



December 2013

December Tips

by **Bonnah Boyd, Somervell County Master Gardener**



*Cover flower and shrub beds with from 3 – 4 inches of mulch to prevent moisture evaporation and to modify soil temperatures.

*Clean out warm-season flower beds, add an inch or two of compost and mix it into the soil.

*Water the entire landscape at least once in December in the absence of significant rainfall to prevent freeze damage.

*If a hard, prolonged freeze (24 hours or more) is predicted, cover freeze-sensitive plants with cardboard boxes or blankets.

*Move tender container plants indoors near a very bright window to keep them healthy through the winter.

*Mow winter weeds to keep them in check.

*In areas of the vegetable or herb garden that are void of plants, pull winter weeds and plant a cover crop, such as cereal rye grain.

*Cover crops reduce weed establishment and can be tilled into the soil later to improve the soil.

*Use leaves from the trees to build a compost pile or as walkway materials. Continue to add leaves to the walkway as they press down with foot traffic.

*Remember to provide water for the birds during winter.

*This is a great time to plan next year's gardens. Try some new things. Add a new "feature" to your garden.

Mistletoe – Friend or Foe?

By Donna Hagar, Somervell County Master Gardener

under the mistletoe



*It must have been the mistletoe
The lazy fire, the falling snow ...
... It only took one kiss to know
It must have been the mistletoe!*

Ah, tis the season for the quintessential mistletoe. Mistletoe is an important part of the holiday season. Many girls and boys stole their first kiss by standing under mistletoe branches. Unfortunately, mistletoe has some qualities that Christmas love-birds probably prefer to ignore. Mistletoe, or *Phoradendron tomentosum* is a parasitic plant, growing on limbs of trees, with elms and hackberries favored among our native trees. Mistletoe can grow 2-5 feet in diameter, and with its evergreen foliage, becomes highly prominent in our landscape trees in the winter, when their host trees have lost their leaves.

As a parasitic plant, mistletoe grows into the wood of the host tree sucking water and minerals. Even though mistletoe is a true plant, meaning it can make its own nutrients from photosynthesis, it is the use of the tree's water resources that can cause the biggest problems.



While mistletoe rarely kills entire trees, limbs are certainly weakened by the loss of water, and with the added drought endured the last few years, mistletoe is just one more added stressor that trees must overcome, and thus may make the tree susceptible to other problems.

While mistletoe is present 12 months of the year, the high visibility during the winter months springs homeowners into action to control the plant. Small infestations can be controlled simply by removing infected limbs at least 12 inches below the mistletoe. Because the roots of mistletoe are embedded into the tree tissue, cutting just the plant, leaves roots behind that will just sprout more mistletoe.

Again, because the root system is so closely tied to the vascular system of the trees, chemical controls are not affective without also adversely affecting the tree.

Mistletoe produces white berries, which are eaten and spread by birds. It takes 2-3 years before a mistletoe plant matures to produce the berries, so control early is the most promising means of keeping it in check. Are there benefits (other than the obvious 'first kiss') to this prolific plant? As mentioned above, birds do feast on the berries, which are high in fat and full of protein. Other mammals, deer, squirrels and porcupines also partake in the berries. Several bird varieties nest in the foliage of mistletoe. Mistletoe is host to 3 varieties of hairstreak butterflies. Research is also being done on the extracts of mistletoe in the treatment of certain cancers.

So, friend or foe? Although a parasite that can weaken affected trees, trees can survive well with small infestations. So removal is recommended if it can be done safely and economically.

Resources: aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu; *National Wildlife Federation Dec/Jan 2014*

Night-Blooming Cereus

By Marilyn Cranford, Somervell County Master Gardener

About 4 or 5 years ago, my sister-in-law (a Tennessee Master Gardener) asked me if I had ever grown a night-blooming cereus. Not knowing just what she was talking about, we went out to her garden and she cut off a leaf of her existing plant. It was one of the ugliest plants I had ever seen, but I acted like she had given me a family treasure. However, she patiently explained that the plant blooms only at night or in the early, early morning.



