

Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks and Home Horticulture

September 2023 Issue

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Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks and Home Horticulture is an online newsletter designed to provide citizens of Allen County and northeastern Indiana with up-to-date information about Horticulture and home issues, written in a lighthearted style! To subscribe, send an email to kemeryr7@frontier.com.

Hover Fly, The Sweat Bee Doppelganger

Written by: Penny Alles Advanced Master Gardener Diagnostic Specialist

So, one thing Indiana is known for is our corn. The hover fly, *Toxomerus politus* love corn pollen. They are also called corn feeding Syrphid Fly. My first step is to look at one under my microscope... this is when I can see it is a tiny insect, 7-9mm in size. They have small heads with large eyes and short antennae. The thorax is black or brown with a black and yellow abdomen. They really look like a sweat bee at a quick glance. They have many variations in their appearance. Saying that, I mean this particular fly, the darkness of the black lines or the brightness of the yellow stripes on its abdomen can be different from one insect to the next. There are over 400 different species of hover flies across America ranging in color.



The adults eat nectar and pollen through their sucking mouthparts. While moving from tassel to tassel, pollination accidentally happens. This is the same when they visit your flowers or vegetable gardens. When it is in its larvae stage, they consume many soft-bodied insects. YES... it is beneficial, farmers really appreciate large masses of larvae on the corn tassels as they keep the aphid population down. Pest control at its best. Aphids, scale, and other soft-bodied sap-sucking insects that stress plants, making them weak and unable to produce to their fullest, are on the menu each day. They are sensitive to pesticides so more are found around fields that practice more organic methods.

OK... now for my disdain. Because I am surrounded by glorious fields of corn, between the months of August and September, the presence of these hover flies are in great numbers. They are attracted to the salt on our skin, from sweat. I spend a lot of my time outside in my landscape and they "all" want to land on me. Now, unlike the bee the hover fly has no stinger or really the ability to bite in any way. I always just swoosh them away and try to remember not to swat. When they are close enough to watch them around flowers, they hover in one place for a long time. Whereas bees and wasps move around more rapidly. They move like a hummingbird.

Hover flies are true flies (Order Diptera, Family *Syrphidae*), which possess only one pair of wings. Other flying insects possess two pairs of wings. This is a way to quickly determine whether you are looking at a hover fly or a bee. They are attracted to the colors yellow and white. So, it probably wasn't a good idea to wear my bright yellow shirt while I painted my fence white... I should have just made a sign that said, "parking for hover flies"! I have now added a hover fly to my collection. I keep them to show people exactly what each insect looks like during presentations.

Ricky's Notes: I have tons of hover flies – attracted to the dropped fruit of Black Cherry on my sidewalk and deck.

Hover Flies AKA Messenger Bees

The name “good news bee” messenger, or sometimes just “news bee” comes from the behavior of an audacious type of hover fly. So what a friend of mine called “messenger bees” were not bees at all- they are hover flies.

Good-news bees have other common names, too. Since they are dead ringers for some yellow jackets, they are sometimes called the yellowjacket hover fly or the black-and-yellow hover fly. Other people call them the Virginia flower fly.

These insects can hover in the air like a helicopter. They have a habit of flying right up to a human, hovering face-to-face, and seeming to make eye contact. The flies have a stout buzz, making them sound like a very large bee. The hovering/staring behavior appears to be a defensive mechanism, startling predators into having second thoughts about attacking. These hover flies are great pollinators that don’t sting or bite.

In the American Southeast, legend tells us that having one of these creatures stare you down means good news is coming your way. Rumor says they stare at you because they have something to say.

The insect is found from southern Canada to southern Florida, and inland they show up as far west as New Mexico, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. Despite the wide range, they are uncommon and dispersed.

Good-news bees are hilltoppers. Hill topping is a behavior that helps the males find mates. Since the populations are dispersed over a wide area, the males go to the nearest hilltop and wait for females to join them.



If you’re looking for these flies, remember that hilltops don’t have to be very high, just higher than the surrounding territory. Hill topping occurs in the early hours of the day only.

Good-news bees are active from April until October, depending on local conditions. While they forage, they especially like sunny patches along deciduous forest edges.

They collect both nectar and pollen from large flowers like Hydrangea, Cornus, Ilex, Rosa, Solidago, Sambucus, and Verbascum.

The females like to nest in the rotting heartwood of deciduous trees, which is why you can often find the adults at forest edges.

