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Subjects we hope to cover in up-coming issues include some of the common but still troublesome or confusing issues for home gardeners. Some ideas currently “under the pen” (or computer) include the subjects listed below.

**Key Points for a Happy, Healthy Lawn.** Whether you have two acres or 2000 square feet of grass, you'll want to read the March 1, 2012 issue of *The Gardener's Home* for growing a healthy, happy lawn. The article will be written by Joe Gyurian, Horticultural Consultant for Rutgers NJAES Cooperative Extension of Somerset County.

**Common Houseplant Pests.** Get to know your houseplant pests! Brief descriptions and photos help to identify the most common pests and the type of damage they cause, including aphids, mealybugs, and spider mites.

**Weed Identification 101.** Weeds may be “plants without press agents” or “plants in the wrong place” but are still problematic in the lawn or landscape beds. The identifications will feature line-drawings with emphasis on what to look for in identifying typical problem plants.
Do You Need a Garden Speaker?

Does your group need an educational program or speaker? The Speakers Bureau is a group of volunteer Rutgers NJAES Certified Master Gardeners who provide presentations and workshops on a variety of topics about home gardening, horticulture, and the environment.

All Speakers Bureau members are trained by Rutgers NJAES Cooperative Extension. Individual speakers are Certified Master Gardeners with advanced knowledge and interest in the subjects they present.

Topics are wide-ranging. For example, talks such as “For the Birds”, “Creating a Winter Garden”, “Fall Color in Your Garden”, and “Late Bloomers” can bring added purpose, diversity, and guidance to your garden endeavors.

Presentations are informal and generally run 40 to 60 minutes, depending on the subject. They can be made to groups in Hunterdon, Somerset, and Warren Counties, such as garden clubs, public libraries, service associations, and at community events.

You can reach us via email at speakers@gardentalks.net for more information about the Speakers Bureau and the complete list of topics.

Bruce Hoffman
Forcing Bulbs

Gardeners who want to enjoy winter blooms should think about forcing paperwhites and amaryllis bulbs indoors. Both bulbs can be bought in garden centers or garden supply catalogs.

Paperwhites are the easiest to grow because they don’t care what kind of pot or soil they are grown in. They produce flowers in three to five weeks. If planted right after the holidays, they will bloom during the dark days of late January and February.

If you have pots with drainage holes, you can use regular house plant potting soil or plain old coarse sand. If using a decorative container with no holes, fill with gravel or decorative pebbles to grow the bulbs in. If you do use a pot with no holes, keep enough water in the container so it just touches the bottom of the bulb. When the roots grow, water as needed.

No matter what potting method you use, for the next few weeks keep the plants in a well-lighted location that ranges between 60-70 degrees. Temperatures over 75 degrees will produce “leggy” plants. In a short time, the air will be filled with the scent of spring. Unfortunately, these bulbs cannot be used again, and must be discarded in the composting bin after they bloom.

The amaryllis plant is spectacular. The bulb is the size of a softball, which transforms itself in four to six weeks into majestic, trumpet-shaped flowers and long sword shaped leaves! Some gardeners are leery about buying this plant because they are afraid they won’t get the same effect in subsequent years. That is partially true. The year after the bulb flowers, no blooms will appear because the bulb was forced the year before. In following years, the bulb will flower by following the directions below.

Plant the bulb so its top half is exposed in a pot that is two inches wider than the width of the bulb. Water thoroughly and place it in a cool brightly lit room at about 65 degrees. After its initial watering, water only when the top layer of soil feels dry to the touch or the bulb will rot.

After the flowers fade, cut the flower stalk down to the bulb but leave the foliage intact. It is needed to feed the bulb. When the weather has warmed in June, place the bulb outside in an area that gets morning sun but is shaded in the hot afternoon. Water and fertilize as you would any other houseplant.

Before the first autumn frost, bring the plant back in and allow the foliage to die back. Once this occurs, put the bulb in a basement that stays at 45-50 degrees for four months. Do not water during this time. After four months resting period, resume the growing process.

If you have questions about growing these bulbs, contact your Somerset Rutgers Cooperative Extension office at 908-526-6293, or Hunterdon Extension office at 908-788-1338.

Joe Gyurian
Did you know that you can fool bulbs into thinking it’s spring when it’s still wintertime?

