fruit starts to grow, you will notice that the color of the shell starts to change from green to gold. The color change begins at the bottom of the fruit and works its way upward. While this happens, the fruit will begin to sweeten, and the flesh color changes from white to yellow. When the golden color progresses about half way up the fruit, it may be picked and eaten. However, you may want to wait a bit longer to be sure it is completely ripe.

Use drapes to lower heating costs –by *Jim Crawford, Natural Resource Engineering Specialist, University of Missouri Extension, Atchison County*

With the high cost of heating oil, LP and natural gas this winter, we need to do whatever we can to make our home more energy efficient. An additional way to make any window more energy efficient in the winter is through the use of drapes. Open the drapes during the daytime to allow the sun's rays to add heat to your home. Even though it may be 10 degrees outside the sun coming through a window can raise a room's temperature several degrees. As evening approaches close the drapes to provide an extra layer of insulation and help keep the heat in the house.