A Foraging Friend

Recently a new friend was telling me of her interest in foraging in the city - using plants for medicine and tonics to improve her health. I found that many folks her age (late twenties early thirties) are interested in foraging for food and medicine. Foraging has been around for centuries when hunter-gatherers used plants growing in their immediate areas for food and medicine. Romans were deeply interested in the uses of plants for medicine. Pioneers learned to forage and used plants medicinally from knowledge learned from native Americans.

I always urge caution when foraging. Collecting in the city can result in using plants that have grown in conditions where herbicides and runoff containing pollutants are taken up by the “weeds” that grow in the city.

In addition, some folks can be allergic to some plants – when others are not.

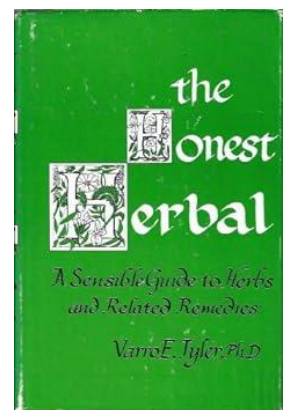
My friend gave me a book to read: *The Master Book of Herbalism*, which she claimed was her go-to book on using foraged plants. She quoted several examples of various conditions - poor immune system, rash, pre-diabetes – where she used tinctures, infusions, or teas to “cure” these health issues. She mistrusted doctors and could not afford to see them regularly. She did not want to take prescription medicines – and believed there was a spiritual component to healing not present in today's health care.

I think many folks believe the way she does, and I understand her distrust of “modern” medicine.

I read the book. I realized that my friend was using a book that described the folklore of plants used by foragers – the magical qualities, the use of herbs in Tarot, with stones and gems. It was an interesting read, but there was no research to support the uses of the plants for medicine – or any strong cautions against the uses of plants like elderberry or foxglove. These type of books are read and then used by some foragers as the gospel truth to heal them of various ailments. It is dangerous in my opinion to do so.

I recommended to her to also use resources that actually quote available uses and qualities of foraged plants - whether they actually are safe – and if they actually work. Varros *An Honest Herbal* is a good starting place for such information.

I did find two sections on the magical qualities of herbs interesting. One section discussed rubbing stinging nettles on “sensitive” parts of the body to increase sexual sensitivity of those areas as a prelude to lovemaking. I would suggest that staring at poop on a sidewalk would generate more sensitivity than the method described in this book. Another section recommended disrobing and sprinkling rose petals as one wonders in their garden at night to attract a lover. I believe this activity would attract local police responding to a neighbor's complaint about a naked individual wandering about naked in their garden scattering rose petals, Wow. If this was just an informative book describing the folklore and use of foraged plants, then it would be ok. However, on the back cover of the book, the description clearly suggests otherwise.” incenses, oils, amulets, elixirs, balms, and fluid condensers – detailed information on how create them”. Not good, in my opinion.



Equinox

Sept 21 marks the date of the autumn Equinox – halfway between the summer solstice and with winter solstice approximately December 21. On this day the sun rises due east and sets due west. Ancient people observed the Equinox with harvest celebrations and rituals and even placed stones that marked the sun's location. For me it marks the change from summer to autumn. It is always a melancholy time for me. This past year was characterized by loss for me. Loss of my second wife, and older sister and others that mark the passage of time. I moved from my beloved house with many memories. It is a time of change. In many ways I am lucky. I still

write and teach and still help people with my knowledge. That is important. It is also nice to know that the people I used to teach at Extension still care about me. I will try to embrace change= accept the losses – and move on trying to live every day the best way I can.

Rose of Sharon

Rose of Sharon was blooming in early September in many landscapes. This later than usual flowering was probably a result of the very cool and prolonged wet spring.

Rose of Sharon is native to semi-tropical regions (Southern China, Northern India).

This blooming shrub has been listed as noteworthy by ancient Greek men of science. Its beauty led it to be cultivated in gardens of Mesopotamia and the Renaissance saw it spread across Europe.



Rose of Sharon bears a name that draws back to near-mystical times. It's actually named after a flower mentioned in the Old Testament of the Bible, in the book of Salomon. Sharon refers to a place in the Middle East that was rich and fertile, and the unceasing blooms of the Rose of Sharon highlighted this abundance.

