

Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks and Home Horticulture

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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.

Family and the Holidays

This year I went to spend time with my daughter Jessica and her family. They live in the extreme northern suburbs of Chicago in Crystal Lake. It is a long journey that took 5 full hours of driving through extremely stressful traffic to get there. Crystal Lake is a very picturesque small city with a downtown square that is a perfect hallmark movie location. It was wonderful to visit – both Jessica and her husband Jeff are very good cooks. The town has very good restaurants also, so we didn't starve. The visit also gave me a chance to spend more time to get to know my two grandchildren Scott and Sam.



Groundhog Day Gazebo in Woodstock Illinois

We actually spent an extra day just to rest up and prepare ourselves for the trip back and to see more of the area around Crystal Lake. A highlight was visiting the town of Woodstock Illinois where as it turns out much of the movie Groundhog Day was filmed. The central gazebo where many scenes were filmed was still there, along with the location where Bill Murray steps in a hole filled with water after encountering Phil Nickerson the insurance salesman. Woodstock is a smaller town that defines character and small town charm. Groundhog Day is one of my favorite movies of all time, so it was a treat.



One thing I found out is how difficult it is to be disabled. The hotel we stayed at had a room designed for the disabled which turned out to be not very handicap friendly at all. My bed was very low to the ground, and I needed help to get up and out of bed. The bathroom area had a low chair and difficult to use facilities. Even getting in my daughter's house was difficult as most houses I encounter have high sidewalk thresholds that are almost impossible to navigate. I highly recommend taking along portable wheelchair ramps to navigate such places. The aluminum ramps come in various lengths, are strong enough to handle me and my wheelchair, and fold up so they are easily transported (see the picture to the left). They are a lifesaver for many folks like me whose legs or knees are crap. I also took a portable "high seat" for a toilet to make it easier to use the "facilities".

The lack of unisex bathrooms and restaurants crowded to the brim also make it harder for disabled folks. I especially enjoy having to park farther way from a destination because perfectly healthy people driving a pickup truck the size of Texas take a wheelchair spot when there is no wheelchair sticker anywhere to be seen on the vehicle.

One never thinks about access when one is young and healthy. Always having to worry about handicap access is not fun. Having the aids I took along made it easier and more comfortable to spend quality time visiting my daughter and her family.



Christmas Stockings

Every Christmas, my sisters and I would place our stockings on the fireplace mantle near our small Christmas tree nearby. Lately I was thinking that the stuff my parents packed in those stocking was very special in many ways. It was a given that a very large peppermint candy stick was always included. This took a very long time to consume. The stickiness factor was very large as there was no way to lick the candy without ones hands sticking to everything afterwards. My mom often would include a small bag of her homemade fudge in the stocking. This took time and care to make on the stove, and it was always very rich. The smooth fudge was incredible. Sometimes my Mom

went all out and made a caramel light fudge version that was also tasty. Hard candy – the kind with the soft jellylike insides was also a standard – along with jawbreakers and milk chocolate balls. Jelly beans, chocolate coins and candy bars were sometimes included. It was a sugar high that could last for days. Sometimes there were practical items stuffed in stockings. Warm socks - a winter scarf – all were stuffed inside to fill the stockings.



Old Fashioned Fudge – Like Mom Used to Make

EQUIPMENT

2 quart saucepan

Candy thermometer – *Mom never had a candy thermometer.*

INGREDIENTS

2 cups granulated sugar.

1/4 cup cocoa powder Hershey's is fine.

1/2 teaspoon salt

2/3 cup half and half

1 tablespoon corn syrup

3 tablespoons butter

2 teaspoons vanilla extract

Combine all ingredients except butter and vanilla. In a 2 quart saucepan, combine the sugar, half and half, cocoa, salt, and corn syrup. Mix well with a whisk and bring to a boil over medium-low heat. While the fudge is cooking, butter a plate or baking dish for pouring the mixture into later.

Let the fudge cook until it reaches 240 degrees, check with a candy thermometer or instant-read thermometer. Don't stir during the cooking process. Once the temperature is reached, immediately remove the pan from the heat.

Place the butter and vanilla on top of the fudge and allow it to cool. Do not mix or disturb the pan. Let it cool about. 20 minutes until the side of the pan is warm but not hot to the touch.

Using a hand mixer on medium-low, beat the fudge for 1-3 minutes until it just begins to firm up and lose its shine. Once the fudge changes texture, immediately pour it into a dish to set. Work quickly. If it is not pourable, just scoop it out and flatten in the best you can. Allow it to cool for 20 minutes and cut into one-inch squares.

