



The Scoop

Lassen County Master Gardener Newsletter

December 2014

Clean Houseplant Leaves

Rain. Beautiful, long-awaited rain. Just last week I had decided to get the hose out again and deliver a dose of much needed moisture to the winter vegetables still hanging on in the garden. Seems odd to recount that just a few years ago with abundant rains we never dreamed of winter irrigating the lawns, trees, Swiss chard, lettuce, onions, carrots, and other landscape plants. Like any gardener in tune with their crops and landscapes, adjustments are necessary to keep up with those wide swings in seasonal precipitation each year, as there is likely no set plan to follow annually. Today, the new plan called for houseplants to enjoy the rain as well.



Did I just really call for houseplants out in the rain in December in Lassen County? Where “rain” can turn to snow in a moment? Where frozen ground is the norm from now through February? Sure! I have a ton of houseplants with a tremendous variety in sizes of plants, leaf structure, and light/temperature needs. I don’t like to dust. I have a hard time picking up the dust rag to clean off the weeks accumulation on very flat, easy to clean surfaces. Do you think I would ever try taking individual leaves of a palm and wiping down each one? Never! Big leaf ficus? Once or twice, but I left swirly dust marks...

Nope. The stars had to be in perfect alignment, and all conditions had to be accounted for: Sun? None. Check. (You don’t want a sunburned, water spotted leaf). Temperature? Above freezing, at 44 degrees. Check. Wind? Hardly a breath (tall, blown over plants may break or spill soil). Check. Rain? Perfect big cleaning drops of rain. Check. So out they went. All 50, but not my tender-at-this-time Christmas cacti and last year’s poinsettia. My African violets also stay in as their “hairy” leaves don’t really wash off well anyway. As they sat outside in the auto-wash cycle, I sat by the fire with the dog and listened to every glorious drip and drop. After three hours of

washing and when I heard a gust of wind, time came to bring them inside.



With a very wet floor as the only downside, I admired the fantastic job this rain did for me. All looked invigorated, well watered, and ready to use their clean leaf surfaces to the fullest extent in capturing low winter light in my house. I will again look forward to a late-spring, warm, rainy day and do it all over again. And

here’s hoping I don’t have to have the hose and drip lines out yet...

Earwigs

One of the most commented on pest this year in Lassen County was the ubiquitous earwig. While we all loathe this pest when we find strawberries or favorite fruits or flowers with earwig damage, this insect is also an aphid eater. Here is a link to the University of California Integrated Pest Management website that has great information on how to deal with this invader:

<http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn74102.html>



Mulching

Have you protected your landscape plants yet? A layer of mulch will keep plants happier through cold winter days and give them a boost in the spring with the nutrients gained. Winter mulching is not to feed plants during the long and cold winter months, but to physically protect stems and roots from the drying damage from freezing, thawing and heaving. Bulbs are particularly prone to damage, as they are generally shallow and near the surface where exposure to cold may last for months. Just a few inches of material can moderate those cold temperatures and prevent the plants/bulbs/roots from drying out.

Remember, compost and mulch are not the same. Compost is made up of *fully decomposed* plant materials and is an asset when added to your soil, as the microorganisms can use it immediately. Mulch has not yet decomposed, and only becomes compost over time. Mulch should be used as a top-dressing only: never mix raw mulch in with your garden soil, as it will deplete the Nitrogen level in your soil as it decomposes, and rob the soil of a key ingredient for plant growth.

Gardeners in the Winter

After a short respite from the garden, most gardeners become restless. They start looking forward to the next growing season but know there is much to be done first. Tools and equipment have to be serviced and organized for future use; a garden plan has to be made; plants and seeds have to be ordered; the tasks of soil preparation, planting schedules, plant cultivating, soil maintenance, and harvesting need our attention now if the garden is to be a success. There is also the need to trim, prune, and protect trees, vines, shrubs, bushes, and all perennials. Timing is everything for the successful gardener. Too early or too soon can be a disaster as well as too late. It is never too early to be prepared, and it is never too late to learn. The successful gardener will start doing both now. Below are a few links to other sites that describe some methods of tool care and repair:

http://ucanr.edu/sites/MarinMG/Marin_Master_Gardener_Independent_Journal_Articles/?uid=318&ds=275

<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/newsrel/2004/nov04/nov0423.html>

<http://web.extension.illinois.edu/cfv/homeowners/021116.html>

Care of Christmas Plants

How many of you have ever tried to keep your Christmas season poinsettia alive after January? There are many articles and writings about how to prune them and re-pot them and place them in a dark but moist environment until spring, but few people I have talked to have ever done it. Poinsettias can become a beautiful houseplant that maintains a beautiful dark green and soft foliage in your home year-round. And it isn't too difficult. I tried it last winter and while the months of February and March weren't a pretty time for the poinsettia, the rest of the year was beautiful – I was even



treated to some red leaves on one of the stems. I have yet to try to “force” the plant to produce the red show (not the actual flower, as the leaves are the showy part of the plant) this involves placing the plant in complete darkness for a minimum amount of time beginning in October. I would be sure to forget some days, or be away and have to ask a friend, or I would let a speck of light in once and ruin the whole process... But I do like the plant even without the red.



Another plant we want looking good this time of year is the Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera spp.*) It is a hardy plant that is pretty resistant to diseases and affords great colors and showy flowers during these long night,

short day periods of December and January.

Master Gardener Class 2015

We will be conducting another series of classes for Master Gardener certification through the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources and Cooperative Extension program. Last year we had 18 people become certified master gardeners, and they are now helping others in our community with gardening and landscaping advice. If you or anyone you know is interested in this commitment, please call Teresa at (530) 251-8132, or check out our website at <http://celassen.ucanr.edu>. We are also on Facebook and are in the process of building information there as well as trying to connect with others. Check us out and Like us – then tell another friend about it and add more!

