



CROW WING COUNTY MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM

Ask the Master Gardener

JANUARY 2016 COLUMN

Dear Readers:

The University of MN Extension Master Gardeners of Crow Wing County (CWC) and the Northland Arboretum have entered into a partnership to support the activities of each organization. Interest in developing such a partnership came about after the Crow Wing County Commissioners made a decision on September 8, 2015, to withdraw support for the CWC Master Gardener program beginning January 1st of 2016. Because of that decision, CWC Master Gardeners will not have the benefit of a paid coordinator to address the numerous administrative duties required to keep the organization moving forward, nor will they have an actual physical space from which to carry out their duties. The Master Gardeners have been long time supporters of the Northland Arboretum, so it was seen as a perfect opportunity to strengthen and expand the relationship between the two organizations. The Arboretum is a great venue for Master Gardeners to sponsor educational programs, classes, and plant diagnostic clinics. It will provide a “home-base” for the Master Gardeners to carry out the majority of their activities; including a continuation of a telephone resource that allows the public to call in and leave a message regarding any horticulturally related question with the knowledge that a Master Gardener will call them back with research- based answers to their questions. Our new mailing address is:

U of M Extension Master Gardeners, P.O. Box 27, Brainerd, MN 56401. Please note the new number for the help line (218) 454-GROW (4769).

Dear Master Gardener:

I've been told that to improve drainage, gravel or broken pieces of terra cotta should be put in the bottom of the container? Does it really help?

It is common knowledge that plants like good drainage and roots sitting in water can severely damage or kill a plant. According to Jeff Gillman, PhD., former horticulture professor at the University of Minnesota, water drainage is actually better if you just fill your container all the way with potting media. His advice, “Don’t use gravel or other nonabsorbent materials at the bottom of your container to increase drainage. If you feel you need better drainage simply buy better-draining media from your local garden center.” ([The Truth about Garden Remedies](#), 2008). To keep the potting medium from escaping out the holes at the bottom of your container, place a piece of landscape fabric or an unbleached coffee filter on the bottom of your container before adding the potting soil.

Dear Master Gardener:

My mother-in-law gave me a Hoya plant that she has had for over twenty years. How do I take care of it and how often does it flower?

Hoya, also known as wax plant, is an indoor tropical plant that can live forever, has a reputation for being indestructible and produces fragrant, star-shaped flowers. Both the leaves and flowers of *Hoya* are thick and waxy. The most commonly grown *Hoyas* include the variegated forms of *Hoya carnosa* and *Hoya bella*. *Hoyas* do not mind being root bound and can be kept in the same container for years, as long as they are fertilized during the spring and summer. In fact, many sources recommend rarely repotting a *Hoya*. *Hoyas* are sensitive to too much water, so it is imperative that they be potted in containers with drainage holes and a well-draining potting medium. Allow them to dry out completely between watering. Like other easy houseplants, *Hoyas* tolerate low light levels; however they will grow faster and be more likely to flower under bright, indirect light conditions. The key factors that trigger a *Hoya* to bloom are age of maturity (yours is definitely mature at over 20 years of age), having the plant in bright indirect light and keeping it root-bound. Fertilizing your plant with a balanced fertilizer during active growth (spring and summer) may also induce flowering. When your *Hoya* is done blooming resist the urge to remove the spent blooms, as subsequent blooms will reappear from those same spots in following years.

Dear Master Gardener:

Are there any unusual flowering houseplants I can try other than the typical ones?

Availability could be an issue, but following are three atypical flowering houseplants. Bird of Paradise is a relative of the banana and one of the most exotic, easy to grow potted plants. It not only has showy fans of blue-green leaves that are attractive all the time, but mature plants send up stalks topped with fascinating birdlike flowers that combine colors of golden orange and peacock blue during the warm seasons. Clivia, a member of the lily family, is easier to grow than an orchid and more unusual than an amaryllis. It has dark, evergreen, leathery leaves that provide a perfect backdrop for the dense clusters of orange flowers that appear. There are some yellow cultivars; however, they are quite rare and consequently expensive. A zebra plant is another option. Not only does it have dark leaves with striking, light-colored veins, making it a beautiful houseplant when it is not in bloom, it also sends up spikes of waxy bright yellow-bracted flowers that are long-lasting. Zebra plants do have a reputation for being somewhat difficult to grow because they require high humidity and consistent moisture.

Dear Master Gardener:

I seem to have a black thumb and kill every houseplant I get. I would really like to have a few houseplants but I need some basic advice that I hope you can give me.

The very basic elements of houseplant survival are light, water and soil. To begin, decide where you want to place a plant and determine where and what kind of light that spot will provide. High-light plants require a south-, east- or west-facing window without trees or buildings to diffuse the light. Medium-light plants require slightly less light but should be within three feet of a south-, east-, or west-facing window. Low-light plants need to be within six feet of a south-east-, or west-facing window or close to a north-facing window. Rarely do plants suffer from too much light.

Soil stores nutrients and water for plants. Commercial sterile, soilless potting mixtures of peat moss, perlite and vermiculite are readily available and inexpensive. A homemade mixture of equal parts sterile soil, perlite and vermiculite works equally well.

Watering is the area where most houseplant owners fail, with overwatering being the primary culprit, followed by under watering and erratic watering. If you water once a week, thoroughly, allowing the excess to drain away, you will meet the water requirements of most plants under

ordinary circumstances. Always, however, feel the soil before watering. The surface should feel dry and the top few inches slightly moist. If you treat a living plant as you would a living pet, both of them should thrive.

Though light, soil and water are the most important basics, there are other considerations. One is the container the plant will live in. Make sure there is a drainage hole so that if the plant has been overwatered, that water can drain out. For that reason a plastic saucer should be placed under the plant. Experts disagree on when and how much fertilizer should be used. A new plant should not be fertilized for four months, giving it time to acclimate to its new home. Thereafter, some say it should be fertilized only in the spring and summer, others feel it should be fertilized at about half-strength once a month all year long. Many plants will eventually need repotting, but that is a question for another time.

JANUARY GARDENING TIPS

- Start perusing garden catalogs, making note of plants you might want to grow in the 2016 gardening season.
- Take a leisurely walk through several neighborhoods, noting trees and shrubs that have winter interest.
- Give house plants a shower to remove dust that may have accumulated. It prevents sunlight from penetrating into the foliage in this season of low light.
- Keep bird feeders filled.
- Treat yourself and your home with a new houseplant for a spot of winter color.
- If you had a live Christmas tree, remove its branches this month and spread them on perennial beds for additional winter mulch.
- Check shrubs for deer and rodent damage and take steps necessary to prevent further loss, such as spreading netting and spraying.

University of Minnesota Extension Master Gardeners are trained and certified volunteers for the University of Minnesota Extension Service. All information given in this column is based on university research. **To ask a question, call the Master Gardener Help Line at 218-454-GROW (4769) and leave a recorded message. A Master Gardener will return your call.**