

# BY THE YARD

## HORTICULTURE NEWSLETTER



University of Kentucky  
College of Agriculture,  
Food and Environment  
Cooperative Extension Service  
Fayette County Extension  
1140 Harry Sykes Way  
Lexington, KY 40504  
(859) 257-5582  
fayette.ext@uky.edu  
<http://fayette.ca.uky.edu/>

December

2023

### Inside this issue:

- Keeping Your Houseplants Happy During Wintertime
- Poinsettias for the Holidays
- Where Do Bugs Go in the Winter
- Take the Chill off High Heating Bills with a Warm Wood Fire
- Winter Holiday Safety
- December Quick Tips
- Recipe of the Month

### Agent Note

Hello gardening friends,

This is the time of year I panic about all the gardening chores I have not yet accomplished. As I work on next year's list of Toolbox classes, the short gray days remind me of the crunch. A group of tired perennials patiently wait to be planted (Sure, we are passed the appropriate window, but I will plant them anyway just to get that off my list). Bulbs need to be planted, the vegetable garden begs for more clean up, leaves need to be raked or mowed constantly... and the list goes on and on. Despite the never-ending list, I make sure to find time in the brief sunny afternoons to take a minute to just enjoy being in the garden or hiking the trails in the woods. For a drought year, fall color was more spectacular than I can recall. Deer, squirrels and turkeys are enjoying one of the heaviest acorn crops I have seen. Hay is in the barn for the livestock and the bird feeders are swarming with little friends who seem as shocked by the cold as I. Despite how much I love this life and all the nature that surrounds me, I don't stop and reflect as often as I should. I am trying to change that. I realized recently that life is not about racing to some mythical "golden years" but rather all the little moments and pleasures along the way. Take time to enjoy all those little moments this month. I have never been more aware how truly blessed we are. Enjoy the people and things that you hold dear, and I wish you and yours the happiest of Holiday Seasons!

Jamie Dockery  
County Extension Agent for  
Horticulture  
[jamie.dockery@uky.edu](mailto:jamie.dockery@uky.edu)

Happy  
Holidays

### Office Closure

The Fayette County  
Extension Office will  
be closed for the  
Holidays

December 25, 2023 -  
January 1, 2024



Follow us on  
Facebook

[@fayettecohort](https://www.facebook.com/fayettecohort)

Cooperative Extension Service  
Agriculture and Natural Resources  
Family and Consumer Sciences  
4-H Youth Development  
Community and Economic Development

Educational programs of Kentucky Cooperative Extension serve all people regardless of economic or social status and will not discriminate on the basis of race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, creed, religion, political belief, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, pregnancy, marital status, genetic information, age, veteran status, or physical or mental disability. University of Kentucky, Kentucky State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Kentucky Counties, Cooperating.  
LEXINGTON, KY 40546



Disabilities  
accommodated  
with prior notification.

## Keeping Your Houseplants Happy During Wintertime

Even though your houseplants do not have to deal with the cold like your garden does, you should still change how you care for them this season, ensuring they stay healthy and continue to grow well. Following these tips, your leafy friends will bring lushness and natural beauty into your home, even in winter.

### Decrease watering

- In general, less light means less water. Plants need less water in the winter because they don't get as much sunlight, compared to spring and summer. To test soil moisture, push your finger into the potting soil at least one inch deep. If the soil is dry, water thoroughly. It is better to water plants well less often than water just a little bit every day. In the winter, it is possible that you will only need to water once every two to three weeks.

### Pay attention to the Sun

- If possible, move your plants closer to the windows. If they're on the ground, put them on a plant stand. Every week or two, rotate the pots to ensure all sides of the plants get some sunlight.

### It's okay if a few leaves fall off

- Plants outside over the summer will probably lose some leaves when they come back inside. This is normal because they are getting used to the lower light levels inside. It's normal for plants that stay inside all year to lose a few leaves as winter approaches. This is just their way of getting ready for less light.

### Avoid temperature extremes

- Keep plants away from cold drafts, radiators and hot air vents. Sudden hot or cold drafts can kill plants, stress them out, or dry them out.

### Put the fertilizer on hold

- Winter is a time for most houseplants to rest. They don't need fertilizer because they usually aren't actively growing. In the fall, stop fertilizing and start back up again in the spring when plants get more sunlight and start growing again.

