

Plant Wise

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
Extension and Outreach

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The Legends and Traditions of Holiday Plants

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There are many traditions associated with the holidays. Many involve plants. Evergreen trees, poinsettias, holly and mistletoe played important roles in ancient legends and rituals, but have evolved into traditions associated with the Christmas season.



The Christmas Tree

The Christmas tree is a tradition which began in Germany in the seventeenth century. There are several legends concerning the origin of the Christmas tree. Historians do know that the primitive cultures of northern Europe believed that evergreen trees possessed godlike powers. The evergreen tree also symbolized immortality. The Germanic peoples would bring evergreen boughs into their homes during winter to insure the protection of the home and the return of life to the snow-covered forest. As Christianity spread throughout Europe, eventually the evergreen tree was transformed into a Christian symbol.

Some believe the Christmas tree evolved from the Paradise Tree of the Middle Ages. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, evergreen trees played an important role in miracle and mystery plays. One such play dramatized the fall of Adam and Eve and was

performed on December 24. On stage during the play was a Paradise Tree (an evergreen with red apples hung from its branches).

Others believe that the Christmas tree began in the sixteenth century with Martin Luther. According to the legend, Martin Luther was inspired by the beauty of evergreens one Christmas Eve. He cut down a tree, brought it home, and decorated it with candles. The first record of a Christmas tree is in Strasburg, Germany in 1604. German immigrants and Hessian soldiers hired by the British to fight the colonists during the American Revolution brought the Christmas tree tradition to the United States.

Poinsettias

Poinsettias are native to Mexico. They were cultivated by the Aztec Indians. The colorful bracts were used to make a reddish purple dye. The Aztecs also made a fever medicine from the poinsettia's milky sap.



After the Spanish conquest and the introduction of Christianity, poinsettias began to be used in Christian rituals. Franciscan priests used the poinsettia in their nativity processions. Poinsettias were first introduced into the United States by Joel Robert Poinsett, the first U.S. Ambassador to Mexico. Poinsett had plants sent to his home in South Carolina. He then distributed plants to horticultural friends and botanical gardens. The Ecke family of California has been instrumental in the development of today's poinsettia.

Initially poinsettias lasted only a few days in the home. All had red bracts. Today's varieties are more compact, durable, and long-lasting. Red, pink, white, gold, marbled, and variegated varieties are now available.

Mistletoe

Mistletoe is a semi-parasitic plant with small, leathery leaves and small, white berries. Mistletoe plants manufacture their own food, but must obtain water and minerals from the host plant.

American mistletoe (*Phoradendron serotinum*) can be found growing in deciduous trees from New Jersey and southern Indiana southward to Florida and Texas. It is the state flower of Oklahoma. Mistletoe sold during the holiday season is gathered in the wild. Most mistletoe is harvested in Oklahoma and Texas.

Traditions involving mistletoe date back to ancient times. Druids believed that mistletoe could bestow health and good luck. Welsh farmers associated mistletoe with fertility. A good mistletoe crop foretold a good crop the following season.

Mistletoe was also thought to influence human fertility and was prescribed to individuals who had problems bearing children. Mistletoe has also been used in medicine. It has been used as treatment for pleurisy, gout, epilepsy, rabies, and poisoning. Mistletoe also played a role in a superstition concerning marriage. It was believed that kissing under the mistletoe increased the possibility of marriage in the upcoming year.



Although mistletoe has been used in the treatment of several ailments, the berries are poisonous. Individuals using mistletoe during the holiday season should keep the sprigs out of the reach of children. For safety reasons, many companies have replaced the berries with artificial, plastic berries.

Holly

Holly was considered sacred by the ancient Romans. Holly was used to honor Saturn, god of agriculture, during their Saturnalia festival held during the winter solstice. The Romans gave one another holly wreaths, carried it in processions, and decked images of Saturn with it. During the early years of the Christian religion in Rome, many Christians continued to deck their homes with holly to avoid detection and persecution by Roman authorities. Gradually, holly became a symbol of Christmas as Christianity became the dominant religion of the empire.

Wassailing

Wassailing is the tradition of going from house to house caroling, eating, drinking, and socializing with friends and relatives.

Wassailing, however, was originally an important part of a horticultural ritual. In England, it focused on the apple orchards.

