The Grapevine

Growing Figs in Kansas
This last week I had an interesting question from an individual who had received some figs and wanted to save the seeds to grow their own fig trees. While growing fig trees from seed outdoors in Kansas is likely to result in failure, especially if getting the figs from the grocery store, you can grow fig trees successfully in Kansas. Let’s take a look at fig plants and how we can grow them in Kansas.

Fig trees (Ficus carica) are native to the Mediterranean basin. You are likely familiar with some members of the fig family such as the ornamental rubber tree, the Osage Orange and the Mulberry. In their native climate fig trees are an evergreen plant however, in areas where the temperatures get below 25-27 degrees F they will lose their leaves in the winter. The fig is sometimes called a “fruit without a flower” however they do have flowers, they are just on the inside of the fruit and not visible. In warmer climates fig trees will bear two crops a year; the first on the previous years shoot growth while the second is borne in the leaf axils of the current season’s growth. In Kansas we usually only get one crop of figs unless we have a warmer winter. There are four types of figs: Caprifigs, Smyrna, San Pedro and Common. The first three types aren’t recommended because they have issues with pollination, setting fruit and fruit drop. There are over 600 varieties of Common type figs that are available but only a few are hardy for our location. Most fig varieties are self-fruitful however there are some that require cross-pollination to bear fruit so keep this in mind when choosing varieties. ‘Chicago Hardy’, ‘Stella’, ‘Olympic’ and ‘Peter's Honey Fig’ are all recommended by The Giving Grove of Kansas City. ‘Florea’ is a variety recommended for cold climates by One Green World (of Portland, Ore.).

Fig trees grow best in well-draining, reasonably fertile soil but will tolerate a wide variety of soil types. They need irrigated for the first few years and during periods of drought however, figs are native to dry soil conditions and tolerate drought well. For the most fruit, plant the figs in full sunlight, but protect them from the harsh summer and winter winds. The issue with growing figs in Kansas is not the soil, but rather the winter temperatures. The varieties recommended above are hardy to approximately 0 degrees but can be killed off in winters with colder temperatures. In cold winters, with temperatures below 15 degrees, figs will freeze off to the ground level and come back as a small shrub the following year. Trees should be insulated if possible to prevent winter kill. There are many ways to protect these trees from severe cold. Trees should be planted close to a house or a backyard wall to insulate them from drying winds as well as extremely cold temperatures. Wrapping the trees in burlap or tar paper can also provide protection. Another method is to build a ‘cage’ around the tree with chicken wire and then fill the space in the cage with either hay or composted mulch. Figs can be grown in pots provided you move them inside in the winter to an area where the plant can go dormant but the roots aren’t killed by winter cold.

Fig trees are a wonderful addition for homeowners who want to grow a different type of fruit in their landscape. Just be aware that birds and other wildlife also love the fruit so be prepared to cover the trees with netting to prevent the wildlife from raiding your orchard or you can plant them specifically for the wildlife to enjoy. If you are considering planting figs be sure to research the variety and don’t try to grow seeds from figs in a grocery store because they won’t be hardy in Kansas.
**Supplemental Light for Houseplants**

With the recent hard freeze all of our houseplants are most likely currently inhabiting the indoors whether they are in their final locations or like mine haphazardly scattered around the house and sunroom. Every year it seems like my houseplants multiply to slowly fill up the free space that I once had (my husband would say I have an issue I prefer to think of it as a hobby). Unfortunately, in my house I am limited to just a few decent windows for my collection of plants. Lack of adequate light is the most common factor limiting the growth of plants in many areas of the home. Luckily it is easy to use supplementary lighting for plants that do not receive adequate natural light.

When adding supplemental light, the color of the light waves matter. Certain colors or wavelengths of light are more important for plant growth than others. Leaves reflect and derive little energy from the yellow and green wavelengths of the visible spectrum. In contrast, the red and blue wavelengths of the light spectrum are the most important energy sources for plants. Plants growing outdoors, in greenhouses or close to windows are exposed to a balance of wavelengths of light from the sun, including the blue and red light that plants need. There are two main types of lightbulbs that are commonly used for supplemental light, fluorescent and LED’s.