Just around the time when the snow piled up on the sides of streets looks gray and dirty, and another snow day isn’t nearly as much fun as the first few were, you can be looking at pretty white flowers that smell nice, too!

Paperwhites are a type of narcissus, and grow in tropical areas. Because of where they grow naturally, encouraging bulbs to grow in the winter in our warm homes isn’t difficult. Here’s how to do it.

Help your family shop for paperwhite bulbs now or later, but they need to be stored in a cool, dry place that is between 40 and 50 degrees Fahrenheit until you are ready to plant them. Can you think of a good place in your home to keep the bulbs until you are ready for them?

In early January, choose a container that is 3 – 4 inches deep and has no drainage holes. A clear container with a wide flat base is good, plus you can watch the bulbs gradually develop. Put an inch or two of stones or marbles on the bottom of the container. Carefully put your paperwhite bulbs, pointed tip up, on top of the stones. It’s okay to crowd the two or three paperwhites next to each other.

Once you have examined your bulbs from many angles and they look right to you (ask any family critics who happen to be in the room with you), add another layer of stones or marbles. The layer should cover the bulbs up to their “shoulders.” The tips of the bulbs should still be showing. Then add water, but just enough so that just the bottoms of the bulbs are covered by the water. You may need to look at it from the side to see where the water is. If you put in too much water, the bulbs will rot.

The bulbs prefer the air temperature to be about 65 degrees Fahrenheit. Check your bulbs every day to see if they need more water. When you see roots developing on the bottom of the bulbs, ask a parent to help you choose a sunny but cool window area to place your bulbs. They will grow very quickly!

Cathy Tiborni
Time for Tree Shopping

By the middle of November, even with Thanksgiving a week or so away, it may be time to pick out a holiday tree, particularly if you will be going to a tree farm.

Here are a few ideas for choosing a live, cut, or balled and burlapped (B&B) tree. If you are cutting your own tree in the field, first look at its overall health. With this year's horrendous weather, you may buy a tree that has been under stress and end up with a living room full of needles. If the tree is already cut, start by running your hands along the branches. If a lot of needles fall off the branch, pass on it and leave it for Charlie Brown and the Peanuts Gang. If only a few needles come off, the tree may be a winner (ideally, none or only a minimal amount should fall).

After you get the tree home, make a fresh cut on the bottom of the trunk--two inches off should do it. This is necessary because air and dirt block the flow of water up the trunk (a hole drilled into the bottom of the cut end doesn’t help water move into the trunk any better than just a fresh cut). After “surgery”, put the tree in a bucket of water to keep the air out of the tree’s plumbing system, and place the bucket, with the “patient,” in a cool, shaded area--the north side of the house is best because it is cooler than other exposures. You could also shelter it amongst other trees or keep it in a dimly lit, unheated garage.

Purchasing and planting a balled and burlapped (B&B) tree can be a major investment, but it can also become a family tradition. Seeing your holiday tree grow over the years as it becomes part of your home landscape is a very gratifying experience. However, there are many things to consider prior to buying this type of tree due to the extra expense and work involved. When was the tree dug? If it was in the spring, it may have been stressed during the year if it was not cared for properly. Is the ball in good shape? The tree trunk shouldn’t wobble in the ball. Are the needles intact?

As with a cut tree, keep it outside in a sheltered area. Avoid southern exposures as this will encourage the tree to come out of its dormancy. Keep the ball moist but not soaking wet. Three days before the tree is scheduled to come into the house, put it in an unheated garage or in a shaded, protected exterior corner of the house. This procedure will help the tree acclimate to warmer indoor temperatures. After three days, the tree can come into the house. Choose a place in the home that is away from heat or direct, strong sunlight. Put the root ball in a metal tub to catch the water. Even though the ball may seem moist, it will lose water due to the tree’s natural water consumption and the low humidity inside the house. Check the root ball daily to make sure it is sufficiently moist.

