



## CROW WING COUNTY MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM

# Ask the Master Gardener

### OCTOBER 2013 COLUMN

Dear Master Gardener:

**My grandchildren enjoy walking on the paths through my flower gardens. Are there some plants that are poisonous and therefore too dangerous to have in my gardens?**

Some parts of plants are poisonous and can be dangerous, but without direct physical contact they are no different than any other plant in your gardens. There are many poisonous plants, but those that are more commonly grown in our northern gardens will be mentioned.

Monkshood (*Aconitum*) is a perennial grown in part shade, with leaves similar to delphinium, but with tall clusters of flowers that look like medieval monk's hoods, hence the name. All parts of this plant are highly poisonous, especially the roots and seeds. Wear gloves when you work with this plant and avoid skin contact. Like monkshood, *Delphinium*, also known as larkspur, is another highly toxic plant that may be fatal if eaten. All parts of delphinium are poisonous. Foxglove (*Digitalis*) is a biennial with showy, dramatic spikes of flowers. Foxglove leaves contain digitalis, a potent heart medicine, and children may become ill from sucking the flowers or eating the leaves or seeds. All parts of the lily-of-the-valley (*Convallaria majalis*) and Jack-in-the-pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*) plants are poisonous. The seeds and roots of several species of columbine (*Aquilegia*) are toxic and harmful if eaten.

Castor bean, which is a fast growing annual some people grow for its large attractive leaves, has very toxic components. Raw castor beans contain ricin, which is extremely toxic, and can be deadly if chewed and swallowed. One seed can kill a child and several seeds can kill an adult. Gardeners may want to think twice before growing this plant, but if you do be sure to prune off any flower clusters to prevent seed production and reduce the chance of accidental poisoning. Another annual that you may not want to have around children is Angel's trumpet (*Datura*), as all parts of this plant are highly toxic. All parts of caladium are poisonous and usually cause irritation, pain, and swelling of tissues. In addition, some bulbs are harmful if eaten, such as, daffodil (*Narcissus*), snowdrop (*Galanthus*), and amaryllis.

No matter how carefully you supervise little children, there is always the possibility that they will put something in their mouths that they shouldn't. If you suspect a child has consumed something poisonous, call the poison control hotline at 1-800-222-1222.

**Dear Master Gardener:**

**The lower leaves of my New England asters have turned brown and died and have bright orange bumps on the lower surface of the leaves and along the stems. Will this kill the plant?**

It sounds like your asters may be infected with rust fungi. According to Michelle Grabowski, department of plant pathology at the University of Minnesota, there are several different rust fungi that infect asters in Minnesota. *Coleosporium asterum* results in yellow leaf spots on the upper leaf surface and raised orange spore filled pustules on the lower leaf surface of New England aster and golden rod. Aster plants with chocolate brown pustules on the lower leaf surface are infected by *Puccinia asteris* or other species of *Puccinia*. Infection by rust fungi usually results in little or no affect on plant growth or blossom. To reduce the severity of this disease and all other fungal infections, it is important to reduce moisture on the foliage by using drip irrigation or watering early on a sunny day so foliage can dry quickly. If you see rust infection developing on some leaves, pinch them off and bury them to reduce the spread of the pathogen.

**Dear Master Gardener:**

**We bought our first home, a 1950s rambler, last spring and have struggled with the thin and weedy grass this summer. What should we be doing with the lawn and shrubs this fall as we work toward a nicer looking yard?**

There are several things you can do this month to improve your lawn. It is the ideal time to treat perennial broadleaf weeds such as dandelions because they are actively storing carbohydrates for the winter and will readily absorb herbicides. Look for products containing 2,4D, MCPP or dicamba. Annual weeds, such as crabgrass, should be treated in the spring with pre-emergent herbicides. Fall is also the best time of year to apply fertilizer to the lawn. Warm soil temperatures allow roots to absorb nitrogen and to promote early green-up in the spring. If your lawn soil has become compacted from heavy foot or machine traffic, fall is a good time to rent an aerator, leaving the plugs of soil it pulls up on the lawn to disintegrate with rain and irrigation. Good soil needs not only nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium but air as well, which aeration provides. To be effective, herbicides need a day or two without rain or watering; fertilization and aeration require frequent watering.

Since yours is an older home, shrubs may need attention too. Take a critical look at foundation plantings. If they are covering windows and impeding sidewalk and entrance use, it may be time to remove and replace them. Some may benefit by simply pruning and thinning them. The internet and the library have good information on when and how to prune, often with clear illustrations on doing so. It is important for you to learn the names of your trees and shrubs so that you can give them optimal care. For instance, knowing that a particular shrub is a weigela will help you learn that it should not be pruned in the fall but in spring after blooming.

A well cared-for yard is rewarding in itself and is an asset to the neighborhood.