If the fudge is gooey, You undercooked it or under-mixed it. You can pour it back into the saucepan and cook it again, and it will usually turn out fine. If the fudge is grainy, you stirred too much during the cooking process or stirred during the cooling process. Try dumping it back in the pot with a cup of water and trying again. I remember my Mom redoing fudge that didn't turn out properly the first time. My Mom never seemed to let cooking stress her out. She would hum or sing softly to her self as she would cook. It was fascinating and comforting to watch her cook – and of course lick the cooking utensils!

Jessica's Microwave Fudge

My daughter Jessica is a good cook, but if something can be done easier – she is down with that. This fudge recipe seems ridiculously simple.

Ingredients:

semi-sweet chocolate chips

sweetened condensed milk.

chopped walnuts (optional)

Line a 9 x 9" pan with foil or parchment paper and spray with non-stick cooking spray.

Place chocolate chips in a microwave safe bowl. Pour sweetened condensed milk over the chocolate chips.

Microwave on high for 60 seconds. Stir well.

Microwave on high for 60 more seconds. Stir well again.

If the chocolate chips are not completely melted, continue to microwave at additional 30 second intervals until chocolate is completely melted.

Add chopped walnuts (if using) to chocolate mixture and stir completely. Pour fudge into prepared dish. Refrigerate for an hour or until completely hardened.

Lift foil out of pan and cut into cubes. It is that easy!

Norfolk Island Pine



Norfolk Island Pine is a houseplant native to Norfolk Island, situated in the South Pacific Ocean between New Caledonia and New Zealand. This houseplant is used by many folks during the Christmas holiday – folks decorate the tree and use it as a centerpiece for the table or buffet.

Norfolk Island pine was discovered on the second expedition of Capt. James Cook (1772–75) and was introduced to cultivation shortly thereafter. Despite its common name, the plant is not a true pine.

Norfolk Island pine (*Araucaria heterophylla*) is only cold hardy to USDA zones 10 to 11 and grown indoors elsewhere. In its native tropical range Norfolk Island pine can grow up to 200 feet tall outdoors. Grown indoors, it gets 3 to 8 feet tall or may even be trained as a bonsai or miniature tree.

The wood of large trees is used in construction, furniture, and shipbuilding. The plant is grown as an outdoor ornamental in regions with a Mediterranean climate, and the attractive saplings are cultivated throughout the world as houseplants.

The leaves of young plants are needlelike and curve upward to a point, while those of mature trees are scalelike and densely overlapping. The mature plant in the wild can produce round female cones that can reach up to 6 inches in diameter. An unusual feature of this species is that lateral branches cut from a tree and rooted in soil continue to grow horizontally and never produce an erect stem.

If growing Norfolk Island pine indoors, use a potting mix that is porous, sandy, and slightly acidic. Adding extra peat moss and sand to a standard potting mix will improve acidity and porosity. Keep the soil damp but not soggy and give the plant as much light as possible. It thrives in full sun or bright, indirect light, so position it near a south-facing window. If your plant begins to stretch while growing inside, the odds are that low light or too heavy fertilization is causing leggy growth.. It's helpful to turn it frequently, so every side gets equal light.

Because they are native to the South Pacific, Norfolk Island pines prefer warmer, wetter climates between 65°F and 70°F. They can briefly survive cooler and warmer temperatures but may perish if they experience temperatures below 35°F.

If you want to give your Norfolk pine some extra love, use a humidifier to help increase the humidity around the plant or mist the plant frequently. Feed your Norfolk Island pine with a weak liquid fertilizer used for acid-loving plants throughout the growing season and back off on the fertilizer during the dead of winter.

Younger plants have notoriously weak root systems and often need staking. Make sure to use heavier pots as the plants can fall over as the tree becomes larger. Remove lower branches that have died—a common issue with indoor specimens. As the tree develops, it will usually drop some needles. These dried needles are great to keep inquisitive cats away from the plant.

Propagating a Norfolk Island pine by taking a cuttings is difficult. This tree propagates by seed and germinates rapidly (10 to 15 days).



A potted Norfolk Island pine only needs to be repotted when it's root-bound or the roots are beginning to come out of the drainage hole. Young Norfolk Island pines are not very fast growers, so it might be possible to repot your tree every other year instead of every year. As the plant matures, it will begin to grow faster.

Repot your Norfolk Island pine in the springtime, and if your plant has attained a larger size, make sure to use a pot of any material with plenty of heavy items in the mix, such as potting sand, to provide enough weight to keep the plant upright. Make sure the pot is only a couple of inches larger than the one the plant is coming from, but also make certain it has plenty of drainage holes.