### Scan for pests

- If you are bringing plants inside for the winter, be sure to check the leaves, stems and soil surface for pests. Wipe leaves down with a wet cloth or remove pests by hand before bringing the plants inside. Small bugs that feed on sap, like aphids and scales, tend to show up more in the winter. Another common winter pest is the spider mite which likes warm, dry places to live. When watering, flip the leaves over and look at the undersides and along the stems. If you find bugs, use your fingers or damp cloth to remove them. Neem oil and insecticidal soap may be options for managing houseplant pests. With any product, be sure to read the entire label for application instructions and precautions.

### Increase the humidity

- In the winter, the air inside our heated homes is often drier. Most houseplants, especially those from tropical areas, do best when the humidity is between 40 and 50%. However, in the winter, most homes have humidity levels between 10 and 20%. Putting plants close together is an easy way to make the air around them more humid. Plants can also be put on trays with pebbles and water to make the air more humid. To keep the roots from rotting, pot bottoms should be above the water. As the water evaporates, it makes the air around your houseplants more humid. Keep plants away from vents with blowing air.



Source: Rachel Rudolph, horticulture assistant professor

## Poinsettias for the Holidays

Traditional red and green colors are well represented in the flowers available for the holidays. Poinsettias, the most popular and spectacular holiday flowers, can combine both these colors.

The poinsettia was named for Joel Robert Poinsett, an amateur botanist and the first United States ambassador to Mexico. He became fascinated with these native plants and sent poinsettias home to Greenville, S. C., in 1825. Although Poinsett later was war secretary under President Martin Van Buren, he is better known for the plant named after him.

The Aztecs cultivated poinsettias for medicinal purposes and as a dye. Missionaries to Mexico used the brightly colored plants in nativity processions, possibly beginning the holiday connection that continues today.

Poinsettias are the most popular potted plant grown in the United States, with annual sales exceeding 70 million plants. In Kentucky, some tobacco greenhouse operators have learned how to grow poinsettias. More than 60 varieties and 500,000 plants are grown and sold in Kentucky each year.

The three to six bloom red poinsettia is the most frequently used, but several other sizes, shapes and colors are available. Colors range from creamy white to yellow through shades of pink to the traditional red. The colorful plant parts often referred to as "flowers" actually are modified leaves called "bracts." The yellow centers are really the "flowers." Some poinsettias have marbled pink and white bracts; others may have pink flecks on red. Poinsettia bracts are very long lasting, providing a nice decorative plant for the holiday season.

Consumers can buy miniatures as well as poinsettia trees and hanging baskets.

The poinsettia is not poisonous to people or pets, but is classified as a non-edible plant material.

Extensive university research and laboratory testing have proven that poinsettias are not poisonous. One scientific study concluded that no toxicity occurred at ingestion levels much higher than those likely to take place in a home. The main information resource for most poison control centers states that a 50-pound child would have to ingest more than 500 poinsettia leaves to surpass an experimental dose.

Some people have skin sensitivity to the white milky sap produced when a part of the plant is broken or injured. Ingesting a plant part may cause some discomfort.

Active young children, who are apt to put just about anything in their mouths, and curious cats might choke on fibrous poinsettia foliage. Therefore it is a good practice to put poinsettias and all other non-edible plants out of children's and pets' reach.

Poinsettias will remain beautiful far beyond the holiday season when cared for properly. Keep these tips in mind.

- Choose a plant with small, tightly clustered yellow buds in the center and crisp, bright, undamaged foliage.
- At home, put the poinsettia in a room with bright, natural light. Ideally, plant foliage should be exposed to direct sunlight one or more hours daily.
- Avoid locations where there are drafts and close heat sources. Do not put the plant on top of a television set or near a radiator.
- Water the plant when the soil becomes dry; drooping leaves may indicate it needs watering. Be sure to discard excess water in the drip saucer.
- If you want to keep a poinsettia after the holiday season, fertilize it with ordinary houseplant fertilizer a few weeks after buying it.



Source: Rick Durham, University of Kentucky Horticulture Specialist

## Where Do Bugs Go in the Winter

Where do the bugs of summer go when the weather turns cold? And how do they reappear the next year when the temperatures warm?

Of course, the insects don't just 'disappear' and magically reappear the next year. Each species has developed some way of dealing with the cold weather.

One insect follows the example of the migratory birds and heads south. The monarch butterfly's from east of the Rocky Mountains eventually find their way to central Mexico, where they overwinter in the mountain highlands near Mexico City. One or two areas are protected as monarch refuges. Monarchs from west of the Rockies travel to a spot near Santa Barbara, California. These are true migrating insects because the same individuals that go south for the winter come back the next year.