When well settled in, in a suitable environment, Rose of Sharon will grow multiple trunks and turn into a dense flowering thicket in under 5 years. **Pruning is important to contain this and keep a nice, clustered bearing.**

Rose of Sharon flowers on new growth. If not pruned yearly, this plant can transform from a shrub to a large tree with flowers only present on the top portion of the plant.

So continual pruning back to 3-6 feet in height each season will keep the plant as a shrub – with flowers evenly distributed throughout the shrub. Pruning in early spring is the best time.

The shrub has little issues, but planting in full sun is recommended. Sometimes very cold winter weather can kill Rose of Sharon. Flooding or poor drainage is not tolerated. Sometimes if the shrub is unhappy – it will not flower. Add compost around the plant and make sure the root flare of the plant is not buried.

It's Drying Time Again

This is my cute way of using a pun illustrating the song “It’s Crying Time Again”– written by Ray Charles. This is the time of year when water tables diminish and soil moisture disappears. This is partly because the summer heat has dried out soil – and plants demand more water to flourish.



This year so far we are behind on precipitation. The soil is extremely dry. So look for wilting plants in areas. It is important to make sure this year that plants go into winter well-watered. Drought conditions can weaken plants and make them more susceptible to winter damage and desiccation that can cause real problems.

Fall Color

Folks are always interested in knowing the exact date when fall color will be the most colorful. This is because folks want to experience the best of everything, and so they can post 58 photos on Facebook of their fall color vacation to New England.



The gospel truth is that no person can predict exactly when fall color will be at its peak – many websites will try and predict - but it's like a fortune teller trying to predict your future using a compact with a broken mirror.

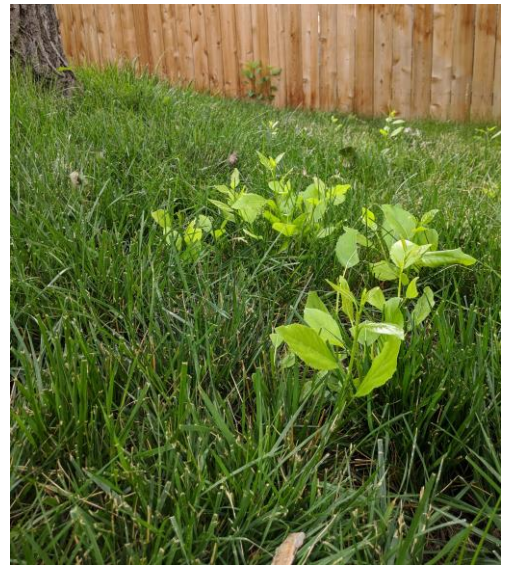
Generally fall color peaks here in northern Indiana around the 17th of October – at least that is what my broken compact tells me.

Some trees are already turning color in our area. This can be an indication the tree is under stress and unhappy. It could be diseased, the flare could be buried, construction might have occurred near the plant, or you – the homeowner – might have done something foolish like applied too much fertilizer or used a herbicide around the plant – overwatered it – the list goes on and on.

When Tree Seedlings Go Wild

Occasionally I receive calls, texts, or emails from folks who have issues with trees in their landscapes producing copious amounts of seed which germinate and try to take over a yard. The most common offender is the illustrious silver maple, but other species such as oak, other maples, and the most recent-rebud seedlings taking over the yard.

There is no easy non chemical way of dealing with this issues – unless one removes the tree or trees dropping seeds on the property. One could also hand pull seedling trees in small areas. Large areas would take tons of time and the patience of a saint. A professional could spray the trees in early spring with a product called Florel Fruit Inhibitor to prevent the tree(s) from producing seeds – but this requires perfect timing and can be very expensive to apply each season. One could simply cover a small area with thick plastic to kill seedlings – but this method would also damage or kill the grass – and one would have to explain to neighbors why you have plastic covering an area of your yard. Whew! The most cost effective method to eliminate the seedlings is to apply a broadleaved herbicide such as Chickweed Clover Control or Trimec to the areas as soon as the seedlings first begin to leaf out in the spring. One might have to repeat the application for a few years to get the situation under control.



Peace Lily – *Some material condensed from The Spruce*



Peace lilies, or *Spathiphyllum*, are not true lilies but in the Arum family and native to tropical Central and South America. In the wild, peace lilies are understory plants that grow in moisture rich humus and in partially shaded light.

Peace lilies are generally grown as potted houseplants in the United States, as most areas are not conducive to growing this plant outdoors. If you have potted peace lilies, you can move them outside during the summer months. But once temperatures dip in the fall, bring them back inside.

