



The Washtenaw Gardener

Washtenaw County Master Gardener Newsletter

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Master Gardener Demonstration Garden

We would like to say thank you to everyone who spent time working in the Demonstration Garden throughout the year. Without the assistance of volunteers, we wouldn't be able to maintain the garden, which is enjoyed by county employees at the Zeeb Road location.

These photos were taken in the middle of October and show the autumn garden's beauty.



Chrysanthemums brighten the entrance to the garden from the building.



These two views of the garden, show the Montauk daisies in bloom. The view at the top is from east to west.



Volunteer Deb Smith carries a bag of mulch, assisting Extension Educator Bob Bricault. At right, Ginny Weingate and Deb Smith mulch plants in the Demonstration Garden.



LIVING CHRISTMAS TREES

Marianne Rzepka (MG 2008)

In the annals of Christmas past, there are many stories of those hearty souls who want a live tree in their homes to celebrate the Yuletide.

Those stories often include wrestling trees, weighing maybe 300 or more pounds with the attached root balls, into the house. Often those trees, planted in the yard after the holidays, were dead before spring.

It takes a dedicated gardener to brave the challenges of a live Christmas tree.

And yet, things have changed a little. Live Christmas trees now are easier to carry and to transplant outside once the presents have been unwrapped.

Bert Cregg, associate professor of horticulture at Michigan State University, has been working with Michigan growers on a pot-in-pot system in which the trees are grown in planting medium. As a result, the trees weigh a lot less, he says, making them "more awkward than heavy" to move around.

This will be the fourth year that Frank and Cathy Genovese of Candy Cane Tree Farm have been using the pot-in-pot system.

The process includes placing "socket" pots in holes bored into the ground, says Cathy Genovese. Small trees are planted in pots that sit in the larger socket pots with about an inch of room between the two pots to allow for good drainage.

After about three years, the trees are big enough to sell as small Christmas trees or they are planted in larger pots for future sales, she says.

The planting medium is a combination of lightweight peat and pine bark, the kind of bedding you often see used in nurseries. The mixture enhances the root system, resulting in a more fibrous root. Genovese says a 3-foot spruce planted using the pot-in-pot system has more root hairs than an 8-foot field-grown tree.

The pot-in-pot trees have less transplant shock because their roots are contained in the pot., says Genovese. Field-grown trees lose about 70 percent of their roots when transplanted, she adds.

Given the lighter planting medium and the smaller root ball, 6-foot, pot-in-pot tree will weigh less than 70 pounds, says Genovese.

Candy Cane Tree Farm, located outside Oxford in Oakland County, has small trees that in their pots measure up to 3½ feet tall and go for \$39.99. Medium-sized trees, about 4½ to 5½ feet tall go for \$69.99. The largest trees, up to 8 feet tall, are priced at \$129.99.

The higher cost is a result of the more expensive pot-in-pot process. The potting medium alone costs about \$45 a yard, plus shipping – and there is more labor involved than in simply growing cut trees, says Genovese.

There is a market for the trees, says Cregg. "There are people who feel that, environmentally, it will be better to have a living tree," he said, adding that sometimes a living tree will become a commemoration of a special event, such as a baby's first Christmas.



Pot-in-pot production

Candy Cane Christmas Tree Farm sells blue spruce, Serbian spruce, Norway spruce and Black Hill spruce as live Christmas trees. (You also can buy cut Christmas trees.)

Spruces do well as living Christmas trees, Cregg said. He likes Black Hill spruce, a variety of white spruce, which has a compact growth habit and grows slower than native white spruce.

Just because a live Christmas tree is easier to get into the house and should be easier to transplant, there still are a few things to remember about getting one this year.

1) Once you bring your living tree home, don't take it into the house immediately. Instead, keep it in a cool outdoor area, sheltered from freezing temperatures or wind, for a few days.

2) In the house, keep it away from heat sources, such as heating vents or fireplaces. You might even want to turn down the temperature of the room where the tree is standing. Use LED lights that don't give off a lot of heat.

The idea is to keep the living tree cool – the same as you would keep a cut Christmas tree – so it doesn't break dormancy and start to bud.

