



CROW WING COUNTY MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM

Ask the Master Gardener

DECEMBER 2015 COLUMN

Dear Master Gardener:

My grandmother had hollyhocks and I remember as a child being in her garden with the flowers towering over the other flowers and me. Are they perennials and are they easy to grow?

Alcea rosea, hollyhock, are striking, old-fashioned flowers that have graced American and European gardens for hundreds of years. Like foxgloves and sweet Williams, hollyhocks are biennials, which means they require two growing seasons to complete their lifecycle. The first year they usually produce only a rosette of foliage; then bloom, set seed and die the second year. In the garden, they reseed themselves so readily, they seem like perennials, returning year after year. Many gardeners choose to purchase greenhouse-grown biennial plants rather than grow them from seed because the plants are in their second year and will bloom that season. Hollyhocks grow best in full sun and moist, well-drained soil. They grow quickly and their flower stalks may need staking 4-6 weeks into the growing season. They are hardy to USDA Zone 3.

Dear Master Gardener:

I would like to try growing gladioli this year for the first time. When should I plant them and how far apart?

Gladioli are not winter hardy in Minnesota, so they need to be planted in the spring and then dug up in September and stored over the winter, or treated as annuals. They are grown in beds and borders and are especially valued as cut flowers for floral arrangements. Gladioli plants are upright and only spread about 6-8 inches. They grow best in full sun. Plant them in well-drained sandy soil, rich in organic matter, loosening the soil to a depth of 10-12 inches. Gladioli corms can be planted beginning in mid-May, then again every two weeks through mid-June to extend the blooming season from July through August. You could also choose early, mid-season, and late cultivars, plant them all in May, and still enjoy continuous bloom for much of the summer. You could also extend bloom time by planting different sized corms. Larger corms bloom somewhat earlier than smaller corms of the same variety. Corms smaller than 3/4 inch in diameter may not produce flowers, so in order to have large-sized blooms, plant corms that are 1 1/4 inch or larger in diameter. Choose corms that are somewhat tall and plump and shaped like a chocolate kiss. Thick corms produce good quality flowers. Plant corms with the pointed side up, about four times as deep as their diameter. Measure the distance to the bottom of the planting hole, then plant the corm. Space the corms six to eight inches apart. For the best design effect in a border or bed, plant gladioli in groups of seven or more corms of the same cultivar.

Dear Master Gardener:

I moved my Ficus tree to a brighter area of my house and the leaves are dropping. What is causing the leaves to fall off and what should I do?

Some of the most durable, beautiful houseplants belong to the genus *Ficus*. You most likely have a rubber tree or weeping fig, as those are two commonly grown *Ficus*. These plants are notorious for dropping leaves when they are moved from one location to another. In addition, they have a tendency to drop leaves in autumn as the days grow shorter. Don't worry – they are able to develop lots of new foliage fairly quickly, as long as they get adequate light. *Ficus* plants will grow well in full sunlight, or in bright, medium light. Old-fashioned rubber trees can even grow well in a north-facing window that never receives any direct sunlight. One thing to keep in mind is that *Ficus* are quite sensitive to cold temperatures and should not be placed near a drafty doorway or cold window in winter. Another cause of leaf loss with a *Ficus* plant is keeping the soil too wet or allowing it to get too dry. Although leaf loss can be quite a nuisance with a weeping fig, it can be quite disfiguring in large-leaved plants such as fiddle-leaf figs or rubber trees.

Dear Master Gardener:

Last summer I had beautiful tuberous begonias in hanging baskets that I took indoors before a frost. I plan to keep them as houseplants and reuse them next summer. How can I best do that?

You can overwinter tuberous begonias and reuse them next year, but they are unsuitable as houseplants because they require a dormant period. Some begonias, such as Rex Begonias, do make good houseplants because they do not need a dormant period. Left outdoors, Minnesota winters will kill all begonias. To store tuberous begonias for next year, cut their stems down to 5 inches and allow the tubers to dry at room temperature, out of direct sunlight. Pull off leaves, stems and soil when they are dry but do not wash the tubers. Store the dry tubers in a perforated plastic bag filled with vermiculite or peat moss at a temperature between 40 and 50 degrees F. A spare refrigerator would be ideal. Occasionally check tubers and discard any with softening, rot or withering. In order to have June bloom you must restart the tubers in February. In a flat filled with vermiculite or peat moss, place them with the upper side (the side with a depression) up, with the peat or vermiculite just barely covering them. Place the flat where the temperature will be steadily 70 degrees F, and keep them moist, but not wet, because rot forms easily at this point. Roots will develop on bottoms, sides and tops of the tubers. In about a month stems will be about 1 inch high. At this point replant them into 5-6 inch pots or into their permanent containers, and move them to a lighter location. In May pinch the stem ends to encourage plants to be bushy and full of flowers. Two weeks before the last expected frost begin to harden them off. Every day set them outdoors in a shaded, sheltered spot, gradually reducing the shade and shelter and bringing them indoors every night. In early June they should be ready for their summer placement.

DECEMBER GARDEN TIPS

- Drain and cover bird baths.
- Poinsettia sap may irritate but is not toxic. Holly berries and mistletoe, however can be, especially for small children. Ornamental peppers aren't poisonous but are so "hot" that tasting or even handling them can be painful.
- Begin a periodic check of stored bulbs, corms and tubers. Look for shriveling, mold and soft spots. Discard damaged ones.

- Check stored produce such as potatoes, apples and squash and discard damaged ones. Often they were damaged when dug or picked or storage temperatures were too high or air circulation was poor.
- When you bring a poinsettia home, cut the bottom of the decorative covering off to allow excess water to drain out. Do not water until the plant surface feels dry, then water thoroughly. Display away from heating vents. Begin to fertilize after 4-6 weeks.
- Though poinsettias are perhaps the holidays' most popular plants, check your local nursery for other colorful plants such as amaryllis, cyclamen, anthurium and others.
- Some Christmas gifts for gardeners would be garden tools or gloves or a subscription to a gardening magazine such as Northern Gardener.
- Have a handy supply of sand available to spread on icy steps, walkways and driveways. Mix a small amount of granular deicer with the sand. The less deicer allowed to accumulate around lawn and shrubs the healthier they will be come spring.

Crow Wing County Master Gardeners are trained and certified volunteers for the University of Minnesota Extension Service. All information given in this column is based on research and information provided by the University. To ask a question, call the Master Gardener Help Line at 218-824-1000, extension 4040 and leave a recorded message. A Master Gardener will return your call.