The purpose was to salute the trees in the dead of winter to insure a good crop for the coming year. The date varied across the 12 days of Christmas. If done formally, the wassail procession visited the principal orchards of the area, caroling as it went. In each orchard, major trees were selected and cider or liquor was sprinkled over their root systems. Incantations such as were recited.

Stand fast at root,
Bear well at top,
Every twig bear apple big,
Every bow bear apple now.
or
Here's to thee old apple tree,
Hats full, sacks full,
Great bushel baskets full,
Hurrah!

To frighten evil spirits away, guns were fired into the air. Before proceeding, the procession usually danced about the honored trees and then snaked its way out of the orchard. The care with which the ceremony had been executed was measured by the crop yield the following year.

As you celebrate this holiday season with friends and relatives, enjoy the Christmas traditions and the ancient rituals and legends associated with them.



Decorate a Christmas Tree for the Birds

University of Nebraska
Backyard Farmer

Before taking your Christmas tree to the recycling center this year, consider creating a backyard habitat for birds. To attract birds to your backyard, you must provide their three

basic needs- food, water, and cover or shelter. Your old Christmas tree will provide excellent shelter for birds, providing protection from wind and predators. It can also



serve as a feeding station, where you provide a buffet of food that our native birds love.

Before taking the tree outside, remove all decorations and lights, including tinsel. To provide the most shelter possible for the birds, place the tree on the south or east side of the house, sheltered from winter's harsh north and west winds. Anchor the tree securely by setting the stump into the ground or a large bucket of damp sand, and securing the top of the tree with twine to nearby buildings or trees.

Decorate your tree with strings of popcorn, cranberries or raisins. Apples, oranges, leftover breads and pine cones covered with peanut butter then dipped in birdseed can also be added. For best results, push the edible ornaments well into the tree. Popcorn will be attractive to cardinals, finches and grosbeaks. Cranberries and raisins should attract cedar waxwings, finches and any robins wintering in the area.

Press suet into the branches or hang it in mesh bags such as those that contain onions and fruit in the supermarket. It is best to keep suet balls in the shade so they don't melt. Also, keep them high enough in the tree that dogs can't reach them. Pre-made suet mixtures, which include suet, bird seed and a variety of dried fruits, are available at most nurseries, garden centers, pet stores, or bird supply stores. To make your own suet seed balls, purchase suet from the meat department of your local grocery store. Mix birdseed and a small amount of peanut butter with suet while the suet is warm enough to be molded. One seed combination that is attractive to a wide range of desirable songbirds is: 50% sunflower seeds, 35% white proso millet and 15% finely cracked corn. Mold the mixture around a wire hook that can be used to attach the suet seed ball to the tree, or fill empty orange rind halves with the suet mixture and attach them to the tree.



Suet is especially attractive to insect-eaters such as woodpeckers, chickadees, and nuthatches and is a good winter energy source. Suet seed balls will attract juncos, chickadees, finches and native sparrows. If you decide to start feeding the birds, be consistent with your feeding. Feeding birds in the winter results in their reliance on you for part of their diet, lack of this food during a severe cold period or storm could result in the birds starving to death before they can find another food source.

Even in winter birds need water to drink and to keep their feathers clean. A birdbath with clean water will attract many birds if the water is not frozen. Commercial

immersion heaters will keep the water in birdbaths from freezing. They are available from many nurseries or bird supply stores. Providing for the winter needs of birds can result in many hours of entertainment, spent watching these beautiful creatures.

Expect a variety of birds to come to your holiday feast, including woodpeckers for the suet, finches for the seeds, jays for the nuts, and waxwings and mockingbirds for the berries.

Protect Young Trees from Rodents

By Peter Dzuik
Minnesota Department
of Agriculture



Voles, mice and rabbit damage can be detrimental to trees and shrubs.

Subsurface damage

is often caused by voles, which feed on the roots and bark of trees and shrubs. Mice feed on saplings and shrubs below the snow and within the grass layer. Rabbits assault bark and tender buds on areas higher up than the reach of voles and mice.

Management Options - Protect trunks by placing a cylinder of ¼" (or smaller) mesh, hardware cloth, or put plastic drainpipe around the trunk. The guards should extend two inches below the soil line (as long as they don't damage roots). Place 18- 24 inches above the anticipated snow line. Guards should be removed or reinstalled each spring to prevent girdling.



