Everyone have a great month, happy holidays and new year!
News from Education Coordinator

Iowa State University Master Gardener News
See the full list of upcoming events here: https://www.extension.iastate.edu/mastergardener/events

Why Trees Matter
Trees Forever – Our Woodland Legacy Virtual Symposium
Thursday, December 10, 2020 - Virtual Online Event
More details and online registration at: http://www.treesforever.org/symposium

International Master Gardener Conference 2021
September 12-17, 2021
This event will be virtual! Read more here.

University of Illinois Extension is offering several Good Growing webinars in December and beyond. Check these out.

THANK YOU
Carolyn Lemaster
The long, strange tale of the Poinsettia

Written by Zack Sterkenberg submitted by Mary Wildermuth, Master Gardener Chair

There are certain plants that play important and often mysterious roles in holiday traditions and celebrations all over the world. From the Egyptians who decorated trees during the winter solstice, to the Pagans and Druids who used mistletoe in their winter customs, stories of ritualized plant use span continents and history and have become infused into the mythologies that span generations.

The poinsettia’s story is just as unique as the rest. Despite this celebrated plant’s prominence during the holiday season, its story remains largely unknown — until now.

The story of the poinsettia is one that spans hundreds of years and contains countless twists and turns as it wound its way into our holiday canon. Although it doesn’t pre-date Christianity like its Christmas counterparts, the holiday season wouldn’t be the same without the reds and greens of the poinsettia.

Cuetlaxochitl: the origin of the Poinsettia

For us to begin, we have to go all the way back to the 14th century Mexico. The plant had a long history of medicinal use. It was said that its milky white sap, called latex, could be used to reduce fever symptoms. The plant was so highly prized in Aztec culture that “Cuetlaxochitl,” as the plant was known, was also used to create red and purple dyes for clothing and textiles. It is said that Montezuma, the last of the Aztec emperors, was so captivated by the plant that he would have caravans of poinsettias shipped to the capital city of Teotihuacan because the plants could not grow at the high altitude.

However, it wasn’t until the 17th century that Cuetlaxochitl, now an established decorative plant in Mexican tradition, began its journey into Christmas traditions.

This part of the journey began in the small town of Taxco de Alarcon, Mexico where Franciscan monks began using the shrub in their Nativity processions. Coincidentally, it is also around this time that the Mexican legend of Pepita and the “Flowers of the Holy Night” began, forever tying the red and green shrub to Christmas folklore.

Pepita and the Poinsettia

As legend has it, a young girl named Pepita was traveling to her village to visit the Nativity scene at the chapel. Pepita did not have enough money to buy a present to give the baby Jesus at the services, so she gathered a bundle of roadside weeds and formed a bouquet.

She was upset that she didn’t have more to offer, but she was reminded by her cousin that “even the most humble gift, given in love, will be acceptable in His eyes.” Upon entering the chapel and presenting her bouquet...
The long, strange tale of the Poinsettia

Written by Zack Sterkenberg submitted by Mary Wildermuth, Master Gardener Chair

The namesake of the Poinsettia

During this time, the poinsettia’s association with Christmas was almost entirely confined to small Mexican towns and their local folklore. It remained in relative obscurity for almost two hundred years before a man by the name of Joel Roberts Poinsett introduced it to the United States. This introduction forever changed the way we decorate for the holidays.

Joel Roberts Poinsett was a man of many talents. He was not only the first person to introduce the poinsettia to the United States, but he was the first U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, and was also a skilled and passionate botanist who co-founded the institution that we now call the Smithsonian Institute.

In the winter of 1828, Poinsett took a diplomatic trip to Mexico on behalf of President John Quincy Adams. He visited the Taxco area where he wandered the beautiful countryside and became enchanted by the brilliant red leaves of an unfamiliar plant. Poinsett kept a greenhouse on his property in South Carolina and began shipping the blooms back to his home. There, he studied and carefully cultivated the plants.

It wasn’t long before he began sharing the plants among his friends and colleagues around Christmas time. This was when the upper leaves of the shrub would turn red. The reputation of the enchanting Christmas plants spread and soon a Pennsylvania nurseryman by the name of Robert Buist began to cultivate poinsettias. Buist would be the first to sell the plant to the public under its botanical name of *Euphorbia Pulcherrima*. He also played a large role in helping to establish the plant’s Christmas reputation.

It wasn’t until about 1836 that the plant formally attained its popular name of “Poinsettia” after the man who first brought the plant to the United States and ignited a holiday tradition that continues to this day.

A national phenomenon

In the early 1900s, the poinsettia began to gain popularity. Paul Ecke Sr. developed the first poinsettia plants that could be grown indoors in grow pots. He began selling them at roadside stands in Hollywood, California. In 1923, he founded the Ecke Ranch that today provides nearly 80 percent of the plants that are bought and sold in the country.

