



High on the Desert Cochise County Master Gardener Newsletter

Vol. 15, No. 1 JANUARY 2004

The University of Arizona and U.S. Department of Agriculture Cooperating

Happy Healthy Houseplants

What to do with the Christmas plants? Toss them? No way. The holidays are over and if you love plants like I do, you have decorated the house with those beautiful plants traditionally grown for the Christmas season. What is more showy than the colorful foliage of the Poinsettia, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, the beautiful flowers of the Thanksgiving Cactus, *Zygocactus*, the Christmas Cactus, *Schlumbergera bridgerii*, and last but not least the Amaryllus, *Hippeastrum*.

The Poinsettia, with the right care, can keep the colorful bracts until about May. The flowers of this plant are the tiny yellow crowns. In the '70s, I was living on the Canary Islands which claim these plants as natives. The Spaniards took them to Mexico when they invaded that country. There the plant quickly naturalized. In its natural habitat the plant grows to a shrub more than 10 feet tall. It starts to color up by November when the days become

cooler and the nights longer. On the Islands the climate is somewhat milder than here, the summers are not as hot and much drier, the winters are not as cold, there is no frost, and it does rain often. To keep the plant alive and thriving you will have to imitate that. The plant is not well suited to be kept outdoors here. In summer it is too hot and too wet, and in winter it is too cold. Kept outdoors the plant usually falls prey to bug attacks (whiteflies) and in the house watch for spider mites. That all sounds like it would be difficult to take care of this plant, but with the right conditions that is not so. Give the plant a sunny, bright spot in your house and it will do just fine. Most Poinsettias die because they are over watered; keep in mind it is an Euphorbia. After the colorful bracts have faded cut down on the watering. It is best watered when the foliage starts to droop. Many colorful hybrids have been created. What you buy are rooted cuttings and a

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growth retarding hormone has been used to keep it in manageable size. This will wear off and the plant will grow. Of course it can be pruned, but I found there always is a lot of die back. For the plant to rebloom it needs cooler days and longer nights. This occurs here naturally, and when you keep your plant in an unheated room that has no artificial lightning the colorful bracts will start to appear in November. In Germany, where I was born, we used to put it into a closet or cover it with a bag. Once the plant gets the colorful bracts, water regularly.



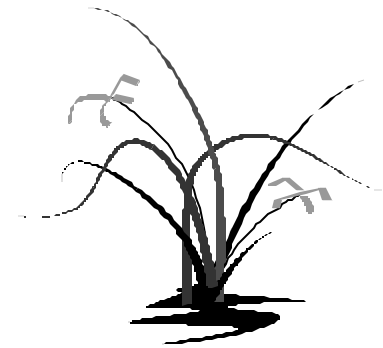
The Thanksgiving and Christmas Cactus are really two species of the same genus, *Schlumbergeas*. The plants we grow as houseplants are most likely hybrids adapted to the conditions in our houses. In the wild these plants are jungle cacti and live high in trees in moist tropical forests, very much like orchids. They root in the leaf debris in the tree branches. The Zygo, or Crab Claw Cactus, blooms around Thanksgiving and the *S. bridgerii* flowers around Christmas. Both have been hybridized in an array of colors, from white to pink to red and anything in between. There are also yellow and orange ones. These plants make very

good houseplants with year around interest. They are not desert cacti and like more moisture and should be watered regularly. They grow actively all summer. For a short period after the flowers fade water sparingly. These plants dislike our hard and alkaline water and are best watered with rain water or filtered water, never softened water. Fertilize with African Violet or tomato fertilizer. Moving plants while in bud can result in bud drop as does exposure to drafts and sudden changes in temperature. When moving a plant in bud try not to change its position towards the light source. The plants like medium light. Never expose them to our strong summer sun. Again cooler days and longer nights will trigger the plants into bloom.

What are the winter days without the gorgeous big blossoms of the Amaryllus? These are bulbous plants that have been especially treated to flower in time for the Christmas season. In their natural habitat the plant would bloom in spring. These plants are usually for sale as dry bulbs, are readily available, and inexpensive. To plant use a pot not much bigger than the bulb itself and use rich, soil based potting soil. Only bury half of

the bulb, water, and wait for the flowerstalk to appear. Then keep the plant evenly moist and in a bright location. A too warm location will make the flowers fade faster. The flowers are big and come in an array of shades from white to red and anything in between. A good quality bulb will have at least two flowerstalks. After the flowers fade cut off the stalk and do not allow seeds to form as that will weaken the bulb. The plant should be allowed to grow lush leaves till August. Give the plant some direct sun, not enough light will only produce leaves the next time, no flower. Then the watering should be slowed and stopped completely in September. The plant needs to rest now. When the bulb shows new growth the potting soil should be exchanged and the circle begins again.

Angel Rutherford, Master Gardener



Note: If you are thinking of building a pond or installing a water garden, Angel will be teaching 3 classes on the subject at Cochise College—February 14, *Water Gardening—An Introduction*, March 6, *Pond Building Basics*, and June 19, *Water Gardening—Plant Selection*. For more information contact Cochise College.

