

Plant Wise

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
University Extension

Sherry Ford
Mills County Extension Education Director
415 Main St., Suite 2, P.O. Box 430
Malvern, IA 51551
712-624-8616
<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/mills>

Prepared by Denise Fikes, Mills County Horticulture Assistant

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The Lucky Shamrock Plant

By: Cindy Haynes
Extension Horticulturist
Leigh Thelen
Horticulture Student
Iowa State University Extension



St. Patrick's Day brings a spot of green into the local grocery stores and flowers shops in the form of the lucky shamrock plant. How did the shamrock plant become associated with St. Patrick's Day and Ireland?

There are many stories and fables, but the most popular is that St. Patrick, the saint who brought Christianity to Ireland, plucked a shamrock from the grass at his feet to illustrate the doctrine of the Holy Trinity to his congregation. Each leaf symbolizes the father, the son, and the Holy Spirit. St. Patrick's Day is celebrated on the anniversary of his death. The shamrock is also credited with the arrival of spring and as a symbol for the "season of rebirth."

Common Shamrock Plants

The "shamrock" that St. Patrick actually plucked was most likely white clover (*Trifolium repens*) and is difficult to grow indoors. Because of this, the shamrock plants that are seen in grocery stores and floral shops this time of year are a species of oxalis or wood sorrel.

Oxalis leaves are clover shaped and can be shades of green, red, purple, or a combination of all these colors in one striking plant. The oxalis blossoms are white, yellow, pink or red depending on the species. There are hundreds of species of oxalis, but two that are commonly grown for indoor enjoyment are the Irish shamrock (*Oxalis acetosella*) and the good-luck plant (*Oxalis deppei*). Both have green leaves and small white or red blossoms, but the good-luck plant has white streaks running along the leaf vein. Both of these species exhibit nyctinastic movements, meaning the leaflets fold up at night or during overcast days and open during daylight hours.

How to Care For Shamrock Plants

Shamrock plants require direct sun for best growth and flowering. Oxalis plants usually bloom all winter if placed in a bright sunny window. These plants prefer soil that is kept barely moist and will do fine if the soil dries slightly between watering. Oxalis plants should be fertilized only when the plant is actively growing. Shamrock plants like cooler temperatures, especially when in bloom. These temperatures should be between 50-65 degrees F at night, and no greater than 75 degrees F during the day. Temperatures above 75 degrees F may induce dormancy.

In the summer months, wood sorrels should be allowed to rest or go dormant. The first sign that a plant is entering dormancy is leaf dieback. If this begins to occur, stop watering and fertilizing the plant. The leaves can be cut back or allowed to die back on their own and the plant should be moved to a cool, dark place for two to three months. At the end of the dormant period, new foliage will begin emerging from the soil. This is a signal to move the plant to a sunny window and to begin watering and fertilization.

Problems and Solutions

If the oxalis plant is tall and lanky, it needs more light or may also occur if the conditions in the home are too warm. If your plant is not blooming, it probably needs a good rest. Cut back on watering and fertilizing and let it go dormant. In two or three months, the plant will begin to grow again and should flower if it receives good care. A yellowing plant may be a sign you are watering it too much. Too little water and your plant will wilt. Shamrock plants are usually not bothered by insect pests, but are susceptible to root rot if kept too wet.

Good luck with this charming plant. If cared for properly, oxalis can be a part of your plant family for years to come.

Rejuvenating Large, Overgrown Shrubs

By Richard Jauron
Horticulturist
Iowa State University Extension

Shrubs are valuable assets to a home landscape. Shrubs are often planted for their ornamental characteristics, such as flowers, colorful fall foliage or attractive fruit. They can also provide privacy, block views and attract wildlife. To perform well in the landscape, most shrubs need to be pruned on a regular basis. Proper pruning helps to maintain plant health, control or shape plant growth, and stimulate flower production.

Many deciduous shrubs (those that lose their leaves in the fall) can be kept healthy and vigorous by removing a few of the largest, oldest stems every two or three years. Unfortunately, many individuals fail to prune their shrubs because of a lack of time, knowledge or courage. As a result of this neglect, shrubs often become large, overgrown and unattractive. Flowering shrubs that are not pruned on a regular basis may not bloom well.

Proper pruning can renew or rejuvenate overgrown, deciduous shrubs. One option is to prune them back over a three-year period. Begin by removing one-third of the largest, oldest stems at ground level in late winter/early spring (March or early April). The following year (again in March or early April), prune out one-half of the remaining old stems. Also, thin out some of the new growth. Retain several well-spaced, vigorous, new shoots and remove all of the others. Finally, remove all of the remaining old wood in late winter/early spring of the third year. Additional thinning of new shoots should also be done.

A second way to prune overgrown, deciduous shrubs is to cut them back to within 4 to 6 inches of the ground in March or early April. This severe pruning will induce a large number of shoots to develop during the growing season. In late winter of the following year, select and retain several strong, healthy shoots and remove all others at ground level. Head (cut) back the retained shoots to encourage branching. Overgrown lilacs, dogwoods, privets, honeysuckles and forsythias may be pruned in this manner. (Most lilacs rejuvenated by this method will not bloom for two to three years.) This method is also an excellent way to renew scraggly potentillas and summer-flowering spireas. For best performance, potentillas should be cut back to within 3 to 4 inches of the ground about every three years.