- Incandescent lightbulbs which we commonly use for light fixtures are not a good option because they don’t have the right wave lengths and they produce too much heat for plants.
- Fluorescent lightbulbs are one of the better options for providing supplemental light. They produce less heat than incandescent lightbulbs and do produce the necessary wave lengths for houseplants. Grow light bulbs are not necessary for house plants, you can use cool and warm light bulbs instead to provide the necessary light. The bulbs are available in several different lengths.
- Light-emitting diodes (LEDs) represent the newest source of supplemental light for plants. They are extremely energy-efficient and very long-lived. LED lights can be customized to produce the wavelengths of light desired. For example, LED plant lights emit only the red and blue light needed by plants. They emit very little heat and require no ballasts or reflectors. LED’s you get what you pay for, cheaper lights have a shorter lifespan and may not provide the correct light lengths. LED’s come in a variety of shapes, styles and sizes making the bulb option perfect for use in a variety of fixtures or you can use the LED fixtures themselves.

Unfortunately, you can’t put the light fixtures on the ceiling and have enough light for house plants. Most plants should be located with the tips of the plants 6 to 12 inches from the light source. The intensity of light drops rapidly as the distance from the light bulbs or tubes increases. Fluorescent tubes do not produce as much light at the ends as they do in the center, so the brightest spot under a fluorescent fixture is directly beneath the center of the tubes. The light fixture’s position should be adjustable if possible so you can keep the distance between the light and the plant fairly constant. Fluorescent shop or workroom fixtures often are hung on chains with S-hooks for easy adjustment. These fixtures are easily raised or lowered from link to link. In most cases, plants receiving no outdoor light should be lit from 16 to 18 hours each day. If some additional light is received, 12 to 14 hours each day may be adequate. Lights should be used at the same time that plants receive window light.

**Leaf Veins**

In our plant identification series this week we are exploring the vein pattern in leaves. The pattern of leaf veins is in part determined by the shape of the leaf and families tend to have similar vein patterns from one plant to another. **Venation:** The arrangement of veins in a leaf is called the venation pattern. Veins bring nutrients and liquid to leaf cells. The illustration gives a few common ones. There are three main types of veins as shown in the photo. **Parallel veins**- just like it sounds: The veins run parallel except where they meet at the tip and the base. This type of veins is found on grasses, corn and other monocots (monocot- grass or grass like plants with only one seed leaf). **Pinnate veins**- one main vein with secondary veins spaced along the central midvein. Pinnate refers to "ladderlike." Oak trees are the most common example of this vein type. **Palmate veins**- several primary veins diverge from a point where the leaf meets the petiole. Maple trees are an example of trees with leaves that have palmate veins.
Pencil Cactus - *Euphorbia tirucalli* by Chris Stuhlsatz

The pencil cactus, also known as *Euphorbia tirucalli*, is a unique and distinctive succulent plant that is not a true cactus, despite its common name. It belongs to the Euphorbia genus and is native to Africa, particularly in regions like Madagascar. The plant is often referred to as a "pencil cactus" due to its thin, pencil-like, green stems that grow upright, resembling the shape of a pencil.

Key features of the pencil cactus include:

- **Pencil-Like Stems**: The most noticeable characteristic of the pencil cactus is its slender, cylindrical stems, which can reach great heights. These stems are typically green, but they can sometimes take on a reddish or purplish hue, especially when exposed to direct sunlight.
- **Leaves**: The pencil cactus lacks traditional leaves. Instead, small, inconspicuous leaves are present along the stems, usually at the tips. These leaves are short-lived and quickly fall off.
- **Toxic Sap**: One of the notable traits of the pencil cactus is its milky white latex-like sap, which can be toxic and irritating to the skin and eyes. Care should be taken when handling this plant, and it should be kept away from children and pets.
- **Easy to Care for**: Pencil cacti are relatively low-maintenance plants and can thrive in a variety of conditions. They prefer bright, indirect sunlight but can tolerate some direct sun. They are drought-tolerant and require well-draining soil. Water sparingly and allow the soil to dry out between waterings.
- **Growth**: Pencil cacti can grow quite tall, often reaching heights of 6 to 15 feet (1.8 to 4.6 meters) or more when grown as a houseplant. Regular pruning can help control their size and maintain their shape.
- **Indoor and Outdoor Use**: While the pencil cactus is commonly grown as a houseplant, it can also be planted in gardens in warmer climates, provided that the climate is not too cold or frosty.
- **Caution**: As mentioned earlier, the sap of the pencil cactus is toxic, so it should be kept out of reach of pets and children. When pruning or propagating the plant, wearing gloves and taking care to avoid contact with the sap is advisable.

