

## Horticulture 2024 Newsletter No. 45 December 2, 2024

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### ANNOUNCEMENTS:

#### Last Newsletter of 2024!

For the months of November through February, the Hort Newsletter will switch to monthly distribution. You can expect a summary of the month's gardening topics the first Monday of each month during this time. This newsletter is a collection of gardening topics for the ENTIRE MONTH of December.

#### K-State Garden Hour Wednesday, December 4, 2024 12:00 PM – 1:00 PM

Register to attend this free webinar here:

<https://hnr.k-state.edu/extension/consumer-horticulture/garden-hour/>



### Home Hydroponics

Wednesday, December 4th 12:00PM -1:00PM CST

Winter blues got you down? Grow fruits and vegetables year-round with hydroponics! Join Lane Wiens, Shawnee County Horticulture Agent, as he discusses the basics of hydroponics, types of hydroponic systems, crops that grow well without soil, and tips on building your own system at home.



Register Here!



Please register for this free Zoom Webinar at:  
[ksre-learn.com/KStateGardenHour](https://ksre-learn.com/KStateGardenHour)



## VIDEO OF THE WEEK:

### Rabbit, Mole and Deer Mitigation

(K-State Garden Hour November, 2024)



Learn what plants are best suited for the landscape to avoid issues with wildlife.

## GARDEN TO-DO

Cover strawberry plants with mulch so they don't heave out of the ground this winter.

## VEGETABLES

### Using Old Garden Seed



Seeds typically remain viable for about 3 years if kept in cool, dark, dry conditions though there are exceptions. For example, members of the carrot family (carrots, parsnips and parsley) have short-lived seeds which are usually good for only 1 to 2 years. Colorado State University has a publication with more detailed information about the longevity of specific species. ([Storing Vegetable and Flower Seeds](#))

If you are unsure of your seed viability you can test it by placing 10 seeds on a paper towel moistened with warm water. Cover the seeds with a second moistened towel. Roll up the towels and place inside a plastic bag with several holes. Keep the bag in a warm location such as the top of a refrigerator. Remoisten the towels with warm water as needed. After the first week, check for germination. Remove sprouted seeds and check again after another week. The percent of seeds that sprout indicates the germination rate. You can decide if this rate is acceptable or if purchasing new seed is warranted.

## Storing Potatoes in Cold Temperatures



Ideally, potatoes should be stored in a cool garage or basement where the relative humidity is 90% and the temperature is between 40- and 45-degrees F. Although they can be stored for long periods of time in temperatures below 40-degrees F, the starches begin converting to sugars which alters the flavor of the potatoes. If this happens in your storage area, keep the potatoes at room temperature for two to three days prior to consuming and the desired flavor should return. If stored above 45-degrees F for

prolonged periods of time, the potatoes will begin to sprout. Potatoes will become soft and shriveled if the relative humidity is too low. Storing potatoes in perforated plastic bags will help maintain higher humidity levels.

## ORNAMENTAL TREES

### Controlling Volunteer Trees

By now hopefully you've heard the phrase "Right Plant, Right Place" which emphasizes the importance of proper plant selection and placement in order to minimize problems in the landscape. Though trees are a vital part of our environment, proper placement in the landscape is necessary for aesthetics, but more importantly for safety. There are situations where volunteer trees need to be controlled. Understanding the species can help you decide what control method is most appropriate.

Some species of trees can be controlled by cutting the trunk down to the ground. For example, eastern redcedar is a very common species that will not resprout after cutting. Most tree species do resprout after cutting making this method ineffective on its own.

Trees that resprout, such as: Siberian elm, hackberry, Osage orange (hedgeball), oak, ash, aspen, cottonwood, maple, sycamore, willow and many others will either need to be dug out or treated with herbicide after cutting. Using herbicides for tree control is specific to trees that originated from seed rather than suckers which develop from the roots of an existing tree. Avoid using herbicides on suckers unless your goal is to remove the entire tree. Herbicides applied to suckers may likely damage and quite possibly kill the original tree.

This is a good time of year to evaluate your trees and determine if any volunteers need to be controlled.



## Choosing and Caring for Your Christmas Tree

Some commercial sites sell cut trees that have already been stored for several weeks. Evaluate the trees carefully before purchasing to find one that will last the entire holiday season. Here are some red flags to avoid:

- Dull, gray-green needles
- Dry, stiff and brittle needles
- Needles drop from tree easily

When you get your tree home, recut the trunk about one-inch above the base. This will open up the plant tissues that enable the tree to pull in water. Place the trunk into the stand with water immediately after cutting.

As with traditional houseplants, avoid placing your Christmas tree near heat sources or drafty windows and doors. Maintain the water level in the tree stand reservoir. If the cut end of the tree is exposed to air it will begin to seal over and need to be recut again. Fresh cut trees tend to absorb a lot of water during their first couple of weeks so check the water level at least every other day.

Living trees are a great option for homeowners who have space in their landscape. This requires a bit more planning by selecting a tree that will work in your landscape and climate. It is also a good idea to dig the hole where the tree will be planted before the ground freezes so it can be planted soon after the holidays.