Robert E. Call

Robert E. Call
Extension Agent, Horticulture

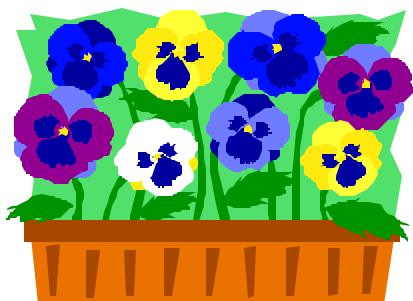
Carolyn Gruenhagen
Editor

The Virtual Gardener—Pansies

As I look around my garden these days, I think I must be living in a black and white movie. The mesquites, naked of leaves, look dead. The brilliant colors of the summer annuals are gone. Even the evergreens look tired and muted. But then I spot a brilliant splash of color and my spirits are lifted. And what is it that provides this tonic to my eye? It's a pansy—actually lots of pansies.

Pansies (*Viola X wittrockiana*) are one of the few plants that can be counted on to provide winter color here in the High Desert. Why we ever chose them to provide the cognomen for weak and gutless people I'll never know. Despite their pretty faces, they are tough little hombres that thrive in cold weather. On a cold morning their leaves and flowers will actually freeze, but by afternoon they'll be back holding their bright flowers to the sun.

Technically pansies are biennials, but they are usually grown as annuals. Although they can be grown all year round here in the High Desert, they require lots of TLC (water and shade) to make it through the heat of summer. It's better to plant them in the late fall for winter color. They come in a bewildering variety of solid and bi-



colors, ranging from white to yellow, pink to lavender, orange to bronze, and blue through purple to black. The patterns created in bi-colored varieties are often described as “faces”. Flower sizes range from a couple of inches across to nearly five inches.

Pansies like a rich soil, adequate water, and occasional fertilization. They can either be planted in the ground or in containers. I find it most convenient to add timed-release fertilizer “prills” to the soil when I plant them. That way I don't have to worry about fertilization for the rest of the winter. Regularly deadhead spent blossoms to encourage blooming.

Most of us probably buy pansies in flats at a nursery or garden shop, but they can also be propagated from seed, cuttings, or division. Seed can be planted in the late summer or early fall for winter plants. The seeds should be covered to exclude sunlight and take about 10 to 14 days to germinate at temperatures of 65-75 °F. Although you can collect seeds from your own plants, you may be disappointed with the results since the resulting plants may not come true to type. Also, allowing the plants to go to seed stresses the plants and shortens their life. A better solution is to start plants from cuttings or divide existing bunches.

Besides looking good, some people think pansies taste good too. The flowers can be used in salads or crystallized and used as decorations on cakes.

The name “pansy” is derived from the French *pensée*, meaning “thought” and a gift of pansies means, “I'm thinking of you.”

If you would like to find out more about pansies, point your browser at:

<http://www.growinglifestyle.com/h/garden/pansy/index.html>

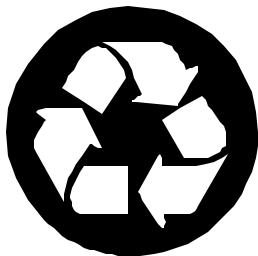
Until next time, happy surfing.

Gary A. Gruenhagen, Master Gardener
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Cuttings 'N' Clippings

* Cochise County Master Gardeners Association (CCMGA) next meeting will be January 8 at 5:00 at the UAS Campus, Room 106.

* *Water Wise* Workshops will begin with the first of 2004 on January 3 and continue throughout the year on the first Saturday of each month. The February 7 workshop will be presented by Christina Garaas and Gary Gruenhagen on *How I Designed My Yard*. This workshop will be held at the Sierra Vista Police Station Training Room, 911 N. Coronado Dr. from 9:00—10:30 a.m. and will be limited to the first 45 people who arrive. For a complete list of workshops go to www.ag.arizona.edu/cochise/waterwise/events.htm or contact Cado Daily at the Cooperative Extension, Ext. 2139.



Recycle Your Christmas Trees

Sierra Vista's Department of Public Works is sponsoring a Christmas Tree recycling program that will run from December 26, 2003 through January 17, 2004. You may drop off your cut trees to the designated location on the north side of the Mall at Sierra Vista, right next to the current recycling site. If you would like to donate your live tree, it can be dropped off at the Pedro Castro Government Center, 401 Giulio Cesare, between the hours of 7:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. or it can be taken to the Compost Facility/Tree Nursery at Hwy 90 East at milepost 325 between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. There will be no special pickup of trees (cost \$12) after January 17. For more information call the Department of Public Works at 458-5775.

What's Happening?

- Interested in permaculture? The Stone Curves CoHousing, 120 E. Limberlost Road, Tucson, residents are available for an informational tour of their European village-like neighborhood and model permaculture landscape design, 2:30 p.m. Saturdays through March. 13. There is no charge. For more information call (520) 293-5290.
- Interested in birds? Learn to identify resident birds and those just passing through Tohono Chul Park, 7366 N. Paseo del Norte, north of Ina Rd. at 8:30 a.m. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays through March 20. "Walk in the Park" tour explores the basics of Sonoran Desert ecology at 9:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays through March 18. For information call (520) 742-6455.

