

BY THE YARD

HORTICULTURE NEWSLETTER

 Cooperative
Extension Service

December

2024

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As I write these words the first snow of the season is falling. While it has been unseasonably warm before today, it's finally starting to feel like winter is coming. I'm not rushing though. We have a few more weeks of fall and I sit in hope for one or two more warm days. I'm not a winter creature. But I have found ways to persevere and actually find the glimmers of beauty in the dark, stillness of winter.

Many of us are wrapped up in flurry of the holiday season. So much to do and very little stillness. I encourage you to take a moment and venture outside, preferably to our beautiful woodlands. A quiet winter hike always grounds me. While walking and crunching through the fallen leaves, I see deeper into the forest than before. If I'm lucky, I still see glimmers of green, blue and white thanks to the mosses, lichens and mushrooms. We'll discuss on of my favorites later in this newsletter.

I also encourage you to bring a little nature indoors this month to remain throughout winter. Whether it be a wreath, a bough of evergreen décor or simply keeping your Christmas tree up a little longer. After the new year, I take all the ornaments down but leave the tree with twinkling lights to remind me that the days are growing and spring is coming. I also have branches of spruce and pine dangling off paintings in almost every room. And before I know it, I'm ordering seeds and planning another gardening season.

So, hang in there, the sun is returning. Warmth is coming.

In appreciation,

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Happy Holidays

The Fayette County Extension
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for the Holidays
December 25, 2024 through
January 1, 2025



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Solstice Season

Winter Solstice is the shortest day and longest night of the year. Celebrations of the solstice reflect the awakening of new life. At Yuletide there is a celebration of the sun. It is a time of joy and hope as the sun is reborn.

Yule or Yuletide is a festival historically observed by the Norse Germanic peoples. Departing from its pagan roots, Yule underwent Christianized reformulation, resulting in the term Christmastide. Many present-day Christmas customs and traditions such as the Yule log stem from historical Yule traditions.

“The word ‘yule’ really is our understanding of the word ‘winter’ in Old Norse,” said Heidi Sherman, associate professor of medieval history at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay and curator of UWGB’s Viking House. According to Sherman, Old Norse was the ancient language spoken by the Vikings and their fellow Norsemen in Iceland, Denmark, Sweden and Norway – where winters are long and brutal.

“It really centers around the winter solstice, which of course, is the longest night of the year,” Sherman said. “It’s also celebrating the coming of the light because, after the winter solstice, the days get longer. The winter solstice is really sacred because it’s celebrating the quiet of winter, but also the excitement of celebrating the sun,” she added.

This year the winter solstice will be observed on December 21st. How will you celebrate the return of the sun?

Source: *Kristin Bouchard, “How the Yule log tradition evolved from an ancient Viking ritual.” Inside UW-Green Bay, University of Wisconsin Green Bay, 2023*



American mistletoe in host tree, University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension

What’s up with Mistletoe?

American mistletoe is an evergreen, partially parasitic, woody shrub. It’s partially parasitic because, although it produces sugars through photosynthesis, it does not draw its water and mineral requirements from the soil. Instead, it siphons these resources from the tree on which it is growing.

American mistletoe can be found growing on many different types of hardwood trees including oaks, maples, walnuts, and more. It typically blooms in the fall and early winter. Mistletoe has male and female plants which means that some plants only have female flowers, while others only have male flowers.

A variety of pollinators, including wasps, bees, and ants, frequently visit mistletoe. Honeybees and native bees often collect nectar and pollen from the flowers. The ripe berries are quickly eaten by a wide variety of birds. It is also the only plant that the caterpillar of the great purple hairstreak butterfly will eat. In addition to the variety of food sources mistletoe provides, its dense, shrubby growth provides excellent habitat for many treetop animals.