3) Keep the root ball damp, but not drenched. (Cathy Genovese suggests using ice cubes to cool the tree and release water slowly.)

4) Keep the tree in the house for no more than 10 days – two weeks max. The less time the tree spends inside, the better. "If you want to keep a tree up in your house for a month," says Cathy Genovese, "you probably don't want a living tree."

Don't think you can prolong the tree's indoor stay with an anti-desiccation spray, said Cregg. That can cause more problems, he said, especially with blue spruce.

And when you take the tree from the 70-degree house to the 30-degree yard, again place it in a sheltered area for a few days while it gets used to the change in temperature.

Cathy Genovese recommends that after a few days in a sheltered area, put the tree into a small, pre-dug hole, even if it's not where the tree will finally stand, and water it every few weeks. After all, she says, the tree has been standing outside at the nursery that way for years.

But given that in Michigan the coldest months are January and February, planting the tree outdoors in December appears to be "a recipe for disaster," said Cregg. He recommends you wait until spring to plant.

Just keep the tree in a sheltered spot outdoors, but still in a spot where it will get a little light and water it sparingly until the ground thaws and you can plant it.

And before you even buy the tree, know where it's going to spend the rest of its years, Cregg says. And when choosing the site, keep in mind the tree will be growing for many years, so pick a place where it won't run into power lines or other trees, he says.



These trees were grown pot-in-pot. Photo credit: Candy Cane Tree Farms.

WOOLY WORMS AND WINTER WEATHER PREDICTIONS

Gretchen Voyle, MSU Extension Educator



With the fall weather comes garden and yard cleanups. As you are outside raking, keep an eye out for the furry, black and rusty brown woolly worm.

Most people have heard about how this little larva can predict just how bad the winter will be. But is this possible? Is a small larva able to do what the weather forecasters with sophisticated predicting equipment cannot?

Two generations of woolly bears hatch each year, one in May and one in August. *Photo credit: Cecilwhig.com.*

Let's meet these insect experts.

Woolly worms or banded woolly bears are the larvae or caterpillars of the Isabella tiger moth. The larvae have rusty brown and black stripes on their bodies. The brown stripe is in the middle and both ends are black.

This fuzzy caterpillar is currently found crawling on sidewalks and sitting on porches all over Michigan.

The story is that by looking at the stripes on the larvae, the amount of black determines how severe the winter weather will be. Wide black stripes mean a bad winter, whereas a wide brown stripe in the middle means a mild winter.

The real woolly worm aficionados have even counted the body segments and determined that there are 13. They have additionally deduced that there 13 weeks of winter and that every black segment means one week of bad weather.

Alas, fiction is so much more entertaining than reality.

The reason for those "predicting" stripes has everything to do with genetics and hatching conditions.

Temperatures at hatching of the eggs can affect the width of the rusty brown to black stripes.

The genetics of the brood can also affect the coloration. There are some woolly worms that spend their entire larval life either being entirely brown or black.

It now appears that sheer chance or dumb luck is involved when finding a larva. Larvae in the same area may be from the same brood and show similar coloration and so will give the same prediction.

In addition, there are two generations of these striped larvae each year. The first hatches in May and second in August.

But the legend lives on about furry weather guys right outside the door, waiting to tell their stories of what winter has in store. And there are still plenty of people with lots of free time to hunt woolly worms and count segments.

If it gives them some feeling of control in a chaotic world, it may be worth the effort. But still, listen to the local weather for confirmation that the woolly worms really know best.

Three festivals are planned each year in honor of the clever creatures: the Woolly Bear Festival in Vermillion, Ohio, the Woolly Worm Festivals in Banner Elk, North Carolina and in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania.

And the myth continues on, all over the United States.

FALL NEEDLE DROP: A NATURAL PHENOMENON IN CONIFERS

Mary Wilson, Statewide Master Gardener Coordinator and Consumer Horticulture

Every fall, people look forward to Mother Nature sharing her palette of reds, yellows, purples, browns, oranges and golds as deciduous trees change color and drop their leaves in preparation for winter.

We understand and expect the leaves on our maple, oak and elm trees to turn color and fall off. What many people don't know is that most conifers also drop their needles at this time.