## OCTOBER GARDENING TIPS

Killing frosts are likely this month. Nighttime cover (tarps, sheets of plastic, old bed linens) can prolong the growing season for flowers and vegetables.

Remove any diseased and insect-infested plants and place them in the garbage. Do not compost them because disease, eggs and larvae may overwinter in a compost pile. This is true for fallen fruit and leaves under fruit trees.

Plant daffodils, tulips, crocus and other spring-flowering bulbs this month. Plant to a depth 2-3 times the vertical diameter of the bulb. A bit of bone meal in the planting hole gives a bulb a good start, as do watering until freeze-up and a cover of mulch.

Dig up tender bulbs such as dahlias, cannas, tuberous begonias and gladiolas. Cure them for several days in a warm, dry place out of direct light. Store them in a box filled with peat moss in a cool, dry place.

Transplant garden herbs such as rosemary and sage into pots for the winter. Place them in a sunny window and keep them moist but not wet.

A good time to divide peonies is in the fall after the foliage has been killed by frost. Divide the clump into pieces with at least 3-5 eyes each. Plant in compost-rich soil, keeping the eyes no more than 1-2 inches below the soil surface. They may not re-bloom for a couple of years.

## QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?

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### NOVEMBER 2013 COLUMN

Dear Master Gardener:

**Can the pumpkins purchased for making jack-o-lanterns be used for making pumpkin pie?**

The terms “pumpkin” and “squash” can be confusing. Pumpkins and winter squash are popular vine crops and members of the family, cucurbits, which also includes summer squash, zucchini and cucumbers. There are two species of pumpkins.

Most jack-o-lanterns and some pie pumpkins come from *Cucurbita pepo* and huge pumpkins grown for competition come from *Cucurbita maxima*. Pumpkins grown for jack-o-lanterns typically are not eaten because the flesh is stringy and tasteless; however the seeds can be roasted and eaten.

Pumpkins used for making pies usually have smaller, sweeter fruit. Pumpkin pie is often made from squashes and some large squashes are used for ornamentation. Edible winter squash belongs to three species: *Cucurbita pepo* (acorn, delicata, and spaghetti types), *Cucurbita moschata* (butternut types), and *Cucurbita maxima* (Hubbard, kabocha, and buttercup types). Some cooks use butternut squash for pumpkin pies.

Dear Master Gardener:

**I've picked gourds from my garden to decorate my Thanksgiving table and was wondering if there is a way to make them last?**

Most of the gourds grown in Minnesota are of the *Cucurbita* species and have soft shells. They are the ones you see in grocery stores, farmer's markets, and wayside produce stands. *Cucurbita* gourds will be damaged by frost, so make sure to pick them before the first frost. A gourd is ripe when it is full-sized and its stem is brown or beginning to dry.

Leave a few inches of stem attached to the fruit when you cut it from the vine to help prevent disease organisms from entering the fruit. As the stem dries and twists it adds an interesting appearance to your gourds. Next, wash your gourds in warm, soapy water; then rinse them with water containing a few drops of disinfectant. Gently dry them with a soft cloth and lay them on newspapers in a warm, sunny location.

Turn them periodically and replace newspapers that are damp. After about one week the surface color will be set and the skin toughened. When this has occurred, again wipe each gourd with a soft rag soaked in a disinfectant solution and spread them on newspapers in a warm, dark place for a few weeks (more if the gourds are very large and fleshy). The warmth helps to dry the gourds and discourage mold and the darkness keeps the colors from fading.

When the gourds are completely dry, they are ready for display. You may polish them with paste wax, then buff them with a soft cloth or coat them with clear shellac if you like a hard gloss finish.

**Dear Master Gardener:**

**I keep hearing that I should mulch in the fall. Why should I mulch, what should I mulch, and what should I mulch with?**

The purpose of mulching is to insulate soil so that it freezes gradually in the fall and thaws slowly in the spring. This reduces the heaving of plant crowns caused by freeze-thaw cycles. It also reduces soil moisture loss in dry autumns and open winters. Mulch is best applied after there is frost in the ground and removed in spring when temperatures have warmed and new growth becomes evident.

Perennials, particularly tender perennials, are the primary beneficiaries of winter mulching. Tender shrubs can benefit, too, but mulch can also provide winter homes for voles and mice, who then grow fat on shrub bark. Usually two to four inches of mulch are recommended. Unlike some summer mulches, which are used to look pretty and can be costly, most winter mulches are free. Common ones are pine needles, straw, evergreen boughs (easy to remove in the spring), and shredded leaves.

Unshredded leaves, particularly oak and maple tend to mat and mold. An often unheralded benefit of mulch is that you can walk on it in the garden without getting your shoes muddy.