Caring for a Peace lily indoors is relatively simple. Provide your plant with moderately moist soil and filtered sunlight, along with consistently temperate conditions.

Peace lilies like a rich, loose potting mix that contains plenty of organic matter. These plants are native to tropical canopy conditions where the soil is packed with deteriorating plant material, so you'll find the best success with soil that mimics this composition. Additionally, the plant is also very sensitive to too-damp soil conditions, so be sure to choose a well-draining mixture.

Peace lilies prefer being under-watered rather than overwatered. How often you should water a peace lily depends on container size and how fast the soil drains, but, in general, water when the top inch of soil has dried out. In winter, reduce watering but never allow the soil to dry out completely. If your water at home is highly chlorinated, it's a good idea to use filtered or distilled water. Alternatively, you can allow tap water to sit for several days until the chlorine evaporates.

These plants prefer moist warmth. Avoid cold drafts and temperatures that fall below 55 degrees Fahrenheit; the plant will die when exposed to prolonged cold temperatures. The ideal temperature range for your peace lily is 65 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit. Spritz the leaves every week with softened or distilled water throughout the summer growing season to raise humidity.

Peace lilies appreciate frequent feedings, which result in the strongest plant and seasonal blooming. Following manufacturer's instructions, feed your plant weekly in the summer or use slow-release pellets at the beginning of the season. You do not need to fertilize the plant during the winter.

Peace lilies are toxic to pets and people, so be mindful about where you place a peace lily in your house.

Peace lilies are notoriously difficult when it comes to blooming. Sometimes even the happiest, healthiest plants don't bloom outside of their natural rainforest environment. If you're hoping to have your indoor peace lily bloom, your best bet is to provide it with very consistent ideal conditions, especially when it comes to humidity, diffused light, and consistent fertilizer.

The peace lily flower stages are budding, blooming, going to seed, and wilting. The buds are fairly small and unfurl like leaves. It can take some time for them to come into bloom, so be patient. When the bloom fades, deadhead the spent flower. In optimum conditions, the plant will flower twice a year in spring and fall.

One of the most common problems is droopy leaves on peace lily. Wilting peace lilies can occur due to several conditions. It is important to look for pest and disease issues, but the problem could also be cultural.

Peace lilies grow naturally in tropical rainforests. These plants need water but once per week is usually enough. Water until the moisture comes out of the drainage holes in the plant's container. This will ensure that the root ball is getting moisture.

Wild peace lilies live in warm, tropical regions and require temperatures of 65 to 75 degrees F. (18-23 C.) during the day and about 10 degrees cooler at night. Most thrive in average indoor temperatures but exposure to extreme heat or cold can cause drooping peace lily plants. Move any plants that are near the furnace or a drafty window or door.

The buildup of salts in the soils sometimes can cause drooping leaves and brown tips on the plant. Ensure that your plant is properly watered and that the soil is draining. If that doesn't seem to be the issue, try flushing the soil by watering until you see water coming from the drainage holes to remove the salts.

Mums The Word

Chrysanthemums are flowering plants of the genus *Chrysanthemum* in the family *Asteraceae*.

Chrysanthemum flower is one of the most popular flowers in the world, next only to Rose.

The chrysanthemum was first cultivated in China as a flowering herb and is described in writings as early as the 15th Century B.C. As an herb, it was believed to have the power of life. Legend has it that boiled roots were used as a headache remedy; young sprouts and petals were eaten in salads; and leaves were brewed for a festive drink. The ancient Chinese name for chrysanthemum is "Chu." The Chinese city of Chu-Hsien (which means Chrysanthemum City) was so named to honor the flower.



The first chrysanthemums to reach Europe were probably introduced by Dutch explorers during the 18th century. French Huguenots imported a variety of forms from the Dutch and developed Old Purple, one of the basic mums of European gardens.

Robert Fortune, one of England's great plant hunters also brought back mums from his explorations.

The chrysanthemum appeared in Japan in approximately the 8th century.. So taken were the Japanese with this flower that they adopted a single flowered chrysanthemum as the crest and official seal of the Emperor. Chrysanthemums are also viewed as a symbol of a long and happy life. Japan's National Chrysanthemum Day ("Kiku no Sekku") is also called the Festival of Happiness.

The name "chrysanthemum" is derived from the Greek words chrysos (gold) and anthemon (flower).