"Marvel Meal" Suet Dough Recipe

Basic mix:

- 1 C peanut butter
- 1 C shortening/solid bacon grease
- 1 C white flour
- 4 C yellow cornmeal

Mix ingredients and put into molds (reuse old suet containers if possible). Place in refrigerator for at least 2 hours to set up. Serve!

-Adapted from the *Bird Watcher's Digest* "Enjoying Bird Feeding More"

Growing Plants for Free

That's the subtitle of a new book by Geoff Bryant which is entitled *Plant Propagation A to Z*. This little book has great charts listing plant species together with favored propagation techniques for each.

The author covers starting seeds and germination requirements including pretreatment, temperature, cover and germination times. Then he tackles plant divisions and the various types of runners, offsets, layering, suckers as well as the rhizomes, tubers, corms and bulbs. After explaining techniques, he provides an extensive chart showing specifics.

Next comes my own favorite technique for getting free plants from others or multiplying my own garden favorites: cuttings. He explains how to take stem, leaf, and root cuttings, the proper time to take them, and the conditions under which they root readily. The table for this is as complete as the germination and division ones in previous chapters.

Finally he explains some of the less common techniques such as layering, grafting, and budding which are feasible for the home gardener.

All this in the first 123 pages of his book. So far as I am concerned the balance of the book is a repetition of information on garden species, many of which are not appropriate for our area. Even without the last one hundred pages, this book is worth adding to any gardener's library. I'm buying a copy. It is available at the Sierra Vista Public Library, call number 631.5 BRY.

Joyce Gay, Master Gardener

Plant Basics: Bare-roots

This month marks the arrival of bare-root plants. Many plants are available including fruit and shade trees, roses, grapes, and cane fruits.

Why buy bare-root? One reason is that it is cost effective. Savings can be up to 70% buying bare-root over container plants. Another is the ease of planting. The hole can be back-filled with soil that is dug out and the roots will grow in one soil structure instead of container soil that is light and airy unlike the native soil the roots will eventually encounter which are usually tight and clayey.

When buying bare-root the nursery will have the plants "heeled" in some type of loose, moist material such as sand or sawdust. Check the roots. They should be fresh and plump. Have the roots bagged or wrapped for the trip home.

If you are not going to plant for at least three days, plants should be placed in moist sand/sawdust. If planting within three days it is a good idea to soak the roots in water (you can add a root stimulator to the water) before planting. A bucket, garbage can, or a bathtub will work.

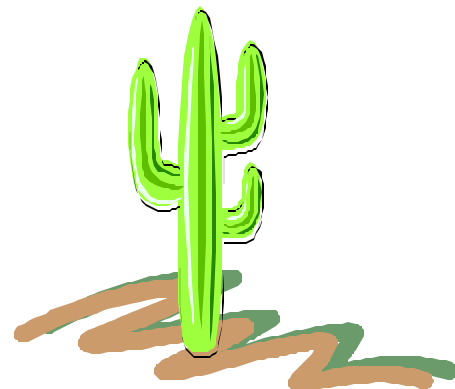
Dig the hole large enough to accommodate the roots. Trim any broken roots and place the plant into the hole ensuring that, if it is a grafted plant, the graft bud sits above the soil level. Backfill with soil, make a ridge of soil around the hole to form a watering basin, and apply water.

Some literature says to prune/thin the tree branches back by one-third to compensate for the root mass being small, some instruct not to prune/thin at all. I have done both and seen no difference. After the first watering, check the soil every few days with a soil probe and water when the top three inches are dry.

Bare-root plants are dormant and do not require lots of water as this could promote the roots to rot. Pick up the watering when the weather becomes warm and the plants start to leaf out. And, be patient—some bare-root plants are slow to leaf out. The wait will be worth it. Enjoy!

Cheri Melton, Master Gardener

(Note: this article is reprinted from the January 1998 Cochise County Master Gardener Newsletter.)



Arizona State Symbols

- Bird:** cactus wren
- Tree:** palo verde
- Flower:** saguaro cactus blossom
- Gemstone:** turquoise
- Neckwear:** Bola tie
- Fossil:** petrified wood
- Mammal:** ringtail
- Reptile:** AZ ridge-nosed rattlesnake
- Fish:** Apache trout
- Amphibian:** AZ tree frog
- State songs:** *Arizona March* and *Arizona*

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January Reminders

- ? Winter pruning
- ? Remove old mulch & replace
- ? Dig tree holes
- ? Prepare soil for spring
- ? Water periodically
- ? Stratify seeds
- ? Fertilize asparagus
- ? General garden clean-up

High on the Desert

The 11th annual High Desert Gardening & Landscaping Conference will be held at Buena High School in Sierra Vista on the evening of March 12 and all day Saturday, March 13. The conference will feature many expert speakers covering “everything you want to know and more” about High Desert gardening. Registration forms will be available in this newsletter, on-line on our web site, or at the Cooperative Extension office after February 1st. For more information call the Cooperative Extension at (520) 458-8278, Ext. 2141.

We hope to see YOU there!