Repellants -The most effective repellants for rodents contain thiram, a fungicide that is distasteful, yet unarmful, to rodents. Thiram is a water-soluble spray or paint. Apply it with a surfactant. One application is usually enough for the entire dormant season. Apply multiple applications during the growing season.

Habitat modification - Discourage rodents by reducing grasses and other vegetation that pests use for cover from predators. Mow or chemically control grasses within a 4' diameter circle around trees. Also, discourage rabbits by reducing vegetative cover, brush piles and other hiding places.

Other - Hunting and trapping, although labor intensive, can be effective. However, mice and vole populations usually don't respond well to trapping or other extermination, such as rodenticides. High reproductive rates draw in pests from surrounding areas. They take advantage of abundant food and habitat following local

extermination. Fumigants and electromagnetic or ultrasonic devices are not effective for long-term control of rodents.

For more information, contact the MN Department of Forest Resources Extension and Outreach office at 612-624-3020.

Upcoming Horticulture Events of Interest

Lauritzen Gardens Holiday Poinsettia Show

Date: Now through January 5, 2014
Location: Lauritzen Gardens
100 Bancroft Street, Omaha NE 68108
Time: 9:00 am - 5:00 pm
Cost: \$7.00 or free with membership
Details: Thousands of poinsettias bursting with rich, vibrant color fill the floral display hall in a glowing tribute to the holidays.

2014 Nebraska Great Plains Conference

Date: January 16-17, 2014
Location: Cornhusker Hotel
333 S 13th St, Lincoln NE 68508
Time: 8:30 am - 4:00 pm
Cost: TBD
Details: Organized by Nebraska Nursery & Landscape Association (NNLA) and the Nebraska Arborist Association (NAA). For more information contact Teri James, tjames2@unl.edu

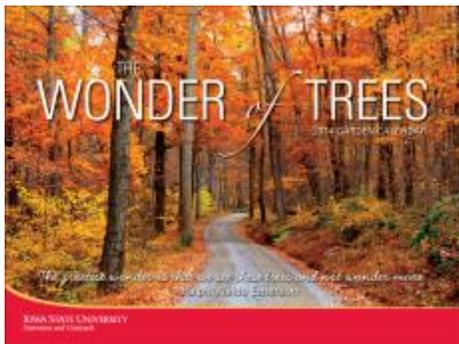
West Pottawattamie Gardening Conference

Date: Saturday March 29, 2013
Location: Senior Center, 714 S. Main St., Co. Bluffs
Time: 8:30 am - 4:00 pm
Cost: TBD
Details: More to come next month

2014 Garden Calendar Available

Trees improve the landscape of Iowa, whether it's with sheltering foliage, beautiful blooms, nourishing fruit, vivid color, or gnarly bark.

This year's calendar celebrates the wonderful gifts that trees provide for other living things. In addition to striking photos, find monthly garden tips, tree-planting instructions, Iowa's state forests, vignettes of historical



trees, and quotes that trees inspired.

Makes a great gift and a handy garden journal too! Calendars are available for \$6.00 each - online at www.store.extension.iastate.edu/ or through the Mills County extension office.

Winter Bird Feeding

Iowa Wildlife Federation



Winter started slow, yet the birds found their backyard oases. Now that cold, wind and snow have rattled in winter for awhile, a steady stream of feathered visitors will keep checking in, if you keep those feeders stocked. Besides, it provides you a front row seat for the small investment of time. "It's just the connection people get with something so beautiful, right in their backyards. It's a great way to appreciate nature", muses Pat Schlarbaum, wildlife diversity technician with the Department of Natural Resources.

Different feeds attract different birds. As a starter, though, black oil sunflower seeds attract the largest share of 'desirable' birds at Iowa feeders. Cardinals, nuthatches, bluejays, chickadees...even hairy woodpeckers...chow down on the winter staple.

If you've priced it, you know already that it has been a volatile sales year for sunflower seeds. Chalk that up to high crop prices. "Soy oil is used for frying, cooking in the restaurant business. The price of soybeans on the commodity market pushes up the price of soy oil", explains Dick Irvin, from Paul's Discount Store in Iowa City, which devotes an aisle to bird feed and feeders. "Many soy oil users turn to sunflower seed oil, which drove up the demand and price for sunflower oil (and seed)."