American mistletoe isn’t a plant that you can “plant” in your yard. It either will show up on its own or won’t. Several resources say that any damage to the host tree is dependent on several factors, such as the health of the tree and how much mistletoe it is supporting. Some other mistletoe species that prefer conifers have been shown to shorten the tree’s life. On the other hand, there is much less evidence as to whether American mistletoe affects the host tree. Either way it is a natural part of the ecosystem and has numerous benefit a wide variety of wildlife.

Source: *Tyson Gregory, American Mistletoe – A Holiday Plant Enjoyed by Pollinators & Wildlife*



American mistletoe berries are enjoyed by many birds, University of Missouri Extension



Female great purple hairstreak butterfly, Lyle J. Buss, University of Florida

Poinsettia Diseases

Poinsettia are a common household decoration. No holiday décor is complete without at least one. However, numerous plant diseases can act as a Grinch to steal holiday cheer. Proper plant selection and maintenance are important for healthy poinsettias that last into the New Year.

Be sure to inspect all plant parts prior to purchase. Assess bracts (the colorful, flower-like structures) and leaves for spots and damage. These spots can be the start of diseases like scab and Botrytis blight. Both of these diseases can cause tan to gray-brown spots and ultimately result in the plant dying.

Stems can also become infected by many different disease-causing pathogens. Lesions often develop on stems near the soil line. Since stem infections limit plants' ability to move nutrients and water, symptoms such as wilting, dieback, and defoliation are likely.

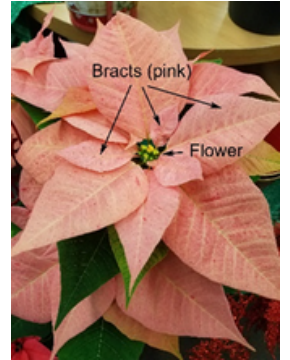
If plants can be removed from the pot, inspect roots for damage and decay. Several different root rots can impact poinsettia. They result in black or gray roots that can become mushy. When roots are damaged, upper plant parts cannot be supported, also resulting in wilting and dieback.

It's also important to maintain plant health and vigor with proper nutrition, light, and watering practices. Remove plants from decorative pot covers and drain saucers immediately after watering. Do not allow plants to sit in water. Overly wet soils can lead to root rot disease.

Remove and destroy any leaves or plant parts that are dead, discolored, or deteriorating. Space plants to increase air circulation. Dispose of any plants that show disease symptoms. Once plants become infected, management options are limited. Root and stem rots cannot be treated or cured.

Leaf spots and blossom symptoms can be managed by removing infected plant parts and maintaining plant health. The life the plant can often be extended through the holiday season. If disease is severe, the plant should be discarded, especially in situations where additional plants are at risk for infection.

Source: Kim Leonberger & Nicole Gauthier, "How Poinsettia Diseases Can Ruin the Holiday." Kentucky Pest News, University of Kentucky, 2024



Poinsettia bracts compared to flowers, University of Minnesota



Photo by University of Maryland Extension

Reindeer Moss



Dixie reindeer lichen, Missouri Department of Conservation

When all the leaves have fallen and winter begins to set in, there is something so magical about seeing the greens and blues of a woodlands mosses and lichens. One of the most mesmerizing is the many reindeer lichen (*Cladonia* spp.). While found most frequently in the Arctic tundra as a wonderful food source for reindeer, hence the name, there are a few species that are fairly common in Kentucky forests.

Resembling an aquatic reef coral, these lichen have a branching growth habit. Depending on species, the color can range from pale blue, pastel green and vibrant silvery gray. The most common to eastern North America is the yellow-green Dixie reindeer lichen.

The branching arms of the lichen are actually the reproductive structures, or podetia, similar to mushrooms being the reproductive structure of mycelium.

Less noticeable, the main body of the lichen (the thallus) consists of green, scalelike structures (squamules) that spread like a mat over the surface of the soil; these squamules often don't last long and may be gone by the time the branching podetia develop.

Interestingly, lichens are not mosses; in fact, they are not even plants. A lichen is an organism that results when a fungus species and an algae species join together in a symbiotic relationship. Although this relationship is quite intimate and integrated, the lichen that is formed does not much resemble either of the components.

