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The Grapevine

Bringing in the Houseplants without bringing in the bugs

Officially fall starts later this week on September 22nd even if Mother nature isn't on board yet. Despite the outside temperatures as I write this, fall weather will eventually arrive and it's time to start thinking about bringing any houseplants you moved outdoors back inside. Even though our first frost date isn't until October 20th there are several things you should be doing, especially if you want to avoid my experience one fall of coming home to tiny grasshoppers everywhere to get your plants, avoid bringing in hitchhikers and help your plants transition successfully.

The key to preventing insects from coming inside on your house plants is to start early and use a multi-pronged approach to control the insects. The first step is to inspect your plants for insects and diseases. Remove any diseased or damaged leaves and any visible insects. Discard any plants that have a severe insect or disease infestation to prevent those from spreading to other plants. The second step for me as I get my plants ready is to use a systemic granule on any plants that have been outside. This granule will slowly be taken up by the plant and provide a 2-3-month residual control for any insects that might be brought inside. I would also consider using an insecticidal spray on your plants a week or so before bringing the plants inside to kill any bugs. If you prefer to go the organic route use an insecticidal soap while permethrin or any pyrethroids are great synthetic chemicals to use. Right before you bring the plants in I would wash them and soak the soil (only tropical plants do not soak the pot of any succulent or cacti). A strong stream of water from a garden hose will often remove most of our insect pests from the leaves and soaking the pot in warm water for 15 minutes should handle any insects in the soil.

Along with making sure we don't bring in any hitchhikers, it is important to transition houseplants to their new light conditions. Outside plants are exposed to high levels of light, even if they are in the shade, which might not be available inside. If possible, over the period of a week, move them to areas with less light before moving them inside. Once they are inside place them in an area with as much light as possible then slowly move them to their final winter spot. If you are using artificial lights to supplement natural light you can skip the second transition when moving plants inside however it is still important to transition them slowly outside to lower light conditions. No grow light has the same intensity of light as the sun and the plants need to get used to it. Transitioning plants to lower light levels can prevent leaf drop and yellowing, especially if you transition them slowly. This slow transition also allows you to keep an eye on your plants and take care of any insects or other critters that might have tried to join you in your house.

I love moving my houseplants outside during the summer. Not only do they provide a lush green jungle outside but the extra light also helps them grow and bloom where they might not normally inside. With just a few steps and some care you can easily move your plants outdoors in the spring and back indoors in the fall. It is important to start early with transitioning plants inside and controlling bugs because we never know what the weather is going to do from one week to another. While we are in the upper 90's to 100 now, later this week we are going to see a major cool down and who knows what next week will bring. It's better to be prepared rather than rushing at the last minute. Just a reminder, indoor plants require less water and fertilizer during the winter months. Be sure to adjust your care as needed. Just follow a few steps to keep your plants happy and healthy in their new environment. Happy growing!!!

Pollinator Plant of the Week-

This week's pollinator plant of the week is the sunflower. The Kansas state flower and native is one of the easiest plants to recognize. Sunflowers can be both annual and perennial flowers depending on the type you are growing. In Kansas there are 11 species of native sunflowers and 9 of them grow in the Flint hills region of the state. Most of the native sunflowers are perennials while most introduced sunflowers are annuals that they will freely reseed in the areas they are planted. The traditional sunflower has yellow petals with a brown or yellow center however there are many new cultivars of sunflower with blooms that range in color from white to pink to red to bi-color. Sunflowers can range in height from less than a foot for annual cultivars to 6 feet for perennials and even up to 10 feet tall for some annual varieties. In the wild sunflowers are an excellent source of food and are often sought out by livestock to eat. The seeds make excellent food for birds and the plants should be left standing all winter long for the birds to enjoy. Native sunflowers are often found on heavier soils, in hay meadows, along stream beds and in roadside ditches. This beautiful flower is a favorite of bees and blooms from July through first frost depending on the species. Sunflowers do best when planted as a background plant in flower beds due to their height however some of the dwarf cultivars do well in pots and mixed in flowerbeds. Sunflowers do need full sun to perform best.

Insect of the Week-

This week's insect of the week is the scale insect. Scale insects come in a variety of shapes, sizes, types and colors. I call scale insects the sneaky killers because they often go unlooked when compared to their flashier friends such as mealybugs, spider mites and aphids. Scale insects come in a variety of shapes but one thing they all have in common is a waxy or shell like covering. Most scale insects we see are tan or brown but there are some that have a white fuzzy covering similar to mealy bugs. They are typically less than ¼" in length which helps them blend into the plants the live on. The photo to the right shows both adult and nymph or "crawler" scale insects. Scale insects feed on plants by sucking sap out of the leaves or stems. Most often the infestation is discovered by the stunted growth of the plant or the presence of "honey dew" which is a sticky substance excreted by the insects. Control can be difficult since the waxy covering of the insect protects it from many insecticides. For lightly infested plants use a q-tip and rubbing alcohol to rub off all the scale insects you can see. For heavier infested plants you will want to move them outside and spray using a chemical with the active ingredients that include insecticidal soaps, pyrethrin, rotenone, resmethrin and acephate. You will have to thoroughly cover the plant and will need to spray every week or so for a month, depending on the product label, to get an effective level of control. If the plant will regrow after being pruned back cut off the areas with the heaviest infestation and then treat. If the plant is heavily infested it might be best to throw the plant away and start over.

Reminders-

- Plant Kentucky bluegrass by October 1. Tall fescue should be seeded nolater than October 15.
- Herbs can be dug from garden and transplanted into pots for indoor use during the winter.

Upcoming Events

- **October 5, 2022: Improving Soil Health in the Landscape and Garden**
  Is your landscape and garden soil healthy? Learn how to measure and improve your soil's health in the home landscape and garden. Dr. DeAnn Presley, Professor and Extension Specialist for Environmental Soil Science and Management, will explore ways to improve your soil, including cover crops and soil amendments. Learn how to build your soil's organic matter, and improve the growing potential of your soil. The KSRE Garden hour sessions are held via Zoom starting at noon. For more information or to register click here.