A 25-pound bag of black oil sunflower seeds retailed for \$14-15 in December; nearly double the cost of four or five years ago. Still, it is scaled down from this past summer. "(With) the harvest season for major sunflower producers; South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas; more seed is available. It drives the price back down", says Irvin.

There are other sources for specific birds, though. Various finches are partial to nyjer seed. Most woodpeckers zero in on suet. A trip to the bird feeding counter or store can set you up with the particular feeders and foods, to enjoy a colorful show from your window, as the snow flies. "Those who enjoy songbirds, boy, you can draw them right into your picture window", emphasizes Schlarbaum.

Snowy owl Sightings: A northern visitor is causing a stir among winter birders in Iowa. An irruption of snowy owls yielded December sightings from Johnson County (December 4), to Ida and Woodbury Counties in the west to Fremont in the southwest and Ames/Boone in central Iowa through the first half of December. They were expected to continue through February.

The large Arctic bird rarely ventures this far south unless food supplies are scarce in its home range. They feed primarily on lemmings and voles. Their white plumage with dark bars and flecks make them stand out on a winter landscape. Find out more at www.iowabirds.org, the Iowa Ornithologists Union website.

Great Backyard Bird Count: If you're still up for tallying cold weather birds, the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) offers the opportunity February 17-20. Window watchers and others keep track of which birds they see...for any 15 minute interval they can spare. There's even an online video with instructions and tips for identifying birds. For details, go to www.birdsource.org/gbbc.

Organizers underscore the 'Citizen Science' provided by thousands of participants; helping them make strides in understanding birds; especially winter territories. "Bird populations are dynamic; they are constantly in flux. No single scientist or team of scientists could hope to document the complex distribution and movements of so many species", emphasizes the website.

Plant Wise Newsletter is Going Paperless Sign up Today!

The Plant Wise newsletter will be transitioning to electronic distribution in February of 2014. We currently mail 175 paper copies of the newsletter and would like to convert most of these subscriptions to electronic delivery via email. Paper subscriptions will still be available at a cost of \$10.00 per year. There will be no cost to receive the Plant Wise newsletter electronically. Please contact Nancy Crews at ISU Mills County Extension and Outreach office to sign up for electronic delivery or paper subscription by December 15, 2013, 712-624-8616 or ncrews@iastate.edu.

Ask the ISU Extension Gardening Expert

How do I care for a poinsettia?

Place the poinsettia in a plant sleeve or carefully wrap it before transporting the plant home. Exposing the poinsettia to freezing temperatures, even for a few minutes, may cause its bracts and leaves to blacken and drop. As soon as you get home, unwrap the poinsettia and place it near a sunny window or other well-lit location. However, don't let the plant touch the cold

window pane. Also, keep the poinsettia away from cold drafts or heat sources. Poinsettias prefer temperatures between 60 and 70 F.

Water needs can be determined with your finger. Check the potting soil daily. When the soil surface becomes dry to the touch, water the plant until water begins to flow out the bottom of the pot. The pots of most poinsettias are placed inside decorative pot covers. When watering a poinsettia, carefully remove the pot covering, water the plant in the sink, then drop the poinsettia back into the pot cover.

When given good care, a poinsettia should remain attractive for several weeks. Poinsettias are normally discarded after the holiday season.

How do I care for a Christmas cactus?

Plants commonly referred to as Christmas cacti include the true Christmas cactus (*Schumbergera bridgesii*), Thanksgiving cactus (*Schumbergera truncata*) and numerous hybrids.

While Christmas and Thanksgiving cacti are similar in appearance, there are differences. The flattened stem segments (phylloclades) on the Christmas cactus have rounded margins. Christmas cacti typically bloom in December or January. The phylloclade margins on the Thanksgiving cactus possess two to four saw-toothed projections. Thanksgiving cacti typically bloom in November or December.

Christmas and Thanksgiving cacti prefer bright, indirect light and temperatures of 60 to 70 F. In spring and summer (when plants are actively growing) water plants about once every seven days and fertilize every two to four weeks with a dilute fertilizer solution. In fall and winter, keep plants a bit on the dry side. A thorough watering every seven to 10 days is usually sufficient.

