A Touch of Spring in Winter

As I wandered through the local grocery store this weekend I spied Amaryllis and Paperwhite bulb kits already being put out in anticipation of the upcoming winter season and boy did it bring back memories. Growing up in my parent’s garden center we always forced bulbs to give us a touch of spring even on the coldest winter days. With some care and planning we could have beautiful blooming bulbs all winter long to make those days just a little brighter. Forcing bulbs is easy but it does require some planning in advance. Any spring flowering bulb can be forced, but there are some that are simply easier than others. Hyacinths and daffodils are the easiest bulbs to force; however, tulips, crocus, grape hyacinth, and snowdrops can also work. Bulbs can be planted in pots or forced in water but both methods require a chilling period before growing (except Paperwhites). When purchasing bulbs, look for large, firm bulbs without blemishes or damage as these will have the best blooms.

Most bulbs will need to be planted in potting soil, with the exception of hyacinths that can be forced in just water. When planting in pots, use 4-8” pots, azalea style works best, but any pot and potting soil (not garden soil) will work. Add enough soil mixture to fill the pot so bulbs are placed as follows:

- **Hyacinths and tulips:** Allow only the tip of the bulb to show above the soil line.
- **Daffodils:** Plant so about 1/2 of the bulb shows above the soil line.
- **Small bulbs (crocus, snowdrop, grape hyacinth, etc.):** Plant so they will be about one inch below the soil line.

Set the bulbs in the pot. One large bulb may be placed in each 4-inch pot. Use six tulips, three hyacinths, five daffodils or 15 crocus (or other small bulb) in each 6-inch pot. All bulbs in a pot should be of the same kind and variety to ensure uniform flowering. Place tulips with the flattened side of the bulb toward the outside of the pot. The first drooping leaf of tulips comes from the flattened side and will then drape over the edge of the pot instead of into the pot. Fill around the bulbs with potting medium to the proper height. Firm the medium with light pressure, but avoid tight packing. After planting, the final potting medium line should be about 1/4 to 1/2 inch below the rim of the pot. Water the bulbs in.

After potting, keep the bulbs between 35-45 degrees with about 40 degrees F being ideal. An unheated garage, refrigerator, cellar, or cold frame are all options to keep your potted bulbs in. After they have been planted, the bulbs will require adequate moisture to keep the roots from drying out as they keep growing. Roots should develop soon after potting; excellent root growth is essential to good growth and flower formation. Potted bulbs should be placed outdoors at least three weeks before the first hard freeze is expected. This is an important period for good root development.

A few varieties may be brought indoors after about 12 weeks of cooling, but most will require 13 or 14 weeks to develop the necessary roots and to signal the bulb to bloom. Once you bring the bulbs inside it takes approximately 3 to 4 weeks to start blooming. To extend your indoor bloom period, remove potted bulbs from storage at weekly intervals to stagger bloom times. If potting medium and tops are frozen when plants are brought indoors, place plants in a cool room (about 40 degrees F) for 2 or 3 days to thaw out slowly place them in a cool, bright window with indirect light where temperatures range close to 60 degrees F. Keep bulbs watered, but fertilizer won’t be needed.

When flower buds are almost fully developed, bring bulbs into a location where you can enjoy them. Keep the bulbs out of direct sunlight and if possible provide cooler nights to prolong the bloom time. Unfortunately, bulbs that have been forced usually don’t transition to being planted outside well and should be discarded. A little bit of planning and work this fall can lead to some beautiful blooms during the depths of winter.
**Fall Leaves**

There are many benefits to utilizing the leaves in your landscape however too many can and will kill the lawn or desirable plants. Even if you don’t have trees in your yard there will likely be some leaves that are blown in from your neighbors. Before the leaves fall is a good time to plan for what to do with your leaves.

Falling leaves are an excellent source of organic matter to replenish nutrients in soil and improve the soil structure but in a lawn setting they can quickly create a mat that will kill the grass underneath. One of the best ways to utilize leaves in your lawn is to use a method called mulch mowing. As you get a thin layer of leaves on top of your grass, one to two inches not 6-8” of leaves, mow your lawn with the bagger off. The mower will chop the leaves into small bits that can fall through the grass to land on the soil surface. These pieces will break down over the winter and add to the soil. You can tell you have been successful with mulch mowing when you look behind you and see mostly grass with a few leaves. If you see mostly leaves you probably waited too long. Should you have lots of trees in your yard this may have to be done multiple times a week when the leaves are falling the most.

Leaves are an excellent addition to any compost pile. For the best results be sure to mulch the leaves so they are in smaller pieces before putting them in the compost pile as this allows them break down faster. You can also add mulched leaves directly to the garden and either let them sit on the surface or till them into the soil to break down for next year. Leaves can be an excellent mulch around perennials and other flowers in your flower beds. They help insulate the soil and keep delicate crowns of tender plants protected from the freeze/thaw cycles we see in the spring.