Unfortunately, a B&B tree can only safely stay in the house for five days. Any longer than that and you decrease the tree's chance for survival. Once the tree comes out of the house, it goes back to the sheltered area for three days and then to where it will be planted in the landscape. For those gardeners who have poorly drained soil, pre-dig the planting hole before the ground freezes. This method works especially well for soils, such as clay, that do not drain well. Dig the hole so that is not too deep. You want the top of the root ball to be about two inches above the existing grade when it is in the hole. Fill the hole to above the grade with straw or bark mulch (thus insulating the soil on the bottom and sides of the hole), and cover the excavated soil with about 12 inches of mulch as well. Once insulated, cover the entire area with a plastic tarp. This will keep rain and snow from turning this area into a muddy, frozen mess. Gardeners who have soil with good drainage may not have to use mulch at all. They have had excellent success by pouring a bucket of very hot water into the hole just before planting the tree in order to melt any frozen soil.

When you are ready to plant, remove all of the mulch from the hole. If you use bark mulch, you can use this material to mulch the tree once it is planted. Place the root ball in the hole so that the top of it is about two inches above grade. Cut and remove any string or burlap from around the top part of the ball. Backfill the hole with the excavated soil and press to remove air pockets. Water the tree even if there is snow on the ground. This will also help settle any air pockets in the loose soil. Spread the mulch beneath the tree to at least the ends of the tree’s branches, and keep it away from the trunk by several inches to avoid damage by insects and mice.

Information about where to get Christmas trees in New Jersey is available here. If you have any further questions, contact your county’s Rutgers Cooperative Extension office.

Joe Gyurian
Holiday Cacti

Holiday cacti is the collective name given to a group of hybridized, mainly Brazilian, rainforest cacti sold in nurseries, florist shops, supermarkets, and big-box stores during the winter and spring holidays. Known as Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter cacti, they all have wide, flat, green stems called segments and produce showy, colorful flowers.

One way to determine the species is by closely examining the segments. The Thanksgiving cactus (Schlumbergera or Zygocactus truncata) has points at the tips of the segments while the Christmas cactus (Schlumbergera bridgesii) segments are smooth. The Easter cactus (Rhipsalidopsis gaertneri) differs from the other two with bristles on the sides and tips of the segments. Thanksgiving and Christmas cacti flowers are similar except that the former are symmetrically irregular and the latter are symmetrical. The flowers can be large, numerous, and literally weigh down the stems. The Easter cactus has smaller, star-shaped flowers. Flower color is not a dependable way to identify the species due to the effects of hybridizing: Christmas cactus blossoms are often red, tinged with purple; Easter cactus ranges from pink to dark red; Thanksgiving cactus can be orange, yellow, peach, lavender, purple, or white. This cactus, which flowers in late November, is often sold as a Christmas cactus because of its bloom time.

In their natural mountainous environment, these cacti grow in the crotches of trees where debris collects and decomposes. They grow rapidly during the rainy season, collecting water in the flattened, jointed stems to use when fresh water is not available or during a drought (when they become dormant). These jointed stems also are capable of photosynthesis because the cacti do not produce leaves. Knowing how cacti grow in nature can help when growing them at home. Soil should be rich in organic manner (not sandy). The plants need bright light (not full sun) because they receive filtered light in their natural habitat. The soil should be kept moist (not wet) with brief “dry-outs” between watering while the plant is growing and producing buds or flowers. When finished blooming, the plants will do well with drier soil.

Holiday cacti grow well and rejuvenate themselves when moved outdoors in late spring. They should not be placed in full sun, but rather in light shade. The pot in which the holiday cactus is growing should be self-draining. Depending on the species, the cacti can be left outdoors as the days shorten and the temperatures cool, but they will not survive a frost. They must be brought indoors. Introduce them carefully into the house by first moving them into a cool area. Buds that set up in early October on the Thanksgiving cactus will shrivel and fall off if the plant is moved too suddenly from the cool outdoors to the warm temperatures of indoors.

Holiday cacti propagate easily. In the spring or summer, cut off a piece of the plant that has at least two segments, and let it dry out for a few days. Place the segment in damp vermiculite. Within a month roots should form, and the plant can be put into a pot of potting soil mixed with one-third sand (which helps prevent over-watering). Holiday cacti do not need to be repotted often, perhaps every three years or longer if the plant appears to be doing well. Once established, they can become “heirloom” plants, handed down through family generations, to be enjoyed during many holiday seasons and celebrations.

Cathy Tchorni

Schlumbergera species.
Dracaena: Dragons in Space?