Christmas and Thanksgiving cacti are short-day plants. Plants will not bloom properly if exposed to artificial light at night. In late summer/early fall, place plants in a cool (60 to 65 F) location that receives bright light during the day, but no artificial light at night. An unused bedroom or basement may have the proper environmental conditions. Continue to give plants good, consistent care during flower bud development. Moving plants from one location to another, excessive watering or other marked changes to their care during flower bud development may cause the buds to drop off.

Several houseplants that were brought indoors in fall are dropping leaves. Why?

When plants are brought indoors in fall they often drop leaves. Environmental conditions indoors are less favorable than those outdoors. The less favorable growing conditions are stressful to plants. Plants respond to this stress by dropping leaves. It usually takes plants 1 to 2 months to adjust to the indoor

environment when brought indoors in fall. Leaf drop may occur during this 1 to 2 month period.

Plants are usually able to adjust to their indoor environment fairly quickly if they receive good, consistent care. Poor or inconsistent care will prolong the adjustment period.

What are some good sources of flower and vegetable seeds?

Flower and vegetable seeds can be purchased at local garden centers and other retailers. They're also available from mail-order/internet companies. Mail-order/internet sources include Park Seed Company, One Parkton Avenue, Greenwood, SC 29647 (www.parkseed.com); W. Atlee Burpee, 300 Park Avenue, Warminster, PA 18974 (www.burpee.com); Stokes Seeds, P.O. Box 548, Buffalo, NY 14240 (www.stokeseeds.com); Harris Seeds, P.O. Box 24966, Rochester, NY 14624 (www.harriseseeds.com); Johnny's Selected Seeds, 955 Benton Avenue, Winslow, ME 04901 (www.johnnyseeds.com); Seed Savers Exchange, 3094 North Winn Road, Decorah, IA 52101 (www.seedsavers.org); and many others.

Do houseplants actually improve indoor air quality?

Houseplants are attractive additions to homes and offices. They can also improve indoor air quality by removing formaldehyde, benzene, xylene, ammonia, and other harmful chemicals. Plants that have been shown to improve indoor air quality include Chinese evergreen (*Aglonema* spp.), umbrella tree or schefflera (*Schefflera* spp.), spider plant (*Chlorophytum comosum*), dumbcane (*Dieffenbachia* spp.), corn plant (*Dracaena fragrans*), pothos (*Epipremnum aureum*), weeping fig (*Ficus benjamina*), rubber tree (*Ficus elastica*), English ivy (*Hedera helix*), philodendron (*Philodendron* spp.), snake plant (*Sansevieria trifasciata*), peace lily (*Spathiphyllum* spp.), arrowhead vine (*Syngonium podophyllum*), and palms (various species).

DECEMBER GARDENING TO DO LIST



- Do not use softened water on houseplants as the salts are damaging to them.
- Store leftover garden chemicals where they will stay dry, unfrozen, and out of reach of children and pets.
- Prune off a few branches of Red Twig Dogwood, Juniper, Winterberry, Arborvitae, Yew, or

Boxwood. Add these to your indoor or outdoor holiday décor.

- Check any holiday plants you purchase or receive for pests to prevent infestation of your other houseplants.
- Wipe dust off glossy leaves of houseplants with a damp sponge or cloth. Use a soft cosmetic brush to dust off hairy leaves. A build-up of dust reduces the plant's ability to take up light and carbon dioxide.
- Keep monitoring stored fruits and vegetables. Remove any that have rotted.
- Rotate houseplants to prevent one-sided growth.
- Check stored bulbs for sign of rot and disease. Shriveling indicates insufficient relative humidity. Discard infested bulbs immediately.
- Cut branches from your discarded Christmas tree and lay over perennials that are susceptible to winter injury.
- Inspect young trees and shrubs for rabbit damage. Replace or repair protective coverings.
- Gather and organize seed starting equipment and supplies. Find an area where you can place flats near a window or under artificial lights. It won't be long until the "Garden Catalog Season" is upon us!

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

RG 316	Poinsettia Care (free)
RG 401	Ornamental Grasses with Winter Interest
RG 328	Growing Amaryllis
RG 308	Growing Holiday Cacti
PM 713	Indoor Plants (\$5.00)

Horticulture Publications on-line
<https://www.extension.iastate.edu/store/ListCategories>

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