Horticulture 2012 Newsletter
No. 49    December 11, 2012

Video of the Week:  Do-It-Yourself Holiday Gift: Gifts with Flair
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FLOWERS

Care of Christmas and Thanksgiving Cacti

Christmas Cactus (Schlumbergera bridgesii) and Thanksgiving Cactus (Schlumbergera truncata) 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, and Thanksgiving Cactus has hook-like appendages on each segment.

Both of these cacti prefer bright indirect light. Too much sun can result in the leaves turning yellow. Common household temperatures are fine. Soil should be kept constantly moist but not waterlogged. Give them a light fertilization every other week. Blooming will normally cease in late winter to early spring, but continue to keep them moist and fertilized until fall. During the fall, stop fertilizing, and give the plants only enough water so the stems do not shrivel in order to encourage flower bud formation. Though these plants seem to flower best if kept a little pot bound, flowers will diminish if they are too crowded. If you haven't repotted in several years, or if you notice a decrease in flowering from the previous year, move the plant to a larger pot in the spring. If possible, move the plants outside for the summer. Choose a shady spot because these plants will not tolerate full sun. Leave the plants outside until frost threatens.

Normally, the plants will have received enough cool nights in the 50- to 55-degree range that flower buds will have formed. However, if they haven't, subjecting the plants to nights greater than 12 hours long and temperatures between 59 and 69 degrees can also generate flowers. Twenty-five consecutive long nights is enough for flower initiation. Place the plants in an unused room or cover them with a dark cloth or cardboard box to insure that they receive uninterrupted darkness. After the flower buds have formed, it takes an additional nine to 10 weeks for flowers to complete development and bloom. (WU)
ORNAMENTALS

Controlling Volunteer Trees

Though trees are a vital part of our landscapes, there are situations where volunteer trees need to be controlled. This is often a case of the wrong plant in the wrong place. If the tree is a desirable species, you may want to consider transplanting in the spring. If it is not, active control measures would be in order.

Most trees resprout after cutting though some don’t. Cutting those that don’t resprout is an effective control method. For example, eastern redcedar is a very common species that will not resprout after cutting. Those that do resprout include Siberian elm, hackberry, osage orange (hedgeball), oak, ash, aspen, cottonwood, maple, sycamore, willow and many more. These trees will either need to be dug out or the cut stump treated with herbicide after cutting.

Note that when we say volunteer trees, we mean those that come from seed rather than suckers that come from the roots of an existing tree. The recommendations given in the remainder of this article are designed to kill these volunteer trees. Using herbicides on suckers will damage and very possibly kill the original tree. Trees that commonly produce suckers include tree of heaven, honeylocust, black locust, hackberry, western soapberry, cottonwood, aspen, poplar, willow and boxelder. It is also possible for larger trees of the same species to be root-grafted. Even though root-grafted trees are not suckers, they do share materials between the individual root systems and therefore herbicides used to treat one tree can be passed to its neighbor.

Let’s say we have a tree we want to control that is a volunteer and there are no other trees of the same species close enough to be root-grafted that we do not wish to harm. What do we do? If the tree is any size, you probably do not want to dig it out. That leaves using a herbicide on the cut stump. Basal treatments are also possible but that is beyond the scope of this article. First decide what herbicide to use. Triclopyr and glyphosate are the herbicides most commonly available to homeowners. Triclopyr is found in many brush killers and glyphosate is found in Roundup as well as numerous other products. Read the label before purchasing to make sure that a cut stump treatment is listed. Most often the undiluted product is applied to the stump immediately after cutting. A paint brush is often used for the application though some people will dip their pruning shears in the products immediately before cutting. Regardless, it is important that the stump is treated immediately or at least within 5 minutes. Note that a paint brush with foam rather than bristles is less likely to drip.

Trees do not need to be actively growing to be controlled. Actually this time of year is a very good time to treat as long as applications are not made when the temperature is below freezing. (WU)
MISCELLANEOUS

Tomato: Fruit or Vegetable?

If you want to start a lively discussion, ask a gardener whether the tomato is a fruit or a vegetable. Actually, tomatoes are both. Botanically, a tomato is a fruit, but horticulturally and legally, the tomato is a vegetable. There is an interesting story behind the legal decision that tomatoes are a vegetable. It all comes back to Congress and protective tariffs.

In 1883, the U.S. Congress passed an act establishing protective tariffs on several commodities including vegetables. There was a 10 percent tariff imposed on the value of imported vegetables coming into the US from the Caribbean. An enterprising importer had a load of tomatoes shipped from the Caribbean region through the port of New York in 1886. When assessed a tariff, he protested saying tomatoes were fruits and not vegetables. He sued through the court system and his case eventually came before the U.S. Supreme Court. The court ruled that tomatoes were to be classed as vegetables, not fruit. Therefore, he lost the case and had to pay the tariff. In 1893, Justice Horace Gray wrote the following opinion for the court:

"Botanically speaking, tomatoes are the fruit of a vine, just as are cucumbers, squashes, beans and peas. But in the common language of the people – whether consumers or sellers of provisions – all these are vegetables which are grown in kitchen gardens and, whether eaten cooked or raw, are, like potatoes, carrots, parsnips, turnips, beets, cabbage, celery or lettuce, usually served at dinner in, with or after the soup, fish or meats which constitute the principal part of the meal, and not, like fruits generally, like deserts."

This Supreme Court decision established the working definition that is currently used to determine whether a particular food item should be classed as a fruit or vegetable. However, there is still some question regarding melons because they are grown like vegetables but are generally eaten like fruits. We may need another court decision for melons. (WU)

Storing Pecans and Other Nuts

During the holiday season, pecans and other nuts are commonly given as gifts or purchased for holiday cooking. Nuts can quickly lose quality if not stored properly. Excessive water loss can lead to shriveled nutmeats, and the fats and oils in nuts can quickly spoil – developing an off-flavor or rancid taste. Store shelled (or unshelled nuts) in the refrigerator, or preferably the freezer. Nuts quickly absorb flavors from other stored products, so store them in a tightly sealed container so they
won’t lose water or absorb flavors from other fruits or vegetables. A solid plastic container with a tightly fitting lid is preferred. You can use a heavy grade resealable plastic bag as well. If nutmeats are tightly sealed, they can be stored in a freezer for up to one year, but using them within six months is preferred. (WU)

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