Some other insects, such as leafhoppers and milkweed bugs, strategy for dealing with winter is to head south as the winter cools. They reinvade the next year, but in this case, it's different individuals that return.

Most insects stay here year round. They employ a variety of tactics for survival. One is simply to move in with humans. Insects such as ladybird beetles (ladybugs), cluster flies, elm leaf beetles and boxelder bugs overwinter as adults in wall voids, attics and other out-of-the-way places in homes and other structures.

Before humans started building insect hotels, they probably found shelter in hollow logs and other natural cavities.

Many insects spend the winter in immature stages - as eggs (the bagworm is a good example), as larvae underground (cicadas and June beetles) or as pupae (the large silkworm moths such as the Cecropia).

Yellowjacket and paper wasp queens, some mosquitoes and the mourning cloak butterfly are other examples of local insects that overwinter as adults. Like the ladybird beetle, they seek out a protected spot and become dormant until warm weather activates them again.

Whatever insect you're looking at or whatever its winter survival may be, the pattern of development doesn't leave much room for variation. For example, moths that form cocoons in the fall must have that winter cold period. If you bring them indoors and keep them warm, chances are that they won't complete their development. Or, if they do hatch, it will be well in advance of the proper time so they have no hope of surviving outdoors.

Though some insects may become unseasonably active during an extended midwinter thaw, the true hibernators and the majority of those that rest in the adult stage will not be tricked to become active early. Of course, that's not much consolation to the homeowner who has to deal with a midwinter wasp buzzing the family or an "invasion" of slow, stupid flies bumping into windows and walls during a midwinter mild spell.

The final group of insects consists of those that remain active all year round. These are primarily aquatic insects that spend the winter as immatures in rapidly flowing streams that don't freeze all the way to the bottom.

Some insects have body fluids that act like antifreeze. Glycol-like substances that resist freezing protect the insect from being torn apart internally by ice crystals.

With or without antifreeze, most insects simply can not function at temperatures below 40 degrees F. Because they rely entirely on the world around them for the warmth they need to function, they've developed this wide range of techniques for surviving cold weather and assuring the survival of their species.

Source: Don Janssen, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Extension Educator

## Take the Chill off High Heating Bills with a Warm Wood Fire

With continued high oil prices and slightly colder temperatures predicted this winter, many people are looking for an economical way to stay warm. Using wood to help take the chill off might just be the answer.

Most people today burn wood as a supplemental source of heat. A wood-burning stove or fireplace, when used in conjunction with a conventional heat source, can be a cost-effective and comfortable choice for many homeowners. However, to get the most out of your wood-burning experience, there are several things to keep in mind.

All firewood is not created equal. Different species of wood provide different amounts of heat per unit size. Wood is made up of air and cellulose. The more air space wood has, the less there is to burn. Therefore, it's best to choose firewood that has the heaviest/densest per unit volume.

The better woods from which to choose are oak, hickory and black locust, which are the densest of the firewoods in Kentucky. Yellow-poplar, silver and red maple provide less heat per unit volume, but they are good woods for starting fires and for short duration fires. For a fire that's easy to ignite and long lasting, try mixing woods of different densities.

Secondly, wood contains water, and the more water in the wood the less heat that will be generated. That's why it is important to make sure firewood has been seasoned, or cured. Wood takes about six to 12 months to season properly. You can tell if it's properly seasoned if it has a gray, weathered appearance and has large cracks in the ends. The larger the cracks are, the drier the wood.

Burning seasoned firewood is also important from a safety standpoint. Unseasoned wood produces a smoldering fire that creates a potentially dangerous creosote buildup in the chimney. Creosote buildup can lead to a chimney fire. It is always a good idea to have a professional check your fireplace before building the first fire of the season.

Remember that wood can absorb water, so stack your firewood in an area where air can circulate around it. Place a cover over the top of the stack, leaving the ends open to the sun and air.

Lastly, firewood is most often measured by volume, not weight, and the most common measurement is the face cord. A face cord is 4 feet high and eight feet long and is available in varying widths. Prices for firewood vary from one location to another and are usually negotiable.

When buying firewood, it's best not to buy more than you will use during the season. And be sure to ask the dealer if the wood you buy will be delivered and stacked properly.