Today, the poinsettia is the most popular plant sold during the holidays and the best-selling potted plant in the United States. Within a six-week period leading up to Christmas, there are over 70 million poinsettias sold and nearly $250 million in poinsettia sales accounted for.

In July of 2002, the United States Congress named December 12th National Poinsettia Day. The day would honor the late Joel Roberts Poinsett who played a crucial role in making the poinsettia into the holiday fixture that it is today.
Dirty Little Secrets (or how to get great soil)
Bill Koellner and Gretchen Nollman, Master Gardeners

What is "Good Soil"?

“Good soil” is a friable, fertile, well-drained soil that has the organic matter and nutrients your particular plant needs to thrive. Ask anyone who has a lush garden “what’s your secret”, and they'll likely tell you that it’s all about the soil. Soil is a living, dynamic ecosystem. Healthy soil is steaming with microscopic and larger organisms that perform many vital functions including converting dead and decaying matter as well as minerals to plant nutrients. It’s the key to everything when growing healthy plants — successful rooting, vigorous growth, great harvests, weed, pest, and disease control. If your soil is, well, let’s call it challenged, you can improve it. Here are some of the basics on soil and some tips on how to make poor soils come alive.

If you were to test your soil (try the simple mason jar method), you would find that it contains some percentage of sand, silt and clay. Together, these components make-up the so-called “soil triangle”, with sand being the most coarse particles in the soil, clay being the finest particles, and silt being intermediate. Generally, loamy soils towards the middle-lower portion of the triangle are considered the best, composed of 40% sand, 40% silt and 20% clay. Soils are also classified according to their organic matter content. Organic matter is important because it provides nutrients to plant roots, helps support a beneficial microbial environment in the soil, increases water holding capacity of soil, and “glues together” smaller soil particles into larger aggregates that increase the aeration of the soil. All that said, it’s difficult to define a “good soil” because it depends to some extent on the plants being grown. A clay soil, or a soil with a high sand content is not necessarily a “bad” soil, but may require a different approach than the “perfect” loam soil.

What are the different types of soil?

The three most common types of soil textures you’re likely to encounter are:

- **Sandy**: Dry and gritty to the touch, and because the particles have huge spaces between them, it can’t hold onto water and lacks nutrients. Almost any plant can grow well in sandy soil as long as they get enough water and nutrients (think hydroponics). Plants such as gazania, lavender, cosmos, rugosa roses are fine with this type of soil texture.

- **Clay**: Sticky and slippery, slow-draining clay soil makes life difficult for many plants. Many ferns, switchgrass, black-eyed Susan, daylilies and Japanese iris don’t seem to mind.

- **Loamy**: Loamy soil are a rich, dark color that crumbles easily in your hand. They are nutrient-rich, allow water to drain easily and hold just the right amount of moisture for plants to thrive and allows air to seep through. Plant what you like!

Okay, so how do I improve my soil?
Dirty Little Secrets (or how to get great soil)
Bill Koellner and Gretchen Nollman, Master Gardners

Few of us are blessed with perfect soil such as the beautiful, black soils of the Midwest that have accumulated organic matter over the eons to where it has decomposed to stable humus (the waste products and remains of soil-dwelling microorganisms and bacteria). The rest of us need to grab a shovel and start working on improving ours. Here are a few ways to get better soil structure: Preparing a planting bed with deep cultivation is not a lot of fun, but breaking-up heavy, compacted soil layers will help aerate the soil, and provide a better environment for quickly setting and then growing healthy roots.

New beds for landscape plants should be amended before any plants go into the ground. For long-term benefits, choose an amendment that breaks down slowly such as shredded bark and peat moss with the addition of compost which, while it breaks down in a matter of months, bolsters the initial nutrient supply available to soil microorganisms. If your soil is mostly clay or sand, spread 4 to 5 inches of amendment over it; if the soil is loamy or has been regularly amended each season, add just a 2- to 3-inch layer of amendment. Spread onto the soil surface and till into the top 4 – 6 inches of soil.

Permanent or semipermanent plantings on trees, shrubs, or perennials benefit from soil amendment too, but you need to do the job without damaging plant roots. Simply spread the amendment over the soil surface as a mulch; earthworms, microorganisms, rain, and irrigation water will all carry it downward over time, gradually improving the soil’s top layer. How much? Where soil is stubborn clay or sieve-like sand, add 4 to 6 inches of compost before each planting season. If soil is already nice and loamy still add compost–1 to 3 inches of fresh compost before each planting season. Note: yes, every planting season.