So I went home and gave this newest addition to our home a lot of TLC. Well, to my surprise, the thing didn't bloom right away, but much later...two years later!! I couldn't believe this prize possession was finally going to bloom. So we watched as the first bud appeared, and every morning thereafter we patiently checked its progress. The occasion held us in suspense, and after around 8 to 10 days after making our regular check in the morning.....there it was in all its glory. What a beauty!!

As the pictures show, the bloom was sparkling white and nearly as large as my husbands hand. It was truly a blessing worth waiting for. Hope the pictures spark some interest to others who might want to try growing one. Enjoy!!

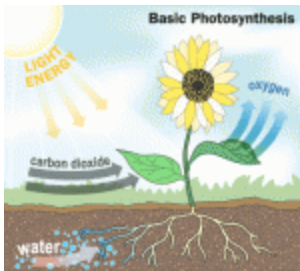
Night-Blooming Cereus or *Epiphyllum oxypetalum* is a species of cactus and one of the most cultivated species in the genus.

Have You Used A Plant Today?

by Katie Hunholz, Somervell County Master Gardener Intern

The Importance of Plants

The importance of plants, and the impact they have on our world, is something that is commonly overlooked. However, no matter your age, occupation, or lifestyle, we use plants everyday of our lives. In fact, without plants, we wouldn't even be able to survive! Plants are contributors in products used as food, soap, cosmetics, medicine, clothing, paper, housing, and numerous other purposes. Not only do we use plants for manufactured products, but they also benefit us in other ways such as erosion control, aesthetics, air quality, recreation, protection from the elements, etc. As we consider the importance of plants, I want to begin by focusing on how plants are essential to our very survival. In order to live, humans need 4 basic things: air, water, food, and shelter. Plants provide us with all of these things.



In a process called photosynthesis, plants absorb sunlight, carbon dioxide, and water, in order to produce carbohydrates (which give the plant energy to make food) and oxygen. The oxygen that is produced is then released into the atmosphere, allowing humans and other wildlife to be able to breathe. Plants also act as air filters, cleaning the air by capturing harmful particulates such as smoke, dust, and lead, and releasing harmless compounds back into the air through a series of chemical reactions.

Not only is oxygen essential for human life, but food is also necessary. Without plants, we would not have food! Everything that we eat is a product of a plant- except salt and water. All animals eat one of two things- other animals, or plants. This means that even if your diet consists entirely of meat, that meat would not exist without plants.

The third essential element of survival is shelter. We all need shelter- it is what protects us from wind, rain, heat, and cold. Plants are the building blocks for the lumber used in houses and the threads used in clothing. Without plants, we wouldn't even be able to start a fire in order to keep us warm.

The final element essential to life is water. There would still be water in the world, even without plants. However, plants are necessary because they act as filters in the water, removing dangerous impurities. As water flows through an ecosystem, by way of rain, streams, lakes, wetlands, etc., it gathers dangerous pollutants from the environment. But, while moving through soil, those impurities are filtered through plants and microbes. The plants and microbes absorb the harmful chemicals and release cleaner water back into the environment. If we didn't have plants, those impurities would slowly build up in the human body as we drank the water, leading to sickness, disease, or death.

As you can see, plants are extremely important! In fact, they are so important, that it would be impossible to elaborate on their uses in just one article. I invite you to join me as we begin a series of articles discussing the many things that plants are used for in this modern world, and how they have affected us in the past. I guarantee that this journey will be filled with amazing, eye-opening information that is applicable to all areas of life.

Literature Cited:

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Murphy, Margaret. Plant and Animal Ways. 1990. Chicago.
Laws, Bill. Fifty Plants that Changed the Course of History. 2010. Quid Publishing.
Sustaining Life: how human life depends on biodiversity. 2008. Oxford University Press

Community Horticulture Education Series (CHES)

Meeting on the 2nd Monday of every month except December

No Meeting in December

209 SW Barnard St, Glen Rose, Texas

Next Regular Business Meeting of the Somervell County Master Gardeners

January 15, 2014 at 10:00 am

1405 Texas Dr, Glen Rose, Texas