Large, overgrown evergreen shrubs, such as junipers, are a more difficult problem. Junipers possess bare or dead zones in their centers. They cannot be pruned back severely because they are incapable of initiating new growth from bare branches. Large, overgrown junipers that have become too large or unattractive will need to be removed and new shrubs planted.

While unattractive, old shrubs may not appear to be salvageable, it is possible to renew or rejuvenate many deciduous shrubs with proper pruning. Once rejuvenated, regular pruning will keep the shrubs full, healthy and attractive. ¥

Upcoming Horticulture Events of Interest:

Siouxland Garden Show

Friday, March 20, 9 am – 8 pm
Saturday, March 21, 9 am – 6 pm
Location: Marina Center, S. Sioux City, NE
Visit www.extension.iastate.edu/woodbury for Info.

Spring Gardening Conference

Saturday, March 28, 8:30 am – 3:45 pm
Location: The Center, 714 S. Main St., Council Bluffs
Call (712) 366-7070 for more information.

Atlantic Garden Seminar

Saturday, April 4, 8:30 am – 3:00 pm
Location: Atlantic High School
Call (712) 243-5527 for more information.

Mills County Master Gardener Plant/Bake Sale

Saturday, May 9, 9:00 am – 12:00 pm
Location: Glenwood State Bank parking lot
Call (712) 624-8616 for more information.

Bagworms: A Review and a Prediction



Bagworm on Spruce Tree

By Donald Lewis
Extension Entomologist
Iowa State University

If you live in the southern half of Iowa you are, more likely than not, familiar with the bagworm, a tree-defoliating caterpillar that has become more abundant and more noticeable over the past several years. In addition, they have recently been reported in more areas of the state than previously, including central Iowa north of I-80. Bagworms have always been in far southern Iowa but they have been moving northward over the past five to seven years.

The bagworm caterpillar lives its entire life inside a tough protective case made of silk and camouflaging bits of foliage.

Each caterpillar makes its own bag that it carries around as it feeds with the head and legs sticking out the open, top end of the bag. As the caterpillar eats and grows the bag is enlarged until by the end of the summer, what started as tiny pods only one-quarter inch long will have grown to almost two inches in length.

The bagworm commonly attacks arborvitae, red cedar, juniper and spruce trees though it has been reported to eat the leaves and needles from more than 128 different trees and shrubs. Attacked plants may be partially defoliated, weakened and rendered unsightly though it is not uncommon for complete defoliation to occur, resulting in death of the conifer trees mentioned above.

Not the Fall Webworm

There is another caterpillar pest found throughout Iowa that also attacks trees in mid- to late summer. The fall webworms are gregarious caterpillars that collectively construct a gray silken web over the end of tree branches, especially walnut trees, but dozens of others as well. Fall webworms do not occur on conifers and are distinctly different from the bagworm and its individual pods that are carried by the caterpillars from branch to branch and even tree to tree.

Bagworm life cycle

In the end of the summer the bagworm caterpillars stop feeding and seal each bag shut after securely tying it to a twig, stem or even nearby structure. Inside the bag the caterpillar transforms to the moth stage. The adult female moth does not leave the bag the caterpillar created. She remains inside while the winged, male moth does emerge to fly about the infested tree to locate the waiting female. After mating, the female lays 500 to 1,000 eggs within her bag and then she dies. The eggs remain in the bags on the trees till the following spring and hatch about mid-June to start the cycle over.

If you have had bagworm infestations in the past, or if you have conifer trees in the southern half of the state, now is the time to carefully inspect trees and shrubs for the bags or pods. Also mark your calendar to check for small caterpillars next June and treat then if caterpillars are present. The bags hanging on the trees now contain the eggs for the next generation (they will hatch next year). These can be removed from small trees by hand and discarded anytime between now and June. Some people find it easier to use scissors to cut bags from the trees rather than trying to pull them off and damage the foliage. Removed bags can be burned if open burning is allowed, buried or soaked in a bucket of detergent water.

Next summer it may be possible on a limited number of small trees to handpick the entire population while the bags are small. If handpicking is not practical, infested plants should be sprayed as soon as the eggs hatch and small larvae begin feeding. Chemical control becomes less effective as the season progresses because of the increased size of the larva and its bag. Insecticides that can be used against the bagworm include Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*), spinosid, azadirachtin (Neem), Sevin, permethrin and many others. Apply according to label directions.

What about next year?

It's a good question to ponder what will happen with this "southern" insect at the northern extent of its range now that those eggs in the pods hanging on the trees have been exposed to temperatures as low as -25 F. The answer is we don't know what will happen, but it is logical to assume the population has been negatively impacted. However, before you get too confident, it is also logical to assume that insects are always survivors and they could still be here next summer regardless of the winter weather. You won't know until you check your trees in June and July. Then we'll all know.

