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THE GRAPEVINE

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FOR RELEASE: November 22nd, 2018

POINSETTIA CARE

Modern poinsettia varieties stay attractive for a long time if given proper care. Place your poinsettia in a sunny window or the brightest area of the room, but don't let it touch cold window panes. The day temperature should be 65 to 75 degrees F. with 60 to 65 degrees at night. Temperatures above 75 degrees will shorten bloom life, and below 60 degrees may cause root rot. Move plants away from drafty windows at night or draw drapes between them to avoid damage from the cold. Poinsettias are somewhat finicky in regard to soil moisture. Avoid overwatering because poinsettias do not like "wet feet." On the other hand, if the plant is allowed to wilt, it will drop some leaves. So how do you maintain proper moisture? Examine the potting soil daily by sticking your finger about one-half inch deep into the soil. If it is dry to this depth, the plant needs water. When it becomes dry to the touch, water the plant with lukewarm water until some water runs out of the drainage hole, then discard the drainage water.

Are Poinsettias Poisonous?

At times, an old time rumor is resurrected that poinsettias are poisonous. This is NOT true. Though there may be an allergic reaction to the milky sap, there has never been a recorded case of poisoning. This rumor has been so persistent that members of the Society of American Florists have sought to dispel it by eating poinsettia leaves for the press. In the 1985 AMA Handbook of Poisonous and Injurious Plants, the poinsettia "has been found to produce either no effect (orally or topically) or occasional cases of vomiting. This plant does not contain the irritant "diterpenes" which is the toxin in other members of the genus Euphorbia to which poinsettia belongs.

Winterizing Strawberry Plants

Winter can be a difficult time for strawberries in Kansas. Plants need time to become adjusted to cold weather and will gradually become more cold resistant as fall progresses. Strawberry plants are able to withstand colder temperatures in the middle of the winter than in the fall before they have gone through much cold weather. For example, if temperatures suddenly plummet below 20 degrees F before the plants harden to the cold, they can be severely damaged. A drop to 15 degrees F may kill them. Hardened plants can withstand such temperatures with ease. Normally, strawberries should be mulched for the winter around Thanksgiving. Mulching plants helps protect strawberries not only from low temperatures but also from heaving damage. Heaving damage occurs when the alternate freezing and thawing common in Kansas winters heave plants out of the ground where the roots are exposed and the plants die from lack of water. Wheat straw makes good mulch if it is clean (free from weed seed and wheat kernels). The straw should be spread over the plants to a depth of 3 inches. Shake the slabs of straw apart so there are no large compressed chunks. This straw mulch not only helps protect the plants over winter but can also help avoid damage from late spring frosts by delaying blooming a few days in the spring. Mulch should be removed gradually in the spring as plants begin new growth.

Remove enough so leaves can be seen. Leaving some mulch in place keeps the berries off the ground and conserves moisture. Mulch left in the aisles protects pickers from muddy conditions.

Ashes in the Garden

You may have heard that using wood ashes on your garden can help make the soil more fertile. Though ashes do contain significant amounts of potash, they contain little phosphate and no nitrogen. Our soils in this part of Kansas are naturally high in potash and do not need more. Also, wood ashes will raise the pH of our soils, a drawback for us because our soils tend toward high pH anyway. Wood ashes can alter the physical characteristics of a soil and basically destroy what good soil structure you have. Therefore, wood ashes add little benefit, and may harm, many Kansas soils. In most cases it is best to get rid of them.

Storing Power Equipment for the Winter

Late fall or early winter is a good time to service power equipment such as mowers, tillers and garden tractors. Run the equipment out of gas or treat the existing gas with a stabilizer as untreated gas can deteriorate over time. If using a stabilizer, run the engine long enough for untreated gas in the carburetor bowl to be burned and replaced. This is also a good time to replace the oil (and filter, if present) since the engine is warm. Check and replace the spark plug if necessary. Some gardeners will also apply a light, sprayable oil into the cylinder through the spark plug hole. Check and clean air filters and replace if necessary. Many mowers and tillers will have a foam prefilter that can become filthy with use. If allowed to become too dirty, engines will run poorly or may not run at all. Sharpen blades, clean tines, tighten screws, replace broken parts and do all the other things needed to keep equipment in good shape. Though such maintenance takes some time and effort, it pays for itself by reducing frustration and lost time due to poorly performing equipment during a hectic spring.

Water Landscape Plants Before Winter

We have had some good rains, and even snow, this fall. Even though we are not dry now, a reminder of how to take care of our plants in the winter is warranted. If we get real dry as we often do, there are some things to remember about water and our landscapes during the cold months. A good, deep watering with moisture reaching at least a foot down into the soil is much better than several light sprinklings that just wet the top portions of the soil. A deep watering will help ensure that the majority of roots have access to water. Regardless of the watering method used, soil should be wet at least 12 inches deep. Use a metal rod, wooden dowel, electric fence post or something similar to check depth. The tool will stop when it hits dry ground. All perennial plants benefit from moist soils before winter, and it is especially important for newly planted trees and shrubs due to limited root systems. Even trees and shrubs planted within the last 2 to 3 years are more sensitive to drought than a well-established plant. Evergreens are also more at risk because moisture is lost from the foliage through the winter. Even if we have a warm, dry winter, watering once per month should be adequate. The only caveat to all of this is that the temperature should be at least 50 degrees F to do any watering over the winter. Temps lower than that will be too cold for the watering to have much effect. So if we get dry, and January is historically our driest month, bite the bullet, pull out the old garden hose to give your plants a shot of the old agua, they will appreciate it, and you will too next spring.

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