Fall needle drop in conifers is no different than leaf drop in deciduous trees. The change in color and drop are a physiological response to the shorter days and cooler nights as trees prepare for winter.

Evergreen conifers such as pines, spruce, fir and arborvitae shed their oldest needles each year starting in late August and continuing into October. Their oldest, interior needles turn yellow, while needles at the tips of the branches stay green. This yellowing and dropping of the interior needles occurs uniformly from the top to the bottom of the tree.



Normal fall needle yellowing on Eastern white pine. *Photo credit: Steven Katoovich, Bugwood.com.*

When and how dramatic this event varies with tree species, summer weather conditions and individual tree health.

Tamarack, larch and bald cypress are less familiar Michigan trees. While these trees are also conifers, they differ from the pine, spruce and fir in that they lose all their needles each fall.

This, too, is a natural phenomenon but causes alarm to people unfamiliar with these deciduous conifers. Like other deciduous trees such as maples and oaks, these trees will grow all new foliage in the spring.

When they notice yellowing and dropping needles in the fall, many people fear their conifer trees are dying. But rest assured this is normal and tree health is not impacted.

Bear in mind though that needle loss at other times of the year or at the tips of the branches is not normal for these species and may be due to an insect or fungal pest or the result of severe environmental stress.

For additional gardening information, call the MSU Extension Lawn and Garden Hotline at 1-888-MSUE-4MI (1-888-678-3464). You can also visit www.migarden.msu.edu.



Normal fall needle coloration on Larch tree prior to shedding all its needles. *Photo credit: Rebecca Finneran, MSUE.*

TAKING CARE OF POINSETTIAS

The Recycled Gardener (MG 1997)

The holiday season brings colorful potted plants to the market. Among the favorite varieties are poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*).

Poinsettias range in color from white to variations of deep red. The large bracts present a showy festive decoration. The small, yellow and insignificant flowers are at the base of the bracts. (Note that the milky liquid draining from a broken stem of a poinsettia can cause skin irritation.)

When you purchase a poinsettia, wrap it well when you take it home, as the plants are very sensitive to drafts, as well as hot and cold temperature changes.

When you get it home, remove the wrapping as soon as possible. Stems and leaves will twist and often break if wrapping is firmly around the plant too long.

Place your poinsettia in a sunny window or well-lighted area. Keep the leaves away from cold window panes. At night, place the poinsettia in a cooler room with a night temperature of 55 to 60 degrees. The cooler nights will extend the blooming time.

Poinsettias are warm tropical plants, indigenous to Mexico and Central America. They do well in comfortable home environments if light, water and temperature are kept consistent.

Poinsettias will rot if overwatered, so good drainage is a must. Too little water or allowing the plant to dry out also can injure growth and well-being. Leaves will yellow and drop off; stems will droop when stressed.

Most poinsettias are grown from cuttings. A large pot may have several young plants grouped for a showy appearance. Single plants are less expensive, and you can try to carefully transplant them to a large pot for that decorative, festive look.

You can keep poinsettias from year to year. I have grown them from cuttings and kept plants doing well for a year or more. It is truly a labor of love and diligence.

Poinsettias should be planted in a sterilized mixture of silt loam, manure and sand. Unsterilized soil is an excellent breeding spot for flies that will soon be making themselves comfortable in the rich soil in other potted plants. To disrupt the life cycle of the flies, carefully loosen the soil on a regular basis to dry out the surface. (I have a favorite spoon designated for the purpose.)

Watch for mealy bugs and spider mites. Use insecticidal soap or nicotine sulfate sprays to control the pests. Be sure to follow the directions on the containers and try to keep the insecticidal sprays out of the home environment when possible. It might help to (tent) a plastic painter's cloth around the plant to block the spray.

You can make your own insecticidal solution by soaking cigarette butts or tobacco in water. When the water turns deep yellow, drain and use the nicotine water once a month or so to water the plants. If possible, soak the tobacco in rainwater to prevent the buildup of calcium carbonate from well water and of chlorine from tap water.



Poinsettias are native to Mexico and Central America.

**START PLANTS
IN EMPTY PRESCRIPTION CONTAINERS**

The Recycled Gardener (MG 1997)

Those empty amber prescription bottles have a number of uses for gardeners.

