Video of the Week:  Dividing Peonies to Share

PESTS

Garden Spiders

People may become concerned when they see a large, noticeable spider setting up shop in or near the garden. These garden spiders feed on insects and are considered beneficial.

There are actually two common species of garden spiders in Kansas that are active during the day. The yellow garden spider has a black abdomen with yellow to yellow-orange markings. The black legs have a yellow or reddish band.

The banded garden spider has numerous bands on both the abdomen and legs. Those on the abdomen are alternating white and dark bands. The legs have alternating black and orange bands.

Both of these spiders are orb weavers that spin large webs with the typical spider web shape. Though these garden spiders have poor eyesight, they are extremely sensitive to vibrations that pass through the web and use this sensitivity to capture their prey. Since these spiders are beneficial and harmless to humans, it is recommended that they be left alone. (WU)

Velvet Ants

Adults of this insect are sometimes called "Cow-Killers" because of their powerful sting. These large (about 1-inch long), fuzzy red ants are not ants at all, but rather wasps. Velvet ant females are wingless (and resemble ants), while the males have blue-black wings and are usually found flying low above the ground in sandy areas. The female runs around searching for bumble bee
nests in which to lay eggs. She will drop one egg beside each brood chamber. The young larvae will invade the brood chamber and feed on bee larvae. As mentioned earlier, velvet ants have very powerful stings. The best control is to avoid these colorful and conspicuous insects. (WU)

FLOWERS

Reblooming Christmas and Thanksgiving Cacti

Christmas Cactus (Schlumbergera bridgesii) and Thanksgiving Cactus (Schlumbergera truncate) are popular flowering holiday plants. Both are epiphytes native to the jungles of South America. Epiphytic plants grow on other plants and use them for support but not for nutrients. Though these cacti are different species, they will hybridize and produce varying stem shapes. Christmas cactus normally has smooth stem segments. Thanksgiving Cactus has hook-like appendages on each segment.

Flowering will not occur unless induced by temperature and light treatment. If the temperature is held at 50 to 55 degrees F, flowering will occur regardless of day length. But flowering usually is not uniform. Temperatures below 50 degrees F prevent flowering. Nights greater than 12 hours long and temperatures between 59 and 69 degrees also can generate flowers. Twenty-five consecutive long nights is enough for flower initiation. Nights will naturally become greater than 12 hours close to the fall equinox, which is on September 23 this year. A plant receiving natural sunlight but no artificial light during night hours, will have this 25-day requirement met about October 20. It takes an additional nine to 10 weeks for flowers to complete development and bloom.

Both of these cacti like bright indirect light. Too much sun may cause leaves to turn yellow. Common household temperatures are fine. Keep soil constantly moist but not waterlogged. These plants seem to flower best if kept a little pot bound. If you need to repot, try waiting until spring. (WU)

Reblooming Poinsettias

If you have saved last year's poinsettia and want it to flower again this year, you must follow certain procedures. Poinsettias are known as "short-day" plants. Growers found out long ago that poinsettias can be brought into bloom if they are given short days and long nights. Originally, it was thought that short-day plants needed a short duration of daylight in order to flower. Now we know that flower formation is actually triggered by long periods of uninterrupted darkness. For poinsettia, at least 12 hours of each 24 must be uninterrupted dark. Night temperature also has an effect and should be below 70 degrees F with 60 to 65 degrees F preferred.
During the day, place the plants in the sunniest location of the house. This high level of light is needed for the plants to have the energy required for good bract coloration. Day temperatures should range between 65 and 75 degrees F.

Providing uninterrupted darkness can be a problem for gardeners unless there is a room in which the lights are never turned on. If you don't have such a room, place your poinsettia in a dark closet or cover it with a cardboard box each night for the required 12 hours. If using a cardboard box, tape all the seams with duct tape to cut off any light. Poinsettia takes anywhere between eight and 11 weeks to flower once the dark treatment has been started. Normally, people start the dark treatment in early October. The first six weeks are critical. For every night you miss during the first six weeks, add two days to the bloom time. After the six-week dark treatment, the buds have set and the dark treatment is no longer needed. (WU)

**MISCELLANEOUS**

**Adding Organic Materials Directly to the Garden**

If the severe summer weather has brought an early end to your garden, consider adding organic materials directly to the soil rather than composting. Materials such as residue from lawn renovation, rotted hay, or rotted silage can be added and then tilled in. Coarser materials such as tree leaves or garden residue should be shredded. A lawn mower with a bagging attachment can be used to shred this material and collect it in one operation.

Organic materials can be spread to a depth of about 3 inches and tilled in. Be sure the soil is not too wet before tilling. During warm weather, the material will decompose quickly and the process can be repeated every two weeks. Later in the fall, it may take longer. This process can be repeated from now until late November to early December.

Remember that organic matter helps almost any soil. It improves clay soil by improving tilth, aeration and how quickly the soil takes up water. In sandy soils, it acts as a sponge by holding water and nutrients. (WU)

**Ornamental Sweet Potatoes**

We often receive the question as to whether ornamental sweet potatoes are safe to eat. The answer is yes. Note that they are chosen for ornamental qualities rather than taste and so may not have the quality of our traditional types. (WU)
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