If possible leave some leaves sitting for native pollinators and other beneficial insects to overwinter in. Many of our good bugs utilize leaves and standing plant material to survive till next spring. No matter how you use your leaves, make a plan on what to do with them so you can avoid sending them to the landfill this fall.

**Succulent pumpkin displays**

Every fall as I scroll through Facebook or Pinterest I always find beautiful pictures of succulent pumpkins to use as centerpieces or just for decoration. These beautiful displays are fairly simple and inexpensive to make, often you already have the supplies at home already. All you need are a pumpkin, hot glue gun, moss and succulent cuttings. Here are some instructions on how to make a beautiful display this fall:

- The first step is to find a pumpkin or winter squash with a flat top. The “princess” varieties or smaller varieties similar to the picture work well. The flat tops help keep the succulents in place.
- Once you have your pumpkin use the hot glue or a spray adhesive to attach the moss to the top of the pumpkin. It is easier to work in smaller sections so the glue doesn’t cool before you can get your moss securely attached.
- The next step is my favorite. Now you will glue your cuttings to your moss. I usually try to figure out where I want my cuttings to go before I start gluing. Try to use taller cuttings in the middle to create a mounded look. Gradually use shorter cuttings as you move away from the stem. String of pearls or burro’s tail cuttings work great around the very edge to trail over your pumpkin. (Note: the cuttings will not be harmed by the hot glue and will slowly start to root through it.)
- Since we didn’t cut into the pumpkin it should last a long time. Place your pumpkin in a bright lit area to keep the succulents growing and happy. You can spray the moss and succulents as they start to look dry, approximately once a week, to keep them happy. Once the pumpkin starts to go bad it is easy to pull the succulents off of it and plant them in succulent soil to start new plants for the future.
Leaves, Needles and Scales
This week in our plant identification series we are covering the different types of leaf structures that plants can have. Many of these leaf structures were developed due to help plants survive specific environmental conditions (needles and scales are more common in hot and dry locations while broadleaves tend to occur in locations with more moisture and moderate temperatures.)

**Broad leaf**- a tree or plant with wide, flat leaves. This group mostly includes deciduous plants (ones that lose their leaves every year) however there are some exceptions such as hollies, viburnums and boxwood. As was discussed last week the type of leaf and the shape can be used as an identification technique. **Needles**- a tree or plant that has leaves shaped like needles. These are common on evergreen plants however there are some deciduous plants with needles (Bald cypress for example). Needles can be found individually (ex. Spruce trees) or in bundles of two or more (ex. Pine trees). The number of needles in a bundle and their length can be used as a plant identification technique for telling pine trees apart. **Scale-like leaves**- small, flat, overlapping structures that store food and water. They are found on evergreen plants that do not drop their leaves. Plants that have scale like leaves include *Juniperus, Thuja* (Arborvitae) and *Chamaecyparis* or White Cedar.

**Recycling Pumpkins** by Cynthia Domenghini
As decorative pumpkins pass their prime due to time or freezing temperatures, put them to good use. Pumpkins can be cut into small pieces and buried beneath leaf mulch in planters. Due to their high-water content, pumpkins will decompose relatively quickly and contribute organic matter back into the soil. Remove the seeds before composting to avoid growing an unwanted pumpkin patch in this location next year.
The raw seeds can be gathered and roasted for human consumption, or incorporated into feed for birds and other wildlife. Squirrels, deer and other animals will appreciate the meat of the pumpkin as food becomes scarce elsewhere. Farms and zoos will sometimes accept pumpkins from homeowners to feed to their animals as well.

**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
- Dig cannas, glads, dahlias and other tender bulbs for winter storage.
- 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: Overwintering Geraniums**
Geraniums are beautiful in the summer, but they won't last outside after the first frost. There are several ways to bring them indoors for the winter, and get a head start on planting geraniums next spring. Plus, you'll be saving money! Watch the video here: [https://kansashealthyyards.org/all-videos/video/overwintering-geraniums](https://kansashealthyyards.org/all-videos/video/overwintering-geraniums)
Upcoming Events

- **November 1st at Noon - Plants Gone Wild! Controlling Invasive Plants**
  Given the opportunity, certain plants can take over your landscape, woodlands, and pastures. Join Lynn Loughary, Wyandotte County Extension Horticulture Agent, as she helps you to recognize which plants you need to keep a close eye on. Learn about a few of our most invasive plants, and management strategies for their control. Discover which weeds are also regulated by law, through Kansas’s noxious weeds program. 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/](https://hnr.k-state.edu/extension/consumer-horticulture/garden-hour/)

- **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/](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.

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