Overall, the pencil cactus is a unique and visually striking plant that can add a touch of the exotic to your indoor or outdoor garden, but it should be handled with care due to its toxic sap.

**Reminders**-
- Plant garlic if you haven’t
- Clean off dead annuals after a killing frost
- Test your soil to beat the rush of spring testing
- Can still plant spring bulbs
- Spray for winter annuals such as henbit and chickweed as well as dandelions in the lawn.
- Till or turn the soil of the garden to add organic matter and eliminate overwintering sites for insects.

**Video of the week: Low Light Indoors? No Problem!!**
The most important criteria in selecting a plant for indoors, to enhance our décor, is the amount of light that's ideal for the plant to grow in. This segment shows a wide variety of plants to choose from when decorating your home or office with low light levels. Watch the video here: https://kansashealthyyards.org/all-videos/video/low-light-indoors-no-problem
Butternut Squash Bake

Ingredients
- 4 cups cooked butternut squash (about 2.5 pounds in grocery store)
- 2 large eggs
- 6 ounces canned evaporated non-fat milk
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- ¼ cup granulated sugar

Topping:
- ¼ cup melted butter
- ½ cup crisp rice cereal
- ¼ cup + 2 tablespoons brown sugar

DIRECTIONS
Prepare squash by rinsing with cool water and scrubbing skin if needed. Next, cut squash in half and lay flesh side down on greased baking sheet. Poke holes in skin and allow to cook for 45 minutes to one hour at 350 F. Mix eggs, milk, vanilla and sugar together by hand, or use a hand mixer. After squash is cooked, scoop out four cups using a spoon and measuring cup. Add squash to milk and eggs mixture. Mix until combined. Pour mixture into a greased 9x13 baking dish. Make topping: Melt butter in microwave and combine cereal, brown sugar and butter in a bowl. Sprinkle brown sugar topping over squash mixture. Top with nuts if desired. Bake at 350 F for 30 minutes. (Source: https://www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/extension/recipes/butternut-squash-bake)

Upcoming Events

- **December 1st at 11 am - Winter Feeding of Birds**
  Feeding the birds is a popular activity with over 59 million people in the United States feeding birds for well over 100 years. Join us for this class to learn some tips about what food to feed, ways to attract more birds to your home and some trouble shooting tips on why you aren’t having birds at your feeders. This program is free at the Douglass Senior Center, 124 W 4th St, Douglass, KS 67039.

- **December 6th at Noon - Beekeeping Basics: How to Start Your own Colony**
  Beekeeping is both popular and important for many reasons. Whether it’s to produce your own local honey, supplement pollination of nearby plants, promote conservation, or even personal entertainment, there are many reasons to become a beekeeper. Join Ryan Engel, Golden Prairie District Horticulture Extension Agent, as he covers the equipment you will need, how to source your bees, and what it takes to establish a new colony. This class is offered online via Zoom. For more information on the Garden Hour series or to register visit here: https://hnr.k-state.edu/extension/consumer-horticulture/garden-hour/

- **December 7th at 6 pm - Winter Feeding of Birds**
  Feeding the birds is a popular activity with over 59 million people in the United States feeding birds for well over 100 years. Join us for this class to learn some tips about what food to feed, ways to attract more birds to your home and some trouble shooting tips on why you aren’t having birds at your feeders. This program is free at the Bradford Memorial Library, 611 S Washington St. El Dorado, KS.