Soil amendments such as lime, sulfur, and organic fertilizers can help create a good fertility and pH level for plant growth. Don’t assume your soil needs these and apply without first consulting a reputable garden center for the types of amendments that are recommended in their area. For example, lime application is generally not needed in the arid western states and sulfur is generally not needed in the temperate Midwestern states.

Is there such a thing as "impossible" soil and how can I keep improving my soil?

Yes, there is such a thing as “impossible soil” – it’s in my backyard! But seriously, almost any soil can be improved. Adding well-composted organic matter is probably one of the best ways to feed the soil and build good soil fertility and structure over time. It’s important to keep on caring for your soil after planting. Mulching and, where necessary, applying fertilizers around plants is an effective way to improve soil in an established garden. Mulch keeps plant root zones cool in the summer, suppresses weeds, and gradually degrades and adds organic matter to the soil. A light fertilization going into spring and again in the summer will help plants thrive. In areas with cold weather, fertilizer late in the summer and into fall is usually avoided as it can prolong vigorous growth into the fall, making the plant more susceptible to cold damage.
A Note from Mary

Mary Wildermuth, Master Gardener Chair

As 2020 draws to a close we look forward to a happier new year in 2021. I hope this newsletter finds everyone well and busily readying for the joyous holiday season ahead. Looking forward to being able to meet in person sometime after the new year! Until then:

- May you be blessed with the spirit of the season which Is Peace.
- The gladness of the season which is Hope.
- And the heart of the season which is Love!

Merry Christmas to all!
Happy New Year 2021!
Mary Wildermuth

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Twas the night before Christmas
and all through the yard...

Not a plant was left standing, the ground it was hard.
The tools were all hung in the garage with care
A well deserved rest now that the garden was bare.

The bulbs were nestled all snug in their beds,
While visions of springtime danced in their heads,
I in my Snuggie, my husband with our cat
Had just settled in for a long winter’s chat.

When out in the hydrangeas there arose such a clatter,
I dropped my seed catalogs to see what was the matter.
Away to the front door I quickly dashed,
Half expecting to find my yard had been trashed.

When I opened the door, it was suddenly clear.
Here was a sleigh and eight tiny reindeer
With a little old gardener so lively and quick
I knew in a moment it must be St. Nick!

More quickly than crabgrass his couriers they came
And he whistled and shouted and called them by name.

“Now Holly! Now Ivy! Now Daisy and Rue!
On Rose, On Petunia, Fern and Lily too!”

To the top of the trellis! To the top of the wall!
Now dash away, dash away, dash away all!

So up to the housetop the reindeer they flew
With a sleighful of gifts and St. Nicholas too.

I closed the front door and was turning around
When he slid down the chimney, hitting the ground.
He was dressed all in red, with Wellingtons on his feet,
And a polisettia on his cap made him look really neat.

He stood up quite quickly and went straight to his work.
With a composer for Cathy, a Dutch weeder for Dirk.

There were asters for Ann, a pine tree for Paul
And a garden design book for use by us all.
Next came a rain barrel. This was for Rob.
And finally, for me, a ginkgo key fob.

Then laying a traveler aside of his nose
And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose.
He ran to his sleigh and gave a quick whistle
And away they all flew like the seeds of globe thistle.

But I heard him exclaim as he drove out of sight,

“Merry Christmas to all gardeners
and to all a good night.”

WRITTEN BY MARIA GOLDEN OF匈牙利
BASED UPON THE ORIGINAL BY CLMENT CLARK HOPE
BROUGHT TO YOU BY

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Current Emails and Addresses
As a reminder – keep both the Extension Office current on any changes of e-mail addresses, phone numbers, or mailing addresses. These need to be current to keep you — our members — informed.

2020 Muscatine County Master Gardener Board
Board Members
Mary Wildermuth, Chair (2021)*
Rachel Horner Brackett, Vice Chair (2020)*
Heather Harroun, Sec/Treas(2020)
Kathy Haltmeyer(2020)
Ron Jensen (2021)
Carolyn Lemaster(2021)*
Ed Moreno (2020)
Maryrose Peterschmidt(2020)
Mary Danner (Past Chair)
Angela Weber (Intern)

( )Year term expires as of Dec. 31
* Going off Board Dec 31, 2020 or 2021 but eligible for re-election

Editorial Comments:
I DO ENJOY PUTTING THE NEWSLETTER TOGETHER, BUT PLEASE LET ME KNOW ASAP IF SOMETHING IS WRONG WITHIN IT, INSTEAD OF HEARING ABOUT IT A MONTH LATER, AS I WOULD GREATLY APPRECIATE IT. THANK YOU!
GRETCHEN NOLLMAN—nollmanag@gmail.com