These lichen are just another incredibly fascinating aspect of the biodiversity of nature. But be careful when you embark on your reindeer lichen expeditions. These organisms are incredibly slow growing and will take many years to recover if trampled by an enthusiastic woodsman.



Gray reindeer lichen, Missouri Department of Conservation

Source: Anonymous, "Dixie Reindeer Lichen" and "Gray Reindeer Lichen", Missouri Department of Conservation, 2024

Become a Kentucky Naturalist!

The Kentucky Master Naturalist Volunteer Program invites nature enthusiasts and conservation-minded individuals to apply for its 2025 spring cohort, offering a unique blend of online and hands-on learning opportunities focused on Kentucky's natural landscapes. Registration is now open and will close Dec. 8.

The program combines weekly Zoom classes with field training sessions designed to deepen participants' understanding of local ecosystems. The Kentucky Master Naturalist Volunteer Program provides an in-depth look into Kentucky's ecological and environmental landscape. Topics span many disciplines, including:

- Native flora and fauna identification
- Ecological principles and relationships
- Conservation practices and resource management
- Watershed and water quality assessment

To receive and maintain certification, participants must complete the program coursework and commit to continued volunteer work within their communities. The certification requires eight continuing education hours annually to stay informed about conservation methods and ecological findings. Additionally, graduates are expected to dedicate 40 volunteer hours annually, which can be fulfilled through various projects, from assisting in environmental education initiatives to participating in local conservation efforts.

For additional details and to apply, visit <https://naturalist.ca.uky.edu/upcoming-training>.

Source: Jordan Strickler, "Kentucky Master Naturalist Program opens applications for 2025 cohort..." UK Martin-Gatton College of Agriculture, Food and Environment College News, 2024

Upcoming Events

Look out for these events happening at the Extension Office and across Lexington. **Some of these require registration. Be sure to look them up ahead of time!**

- December 4 – Kentucky Farm to School Network Summit @ Hardin Co Extension Office
- December 6 – Green Innovations Workshop with Bluegrass Greensource
- December 7 – FoodChain's Holiday Open House
- December 12 – Neonics & Advocacy Webinar with Wild Ones Lexington
- December 16 – Central Kentucky Hay Program @ Fayette Co Extension Office

December Quick Tips

- 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 deicer or electric pet bowl. See if you don't attract more feathered friends than before.
- 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.

Recipe of the Month



Butternut and Acorn Squash Soup

1 butternut squash, halved and seeded	½ cup chopped sweet onion	½ teaspoon ground black pepper
1 acorn squash, halved and seeded	4 cups chicken broth	¾ teaspoon ground cinnamon
1 tablespoon olive oil	3 tablespoons peanut butter	¼ teaspoon nutmeg
	½ cup packed brown sugar	Fresh parsley for garnish

Using a vegetable peeler, **remove** the skin from the butternut and acorn squashes and **cut** into 1-inch cubes. In a large soup pot, **heat** the oil on medium high. **Add** the onion, and **cook** 1 to 2 minutes until it starts to become translucent. **Add** cubed squash, and cook 4 to 5 minutes. **Add** chicken broth, and bring to a boil. **Lower** heat, and **simmer** 30 to 35 minutes, until the squash is fork tender. Allow to **cool** slightly, then **blend** until smooth in a food processor or

blender. **Return** mixture to the pot, and **heat** to medium low. **Add** peanut butter, brown sugar, pepper, cinnamon, and nutmeg. **Stir** until well blended. **Garnish** with fresh parsley. **Serve** warm.

Yield: 7, 1-cup servings

Nutritional Analysis:

200 calories, 6 g fat, 1 g saturated fat, 5 mg cholesterol, 600 mg sodium, 36 g carbohydrate, 4 g fiber, 14 g sugar, 10 g added sugar, 4 g protein.





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