Dracaena means “dragon” and these common houseplants are from an ancient lineage associated with fabled dragons and magic. Among the most popular foliage plants grown today, they are easy care, slow growing, and long lived. There is wide variety in texture, color, and size. In return for minimal care, dracaena help filter the air of pollutants in our homes. These age-old plants may someday make our space colonies more homey and familiar while refreshing the air we breathe.

Dracaena hail mainly from tropical Africa and Madagascar. There, Drago, or the Dragon Tree (Dracaena draco), and the Dragon’s Blood Tree (D. cinnabari) have been prized for centuries for their rich red sap. Because red was associated with dragons, the sap was believed to have magical powers and was used in ritual and for medicine. Condensed to a resin, it became artist colorant, dye, varnish, and stain used for Stradivarius violins. Although called trees, dracaena are monocots and not “true” trees, so their growth is different. Growth at the crown branches each year, eventually producing an umbrella shaped top in older specimens. Villages are often identified with nearby ancient trees with unique shapes which are also local tourist attractions. At one time, dragon tree forests covered vast areas but now they are endangered. Today, few trees live long enough to develop the signature umbrella shape of older dragon trees.

A collection of dracaena houseplants would make its own indoor forest with variety in color, leaf, and size. Forms like Gold Dust, D. surculosa (green heavily dotted with yellow), Song of India, D. reflexa (with broad cream margins), Corn Plant, D. fragrans (with yellow center stripe), and Tricolor, D. marginata ‘Tricolor’ (with red, green, and cream stripes) suggest the variety available. One of the most commonly grown is Lucky Bamboo, D. sanderiana (a dracaena and not a bamboo).

As understory tropical forest plants, dracaena prefer bright but indirect light, moderate moisture, and warm temperatures. Let the soil dry slightly between watering and err on the side of too little rather than too much water. Provide a light, well-aerated soil, such as a mix of peat and pine bark. Most dracaena are sensitive to fluoride and show it by tip burn or browning (tip browning can also be due to dry air). Use bottled water if you have fluoridated city water. Avoid using perlite in the compost as perlite can release fluoride as it ages. Lucky Bamboo is typically grown in water but does best in moist soil. Dracaena grow slowly but taller forms eventually become unwieldy and too large for their space. The stem can be cut down and new growth quickly appears from the stub.

The attractive dracaena decorating your home today may help clear the air and make a space station feel more comfortable in the future. More than just pretty faces, dracaena remove some air borne toxins found in our homes. Plants absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen as part of their photosynthesis or food making process. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) wanted to see if plants could do more to keep air in contained structures like the space station pure for extended periods. NASA tested 19 houseplants, including four dracaenas, and concluded that the plants did filter out pollutants from synthetic fibers and materials such as formaldehyde and benzene from the air. Newer, more airtight homes present concerns because there is little exchange with inside and outside air.

Perhaps, the next time you look at a common dracaena, you’ll think of dragons and the magic of plants that help clear the air and make our houses into homes, even if those houses are space stations.

Gail Greer
Children’s Gardening Books as Holiday gifts

My lifelong love of plants and gardening took root in my grandfather’s vegetable garden and grandmother’s magnificent “rainbow” border gardens. Now that I am a grandparent, I encourage and witness my granddaughters catching the “bug.” As an educator, I also love books and am able to supplement actual gardening with the wonder of books on, of course, gardening!

My nine year old granddaughter in Sweden raises food such as radishes for her pet rabbit. My two-year-old granddaughter delights in meandering through pathways in my gardens and always stops along her way to point out the stepping stone she made for Pop’s birthday this summer. Delighted by birds at the bath fountain or feeders and the rabbits nibbling clover, she seems to be in seventh heaven in our backyard.

With winter fast approaching and fewer days to enjoy warm weather activities, I turn to some of the gardening themed books I have collected to read to them. Many I have also given to them as holiday gifts.

Below are a few books we have enjoyed together. They can hold the attention of children from ages approximately three and up.

Bunting, Eve. **Flower Garden**, Boston: Harcourt Children’s Books. 1994. A father and his daughter buy a flowerbox, soil, and flowers to surprise the girl’s mother. This is a loving family portrayal.