There are two major types of mums widely available. Pot Mums (*Chrysanthemum Morifolium*, or Florist's Mums) are annuals outdoors and typically grown as houseplants or office plants and given as gifts. They can bloom all year in a cycle.

Garden Mums are the standard mum sold and displayed in fall. With proper care, they can be grown as perennials in zones 5-9. They are photoperiodic, blooming only while daylight is at a certain length.

Belgian Mums are a special variety of winter-hardy chrysanthemums known for producing a large number of flower buds, sometimes as many as 1000 per plant. These mums are known for their toughness and ability to withstand damage. Belgian mums have a mounded shape and do not require pinching or staking. They are available in early, mid-season, and late fall-blooming varieties, which can extend the blooming season for gardeners who plan their purchases carefully. Belgian mums are the most common mums propagated by greenhouse growers for retail sales at garden centers.

Mums are short day plants, which means that left on their own, they will flower in the fall as the days become shorter and the nights longer. Greenhouse growers need to sell mums to consumers at the right time for late summer. They will pinch cuttings to develop a more compact plant or use plant hormones to promote branching. Sometimes shade cloth placed over the plants to reduce daytime light allows for precise control of when the plants flower and are ready for market.

Many fall-planted mums do not survive the winter because there is not enough time for root systems to develop properly. Many home gardeners and commercial companies treat the mums as annuals – placed in a landscape for fall color only. If one likes mums and wants them as a perennial in a garden, then mums are better planted in the spring. Pinch to mums a few times beginning around the fourth of July. Accept the fact the mum will probably flower in late fall. One can place a cardboard box over the mum for 3-4 weeks about five o'clock each day beginning in September – removing the box each morning if you want the mum to flower earlier.

Vinegar and Seed Germination



White vinegar is a household staple that everyone uses to cook. It is an aqueous liquid that contains about 5-8% acetic acid. Acetic acid helps certain seeds to germinate faster and allows the outer layer to break down for speedy growth. This also enables the developing seedlings to absorb any nutrients that are added during the germination process.

A study was done at the Capiz State University, Capiz, Philippines. It determined the effect of vinegar on the germination of eggplant seeds and identified that vinegar definitely expedites the sprouting process.

It was found that the application of vinegar with 0.001% concentration is effective in the germination of

When you soak seeds with up to 5% acetic acid formula white vinegar, the seeds usually germinate in a much shorter span. Acetic acid allows the outer layer to break down and also helps in decimating any external pathogens on the seedling.

Mix one tsp of vinegar in one cup of water in a bowl.

Soak the seeds in this solution overnight (not more than 12 hours).

Plant the seeds your usual way the next day after soaking.

You can also try the paper towel method for quick germination.

Some experts say that some seed does not take to the vinegar and can be damaged. Bummer....

Bringing Indoor Plants From Outdoors

Many gardeners place their tropical plants outdoors during the summer months to give the plants fresh air and natural sunlight. Tropical plants placed outdoors also can add texture and interest to outdoor landscapes.

We are rapidly approaching the time when tropical plants must come back indoors before the winter. In general forty-five degrees is the temperature cutoff point. Below this temperature tropical plants can be damaged.



It is important to prevent any “hitchhikers” such as spiders, earwigs, and beetles from traveling indoors with the plant. If the pot is small enough, submerge the container holding the plant in a five-gallon bucket of water for several minutes. Adding a half teaspoon of dish soap to the water can also help deter creatures.

Wipe down the leaves with a damp cloth or spray the foliage with insecticidal soap, neem, or pyrethrum to make sure any insects or mites do not come inside.

Some folks with time on their hands will acclimate the plant to indoor conditions by placing the plant back in its indoor location for a short period – then back outdoors – increasing the time indoors until the plant is acclimated to its indoor location. Fig trees are notorious for throwing tantrums and shedding their leaves when conditions change – so acclimating them back indoors helps reduce the tantrums.

Bringing tropical plants back inside takes time – and many folks now are placing Halloween decorations’ outdoors – or chuckling that their Christmas decorations left outside from last year are still working. Sacrifices must be made – I guess.



Hoggles – Demented Cat Logic

To my caregiver: The impending fall season has resulted in my pondering – maybe I should embrace the fall season by dying my fur. I see many folks wandering around with pink, red, or blue hair. I think it is time for me to embrace this new fashion trend – so maybe I can draw even more attention to myself. Just a thought.....

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