## **NOVEMBER GARDENING TIPS**

- As days grow shorter and the angle of sunlight changes, houseplant growth slows. Place plants in bright, sunny windows and reduce the frequency of fertilization
- Don't let thick layers of leaves accumulate on lawns, which will encourage mold and fungus. Rake leaves up regularly and compost or dispose of them. Alternatively, run over them several times with a power mower to chip them fine. They will filter down and enrich the soil
- Wrap young trees with thin bark, especially fruit trees, with hardware cloth cylinders several inches wider than the trunks so they will last for several years. They will keep rabbits, mice and deer away.
- November is a good month to identify and eradicate invasive buckthorn because its leaves remain green long after other shrubs and trees have lost theirs. Those still-green leaves make it easy to identify. Look too, for buckthorn's dry, blue-black berries and occasional thorns. Its tenacious roots make it difficult to pull up and may mean cutting stems out and applying a stump killer.
- Collect and inspect garden tools used this summer. Clean and sharpen them and wipe them with a light coating of oil to prevent rust.
- Drain water from hoses and coil them loosely for flat storage.
- Seal bags of unused fertilizer and store them off the garage floor to prevent them from getting damp and hardening.
- Store liquid garden products indoors where they will not freeze and change their chemical composition.

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### DECEMBER 2013 COLUMN

**Dear Master Gardener:**

**What kind of care do poinsettias need? Is it safe to have poinsettias with small children around; aren't they poisonous?**

Although poinsettias are only sold during the holiday season, they continuously rank as the number one selling potted flowering plant in the U.S. They are susceptible to chilling injury, so make sure poinsettias are wrapped well at the store and kept warm on their way home. In your home, place the plant near a sunny window as it does best with bright light for at least six hours. Try to keep poinsettia plants away from drafts, fireplaces or places with fluctuating air currents. Water your poinsettias thoroughly when the soil feels dry to the touch. Don't leave it sitting in water or it may suffer root rot.

It is a common misconception that the poinsettia plant is poisonous; but according to the University of Minnesota and the Mayo Clinic, poinsettias are not poisonous. Ohio State University conducted research on the safety of the poinsettia plant and disproved any claims that the poinsettia is harmful to humans or animals. Like all ornamental plants, the poinsettia is not meant for human or animal consumption. Eating the leaves or stems of the plant may cause a stomach ache, vomiting or diarrhea, but a severe reaction is highly unlikely.

**Dear Master Gardener:**

**I would like to find an unusual plant to have in my home for Christmas other than the typical Christmas cactus, poinsettia, or cyclamen. Is there a houseplant that blooms in a red color that I could use?**

A plant you may want to consider is the Anthurium. It is a tropical plant native to Columbia and Ecuador and grown here as a houseplant. An Anthurium, which is in the arum family, has drooping, dark green waxy, heart-shaped leaves. Its showy, long-lasting blooms have a yellow spadix and large, flat, waxy bright red spathes. In favorable growing conditions, an Anthurium will flower throughout the year. Anthuriums prefer bright, indirect light, high humidity and consistent moisture. You should be able to find these plants at a local garden center or florist.

**Dear Master Gardener:**

**Last year I visited Oregon at Christmastime and enjoyed all the holly I saw there, both outdoors and indoors as cut décor. Can I grow some in Minnesota?**

The short answer is no. American holly, *Ilex opaca*, will not grow in Minnesota because it freezes, turns black and dies when temperatures go below 26 degrees F. Often florists carry it at Christmas time so that you can add it to your holiday decor. Holly leaves dry out and fall from their stems after 7-10 days but hormone treatment and anti-transpirant spray can extend their attractiveness up to 14 days. Fortunately, florist holly has usually been treated for you. Nonetheless it will be best served by placement out of direct sun in a cool spot.

There is a Minnesota Ilex, *Ilex verticillata*, commonly called winterberry. It has abundant and showy red berries but its deciduous leaves are not shiny and spiny. It makes an attractive, low shrub in a landscape, and stems with berries can be brought indoors at holiday time.

## DECEMBER GARDENING TIPS

- Buy a fresh Minnesota-grown Christmas tree. It is a renewable resource, provides habitat for wildlife, prevents soil erosion and employs people. Make a fresh cut just before placing it in its water-filled stand and keep it watered until you dispose of it.
- Like poinsettias, bright ornamental peppers are not poisonous, but persons handling them and then rubbing their eyes certainly feel “burned.”
- Check stored garden produce and bulbs periodically, discarding any that smell bad, have shriveled, or show mold or soft spots.
- Deicers can “burn” grass and shrubs. Use builder’s grit or sand instead.
- Some gifts for gardeners might include a subscription to Northern Gardener, a 2014 Minnesota Gardening or Northland Arboretum calendar, a good hand pruner or small pruning saw, a decorative plant, or a gift certificate to a nursery or garden center.
- Less popular than poinsettias, plants such as cyclamen, amaryllis, paperwhites, kalanchoe and others also provide winter color.

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