Source: Doug McLaren, University of Kentucky, Extension Forestry Specialist



## Winter Holiday Safety

Winter holidays are a time for families and friends to get together. But that also means a greater risk for fire. Following a few simple tips will ensure a happy and fire-safe holiday season.

### Holiday Decorating

- Be careful with holiday decorations. Choose decorations that are flame resistant or flame retardant.
- Keep lit candles away from decorations and other things that can burn.
- Some lights are only for indoor or outdoor use, but not both.
- Replace any string of lights with worn or broken cords or loose bulb connections. Read manufacturer's instructions for number of light strands to connect.
- Use clips, not nails, to hang lights so the cords do not get damaged.
- Keep decorations away from windows and doors.

### Holiday Entertaining

- Test your smoke alarms and tell guests about your home fire escape plan.
- Keep children and pets away from lit candles.
- Keep matches and lighters up high in a locked cabinet.
- Stay in the kitchen when cooking on the stovetop.
- Ask smokers to smoke outside. Remind smokers to keep their smoking materials with them so young children do not touch them.
- Provide large, deep ashtrays for smokers. Wet cigarette butts with water before discarding.

### Before Heading Out or to Bed

Blow out lit candles when you leave the room or go to bed. Turn off all light strings and decorations before leaving home or going to bed.

Source: National Fire Protection Association ([nfpa.org/education](http://nfpa.org/education))

What matters to  
Fayette County,  
matters to us. Share  
your thoughts and  
help us move our  
community forward  
[go.uky.edu/serveKY](http://go.uky.edu/serveKY)



## December Quick Tips

- Broadleaf evergreens will benefit from an application of anti-desiccant this month. Make sure evergreens are well watered.
- Outdoor pond inhabitants may encounter problems if the pond freezes over and gases cannot escape. A basketball floated on the surface will often keep a small spot from freezing.
- If you haven't already, empty and store flower pots for the season. Many pots, particularly clay and ceramic, will be damaged by moisture and freezing temperatures.
- Plan gardens and place seed orders. Many popular items and new offerings will sell out first.
- Use fallen leaves to mulch your vegetable garden. These can be tilled in next spring to add valuable organic matter. They will also protect the soil by preventing erosion, compaction, and to a degree, inhibit cool season weeds from germinating.
- Water is often as limited a resource for birds as food. If you enjoy feeding and watching birds try a bird bath de-icer or electric pet bowl. See if you don't attract more feathered friends than before.
- If you will be establishing a new lawn this spring, Do A Soil Test Now! New ground usually benefits from an application of nitrogen, and sometimes phosphorus, potassium or lime (only if pH is too low).
- Be careful where you throw de-icing salt, as well as the contaminated slush, snow and ice which you scoop off the walks. Most plants are easily damaged by these salts. Try using sand, sawdust, urea fertilizer or kitty litter for traction rather than the de-icing salts, or buy a brand which is labeled "safe for plants".
- Avoid walking on frozen turf as much as possible. Whenever you hear the crunch of icy grass, you are actually damaging the crown (growing point) of the frozen grass plant.
- Your landscape can be a great source of materials for holiday decorating. Light pruning will generally not harm your plants in the winter and you may be surprised at the variety in your own yard. Don't just consider evergreens, use ornamental grasses, pine cones, fruits, berries, even mosses in your decorating.
- Watch for January, 2024, "By The Yard" newsletter for the class schedule: "Gardener's Toolbox 2024".

## Recipe of the Month



**Glazed Butternut Squash with Carrots and Turnips**

1½ cups cubed butternut squash	½ teaspoon salt
1½ cups sliced carrots	¼ teaspoon pepper
1½ cups cubed peeled turnips	Cooking spray
4 teaspoons oil	2 tablespoons maple syrup

1. Preheat oven to 450 degrees.
2. Cut vegetables into ½-inch pieces.
3. Coat a 9 x 13-inch baking dish with cooking spray.
4. Combine the first 6 ingredients.
5. Bake for 10 minutes.
6. Stir in syrup and bake an additional 20 minutes.

**Yield:** 8, ½ cup servings.  
**Nutritional Analysis:** 60 calories, 2.5 g fat, 0g sat fat, 1 g protein, 9 g carbohydrate, 0 mg cholesterol, 170 mg sodium, 2 g fiber.

Buying Kentucky Proud is easy. Look for the label at your grocery store, farmers' market, or roadside stand.




**Plate it up!**

For More Plate It Up Recipes, Visit: <http://fcs-hes.ca.uky.edu/content/plate-it-kentucky-proud>