Bunting, Eve. **Sunflower House**, Moolooba, Queensland: Sandpiper, 1st Voyager Books. 4/19/1999. A boy plants sunflower seeds in a large circle. When the plants grow taller than the boy, he has a “Sunflower House.”


Stewart, Sarah. **The Gardener**, New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 1997. A young girl brings her suitcase full of seeds from the country to the city. Her uncle is a cantankerous baker, who is gradually won over by his niece’s use of flowers in his bakery.

Gail Smith
Winter Garden Calendar

DECEMBER

Winter Care
♦ Check tubers and corms in storage. If they are sprouting, put them in a cooler spot. If they are shriveling, re-wrap in paper bags with peat moss or sawdust.
♦ Lime can still be applied to lawns and gardens if a soil test shows it is needed.
♦ Fill holes and low spots in the landscape so soil can settle over winter.
♦ Store bird baths, planters, and other outdoor ornaments that may be damaged if water freezes in them.
♦ Mulch perennials, roses, and new plantings after the ground freezes or by mid-month.
♦ Keep firewood outside, away from houses’ foundations. Bring in only what will be used immediately because of possible carpenter ants or termites.
♦ Clean garden tools and sharpen pruning tools and store in a dry location.

Holiday Decorations
♦ To disinfect newly gathered pinecones and seedpods before using for indoor decorations, place in oven for one hour at very low temperature.
♦ Grape vines can be pruned for use as craft material.
♦ Decorative seed heads and dried flowers can be kept intact with pump-activated hairspray.
♦ If using a live holiday tree, make a fresh cut at the base of the trunk, and check the water level every day.

Houseplants
♦ Move plants back from cold window areas and keep an eye out for insect pests, especially on plants that summered outdoors. Wipe or shower houseplants occasionally to remove dust.
♦ Rotate houseplants in dim locations to sunny spots to keep them in prime condition.
♦ Remove decorative wrap from holiday plants or punch holes to allow for drainage.
♦ Quarantine all gift plants until you determine they aren’t harboring insect pests.

JANUARY

Planning
♦ Peruse seed and plant catalogs for spring, summer and fall garden ideas.
♦ Plan improvement to your landscape design.
♦ Consider use of container, raised and/or box gardens for smaller garden spaces, ease of weeding, and high yield of flowers or vegetables.
Winter Garden Calendar

Winter Care
- If there is no snow-cover, mulch perennials, especially new plantings, if not done in December.
- Check for soil heaving after thaws and freezes. Firm back plants into soil if needed.
- Mulch any bulbs that are showing leaves.
- Anti-desiccant sprays can be applied on a mild day (follow package directions).
- Brush off heavy snow from trees and shrubs. Don’t attempt to free plantings from ice.
- Avoid heavy traffic on dormant lawns.

Houseplants
- To increase humidity in homes, set plants on trays of pebbles and water.
- Fill a container with tap water and allow the water to warm to room temperature before watering cold-sensitive plants.
- Turn plants regularly to keep them shapely. Pinch back new growth to promote bushiness.
- Little or no fertilizer is needed during winter.

FEBRUARY

Planning
- Start these seeds during February/March: onion, leek, parsley, lettuce, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, begonia, browallia, geranium, lobelia, impatiens, ageratum, verbena, petunia, snapdragons, vinca, and sweet alyssum.
- Don’t start vegetable plants indoors too early. Six weeks ahead of the expected planting date is early enough for the fast growers, such as cabbage. Eight weeks allows enough time for the slower growers, such as peppers.
- Clean used flowerpots in a 1:10 solution of household chlorine bleach.
- Check viability of leftover seed. Spread a dozen seeds on a damp paper towel, roll it up and place it in a plastic bag. If at least ½ the seeds germinate in two to three weeks, they’re worth using.
- Check stored bulbs, tubers, and corms. Discard any that are soft or diseased.

Winter Care
- Check trees and shrubs for bagworms. Remove them by handpicking.

Pruning
- When temperatures moderate, start pruning fruit trees, grapes, brambles, and ornamentals except those that ‘bleed’ excessively: maple, beech, elm, birch, and black walnut.
- Remove dead, dying, or unsightly parts of the plant, sprouts growing at the base of the tree trunk, crossed branches, and v-shaped crotches.

Gail Smith