The containers, which usually have sturdy clip-on or screw-type lids, are excellent for seed storage. They also make marvelous containers for growing cuttings in water or a starting medium.

Sometime the containers seem top heavy. You can give them a more solid base by placing a drop of glue inside the cap and setting the container base in the lid.

When starting cuttings in water, several containers could be cumbersome to manage. Simply glue the base of each container to a clean Styrofoam tray or inside the top of an egg carton.

This makes it easy to move the containers and better prevents them from spilling. It also makes the starting garden look fine on a windowsill.

**ON THE HUNT FOR GYPSY MOTH EGGS**

"The falling leaves drift by my window", so the song goes. As summer 2011 fades to a memory with these falling leaves. It is a great time to check for Gypsy Moth eggs. Remember how Gypsy Moth caterpillars brought fear into normally sane

people. Well I guess it was hard to stomach thousands of caterpillar on the house, trees, picnic tables and likely Fido if he stood still long enough. This insect has not gone away but has become naturalized as predators, pathogens and parasites have helped to keep it in check.

Gypsy moth is still causing trouble but usually on a much smaller scale. In recent years they have damaged spruce in SE Michigan. They went unnoticed until their feeding started stripping spruce needles. The moths seem to like the protection of the dense foliage of spruce trees and uses this shelter for its eggs. Look for eggs now and remove them by knocking them into soapy water to save the trouble of spraying for them next spring.

Nov./Dec. Calendar

Matthaei Botanical Gardens & Nichols Arobretum

1800 Dixboro Road, Ann Arbor 734-647-7600

<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/mbg/>

Call for classes and to register

Ann Arbor Orchid Society

"Growing Orchids the EnLightened Way: Gardening Under Fluorescent Lights," a talk by Ernie Gemeinhart, Sunday, Nov. 20, 7:45 p.m.

Southeast Michigan Bromeliad Society

"The Earth Stars," a talk by Lynne Echlin on Earth Stars, a small bromeliad, Saturday, Nov. 19, 2 p.m.

Ann Arbor Backyard Beekeepers

"Winter Preparation," Tuesday, Nov. 8, 7-9 p.m. A discussion on preparing hives for winter and how to manage condensation generated by honeybees.

"Construction of Alternative Hives," Tuesday, Dec. 13, 7-9 p.m. This talk includes discussion of the difference between organic and biodynamic beekeeping.

Master Gardener Alumni Association of Washtenaw County News

The MGAAWC meets on the third Tuesday of the month, September through May, at 7 p.m. in the basement conference room of the County Building at 705 N. Zeeb Road.

COMING ATTRACTIONS: Add these dates to your 2012 calendar.

Jan. 17: Chiropractor Stacey Myint talks about "Thyme to Garden Healthily," the physical aspects of gardening.

Feb. 21: Veronica Muscat, of the Herb Society, explains "For the Love of Chocolate" and includes a tasting.

March 20: Kim Roth from Christensen's Plant Center discusses "Spring Kickoff."

April 17: Membership potluck and meeting.

May 15: County naturalist Faye Stoner describes "Washtenaw County Wetlands and Wildlife."

If you have suggestions for future speakers or topics, please send a message to V.P. Bob Devereaux

Master Gardener Alumni Association of Washtenaw County Membership Enrollment Sept. 2011 thru August 2012

(Please Print Clearly)

Name: _____ MG Year completion _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: MI Zip _____ - _____

Phone: (day) _____ (evening) _____

Email: _____

Check this box if this is an email change

New items:

Gardening interests:

Please Circle: Yes / No to include personal information in Alumni Membership Directory

Mail enrollment with a check for \$20 dues, payable to:

**Master Gardener Alumni
Association or MGAA
c/o Pat Belluci
5312 Fox Ridge Ct
Ann Arbor, MI 48103**

6960

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**TIME SENSITIVE MATERIAL ENCLOSED
PLEASE DELIVER PROMPTLY**



Office Hours: 8 a.m. — 6 p.m., Monday—Thursday, CLOSED Friday

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County website:.....	www.eWashtenaw.org
State website:.....	web1.msue.msu.edu/mastergardener

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