Living trees should only be kept indoors for a few days. Trees kept indoors too long will come out of dormancy and initiate new growth. If the tree is then moved outdoors during winter, it will not be hardy to the cold conditions and can suffer extreme damage or even death. Water the tree in well during planting and apply a layer of mulch to prevent the water from freezing.

## What to Do with the Christmas Tree After Christmas

After the holidays, many municipalities allow cut Christmas trees to be placed curbside. Trees are then collected and burned or ground up for mulch. If you miss the designated date, or your trash collector doesn't accept trees, there are several options to maximize the use of the tree.



An old Christmas tree can be used to benefit birds and fish. Placing it in the landscape provides shelter for birds. Sinking your Christmas tree in a pond is an easy way to improve fish habitats. The tree serves as a reef, as the branches provide substrate for water plants to grow and cover for minnows and other forms of small aquatic life. Larger fish are drawn by the shade and the presence of prey.



## FLOWERS

### Caring for Christmas and Thanksgiving Cacti

Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera bridgesii*) and Thanksgiving cactus (*Schlumbergera truncata*) look exotic but are rather easy to maintain under the right growing conditions. While in bloom, water the plants when the soil surface is just becoming dry to the touch. Never let the plants remain in standing water and well-drained soil is a must.



Holiday cacti bloom in response to the shorter days and cooler nights of winter. If you are gifted a Christmas cactus this season, to prolong the bloom, keep the daytime temperature between 60-65 degrees F and the nighttime temperature between 55-65 degrees F. Keep your cactus in total darkness for at least 12 of every 24 hours. The plant should receive bright, indirect light the rest of the time.

Sudden changes in temperature can cause the cactus to drop its blooms. When transporting it home be mindful of the outdoor temperature and protect your plant from the cold.

The segments of the holiday cactus that look like leaves are actually stems known as “phylloclades”. When blooming is done, you can prune the cactus between these segments. Each cut phylloclade remaining on the parent plant will produce one to two new stem segments. This will encourage branching and a fuller plant. The cuttings removed from the plant can be established into new plants. Dip the cut-end of the stem into water and then rooting hormone, which can be purchased at garden centers or online. Secure this end into potting mix and keep it moist and in a warm location with bright light. Once roots develop you can transplant it into a cactus/succulent media.

### Poinsettia Care

Modern poinsettia varieties hold onto their beauty for a long time with proper care. Place your poinsettia in an area with bright light, but don't let it touch cold window panes. The day temperature should be 65 to 75 degrees F with 60 to 65 degrees F at night. Temperatures above 75 degrees will shorten bloom life and below 60 degrees may cause root rot. Move plants away from drafty windows at night.

Poinsettias do not tolerate saturate soil so avoid overwatering. On the other hand, if the plant is allowed to wilt, it will begin to drop leaves. To maintain proper moisture, examine the potting soil daily by sticking your finger about one-half inch deep into the soil. If it is dry to this depth, the plant needs water. Place the plant in the sink and add lukewarm water to the soil surface until water runs out of the drainage hole. When the pot finishes draining it can be placed in a saucer or back in the foil wrap.



## Are Poinsettias Poisonous?



Since childhood I've heard that poinsettias are poisonous and should not be kept in a home that has pets indoors. The origins of this rumor are not certain though the effects are widespread. Studies have been done to report side effects for humans and pets after consuming poinsettias. Though pets may have some negative gastrointestinal symptoms if they consume parts of a poinsettia, the plants are not considered a major health risk to animals or humans. Regardless, poinsettias are not considered edible

and could cause discomfort if ingested, especially in large quantities. Homes with pets that are prone to chewing should keep indoor plants out of reach.

As a member of the Euphorbiaceae family, poinsettias are related to the rubber tree. The rubber tree is responsible for the production of natural latex. For this reason, anyone with a latex intolerance may be sensitive to direct contact with poinsettias as well.

## MISCELLANEOUS

### Monitor Indoor Plant Temperatures

Now is a good time to check on houseplants to ensure they aren't getting too cold. Plants next to windows or near exterior doors are at the greatest risk. Many houseplants including: Chinese evergreen (*Algaonema*), flamingo flower (*Anthurium*), croton (*Codiaeum*), false aralia (*Dizygotheca*), and ming and balfour aralia (*Polyscias*) are highly sensitive to cold temperatures.



Most houseplants prefer temperatures above 50 degrees F though some require the temperature to be over 60- or 65-degrees F. If necessary, move plants away from the windows or door entrances to reduce cold temperature exposure.

## QUESTION of the WEEK



### Tomatoes with Fewer Seeds

*As I plan my garden for next year I would like to know if there is a tomato variety that produces fewer seeds. I use most of my crop to make salsa and I'd like to minimize the number of seeds.*

Any tomato variety can be used to make salsa, but for those who prefer thick salsa with as few seeds as possible, "paste" varieties, such as Roma, are the recommendation.

Slicing varieties of tomatoes will produce a more watery salsa, which may still have great flavor, but will also typically have more seeds.

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For questions or further information, contact your local extension agency.

This newsletter is also available on the World Wide Web at:

<http://hnr.k-state.edu/extension/info-center/newsletters/index.html>

The web version includes color images that illustrate subjects discussed. To subscribe to this newsletter electronically, send an e-mail message to [hortsupport@ksu.edu](mailto:hortsupport@ksu.edu) listing your e-mail address in the message.

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