Ask the ISU Extension Gardening Expert

Some of the seedlings that I start indoors collapse and die shortly after germination. Why?

Damping-off is probably responsible for the collapse and death of your seedlings. Damping-off is caused by several different fungi. Environmental conditions usually associated with damping-off are poorly drained potting soil and overwatering. Damping-off can be prevented by using clean containers, a sterile, well-drained potting mix and by following good cultural practices. Previously used containers should be washed in soapy water, then disinfected by dipping in a solution containing one part chlorine bleach and nine parts water. Flower and vegetable seeds need an evenly moist potting mix for good germination. After germination, allow the potting soil to dry somewhat between waterings.

When should I plant potatoes in the garden?

Potatoes should be planted in early spring. Appropriate planting times are late March or early April in southern Iowa.

Since potatoes are susceptible to several diseases, buy certified, disease-free potatoes at garden centers or mail-order nurseries. Gardeners can purchase seed pieces (tubers that have been cut into sections) or whole potatoes. Small potato tubers may be planted whole. Large potatoes should be cut into sections or pieces.

Each seed piece should have 1 or 2 "eyes" or buds and weigh approximately 1.5 to 2.0 ounces. After cutting the tubers into sections, place the freshly cut seed pieces in a humid, 60 to 70 degrees F location for 1 or 2 days.

A short "healing" period allows the cut surfaces to callus or heal over before the seed pieces are planted. Healing of the cut surfaces helps prevent the rotting of seed pieces when planted.

Plant seed pieces (cut side down) and small whole potatoes 3 to 4 inches deep and 1 foot apart within the row. Rows should be spaced 2.5 to 3 feet apart.

Extension programs are available to all without regard to race, color, national origin, religion, sex, or disability.

MARCH GARDENING TO DO LIST



- Most Catalogs send bare-root plants just prior to planting time for your area. If the plants arrive early or winter stays late, store dormant bare-root plants in a cool, dark location. Keep the roots moist.
- Pot up bare-root plants that started to grow during shipping or storage. Grow these plants indoors in a sunny window or under artificial lights. Move outside after the danger of frost.
- Prune trees and shrubs while still dormant. Early spring bloomers should be pruned after flowers fade. Birches, maples, and other heavy sap bleeders can be pruned in early summer to avoid the sap flow.
- Wait until the soil thaws and dries before getting out the shovel. Working wet soil causes damage that takes years to repair. If soil forms a solid ball, it's still too wet. Be patient!
- Clean out birdhouses before new tenants arrive.
- Determine if you will be expanding your vegetable garden this season. If so, locate sources for topsoil, compost, and other amendments you might need. Calculate the amount needed before you go shopping. (A cubic yard of soil covers over 300 square feet at a 1-inch depth.)
- Now is a good time to get your lawn mower ready for the season ahead. Take it to a repair shop or get out the owner's manual and do it yourself. You should sharpen the blades, clean or replace the spark plug and air filter, change the oil, and check the tires for wear.
- Leave mulch on strawberries and perennials until new growth begins. Be ready to re-apply mulch if a hard frost is predicted.



"Every gardener knows that under the cloak of winter lies a miracle...a seed waiting to sprout, a bulb opening to the light, a bud straining to unfurl. And the anticipation nurtures our dream."

~ Barbara Winkler

WE NEED YOUR HELP!

The Mills County Extension office is currently planning a workshop for small acreage homeowners. We are targeting those who live on properties of 1-20 acres.

If this describes you, we would like your feedback on topics you would like to see in this workshop. Please review the following list, pick the topics you would like to know more about, then e-mail (dfikes@iastate.edu) or call the extension office to let us know your choices.

- Water/Well Systems
- Septic Systems
- Lanes/Driveways
- Waterways/Erosion/Drainage
- Legal Issues (easements, property lines, trespassing, zoning laws)
- Government/County Services
- Pastures
- Equipment Issues (tractors vs. mower, etc.)
- Plantings (trees, prairies, landscaping, turfgrass, vegetables & fruits, woodlands)
- Wildlife Issues
- Raising animals for production
- Beekeeping
- Rural Family Life
- Safety Issues (chemical, equipment, etc.)
- Other?

Thank you for helping us to serve you better!

Resources for Horticulture information

ISU's Hortline at (515) 294-3108

(Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-noon, 1-4:30 p.m)

ISU/Mills County Extension: 712-624-8616

www.extension.iastate.edu/mills/yardgarden.htm

Iowa State University Publications

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| PM 1958 | Pruning Ornamental Shrubs (\$1.50) |
| SUL 0005 | Pruning Trees: Shade, Flowering, & Conifer (Free) |
| PM 874 | Starting Garden Transplants at Home (\$.50) |
| RG 0105 | Garden Tips: Guidelines to Seasonal Chores (Free) |
| PM 0819 | Planting a Home Vegetable Garden (\$.50) |
| PM 534 | Planting & Harvesting Times for Garden Vegetables (Free) |

Horticulture Publications on-line

<https://www.extension.iastate.edu/store/ListCategories>