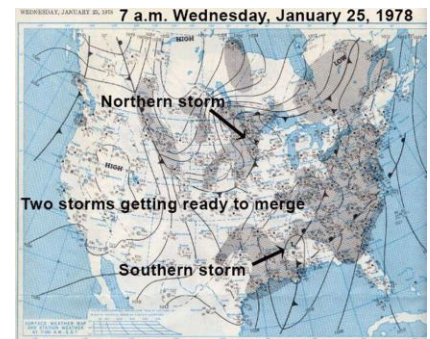
The tree can't tolerate cold, but it also can't tolerate extreme heat. Wide temperature fluctuations can cause the needles to brown. If the needles turn yellow or drop from the tree, the tree may not be getting enough sunlight or the tree may be overwatered. Norfolk Island Pine is a houseplant that can become a large plant if it receives the stability it needs. Once you find a place the tree likes – don't mess with it or change things drastically. It will throw a tantrum if you do.

The Great Blizzard of 1978

There are events that have occurred during the course of my life that remain in one's memories forever. For me the John F. Kennedy assassination, the Covid pandemic, 9/11, the Challenger disaster and the blizzard and the winter of 1978 are life changing events that I will never forget. When I meet younger people, it is interesting and a bit sad that events like the great depression and all the events I listed are just items in textbooks that get the classic eyer roll when older people reminisce about them. They meant something – they impacted one's life directly..

The winter of 77-78 began as a “normal” winter in northern Indiana. It was cold, there was snow on the ground, but it was no big deal. Beginning in mid-January 1978, our lives were changed forever.

Few citizens of central Indiana could have known the devastating impact that this once-in-a-generation blizzard would have on their lives, despite the warnings coming from forecasters at the National Weather Service office in Indianapolis. Even experienced weather professionals, who knew what was coming, had little idea of exactly what they would face over the next few days. The storm set records still in place to this day, including the most snow in one month at Indianapolis, 30.6 inches, and the most snow on the ground at Indianapolis, 20 inches.



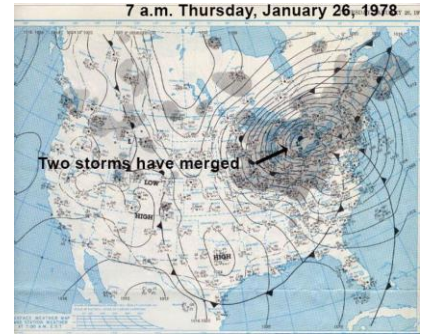
What happened was two very strong low pressure systems converged over the Great lakes region beginning on January 24th, 1978. Forecasters saw record low barometric pressures and extremely high winds – similar to a severe nor'easter hit our area.(see maps). What I remember is how quickly it all happened. It began snowing and never stopped. The cold and wind was incredible.

The other issue was that in Steuben County, Indiana where I lived, the countryside was very hilly. Many roads were curvy. All this created massive problems when the storm hit, because huge snowbanks formed on curves and hills that made travel impossible. Many recall homes buried in snow, cars buried in huge snowbanks, or even sledding from second floor windows after the storm finally released Indiana from its grip. One National

Weather Service employee who was off duty during the blizzard recalled stuffing newspaper into the cracks around his garage door to keep the howling winds from forcing the snow in through them.

Hundreds of automobile accidents were caused by the blizzard conditions. Tanks had to be used to remove stranded vehicles on some highways

Many regions in the Midwest saw more than a foot of snow from the initial blizzard, which closed major highways, stranding motorists and causing food shortages in many areas. Winds gusting up to 100 miles per hour caused high snow drifts that nearly buried some homes.



Throughout the Midwest, doctors and emergency personnel were forced to reach people on skis and snowmobiles. The governor declared a snow emergency for the entire state on the morning of the 26th. During the afternoon of the 26th, the Indiana State Police considered all Indiana roads closed. Seventy people perished during the storm. The other issue was the cold. Wind chills across the region often fell to between -70 and -80 °F.

My memory of the day was I worked all day at a factory in Fremont, Indiana. When my shift was over, I drove to my house near Clear Lake Indiana about 7 miles away. It was a precarious drive. The plows could not keep up with the snow coming down. I barely made it back. The road from the main highway to my house was already drifted shut. I parked my car just off the main highway and shoveled a spot around the car, and then trudged the 50 yards to my house. A 5 foot drift had formed in front of my front door. I had to shovel the drift to get into the house.



It took several days before a plow came to clear the road to my small house. By then we were running out of food. On the Sunday after the storm, we finally made it to a grocery store. Many items were not available because the panic shopping for items.

The other issue was the cold and persistent winds. The 1977/78 winter average winter temperature was to be the second lowest in recorded history, I was so cold that the fuel line from the outdoor tank to my space heater in the home froze often.

My bathroom sink froze and never thawed until May. I used heat tape that was not effective. I had to pour boiling water on the line to thaw it temporarily so the heater would work. Often winds would increase and the snow from the huge drifts would drift again across the roads making them impassable. I rigged up light bulbs placed in my car engine so my car would start to go to work. Often my car doors would freeze shut and boiling water was necessary to pour on the locks and door so I could get inside.



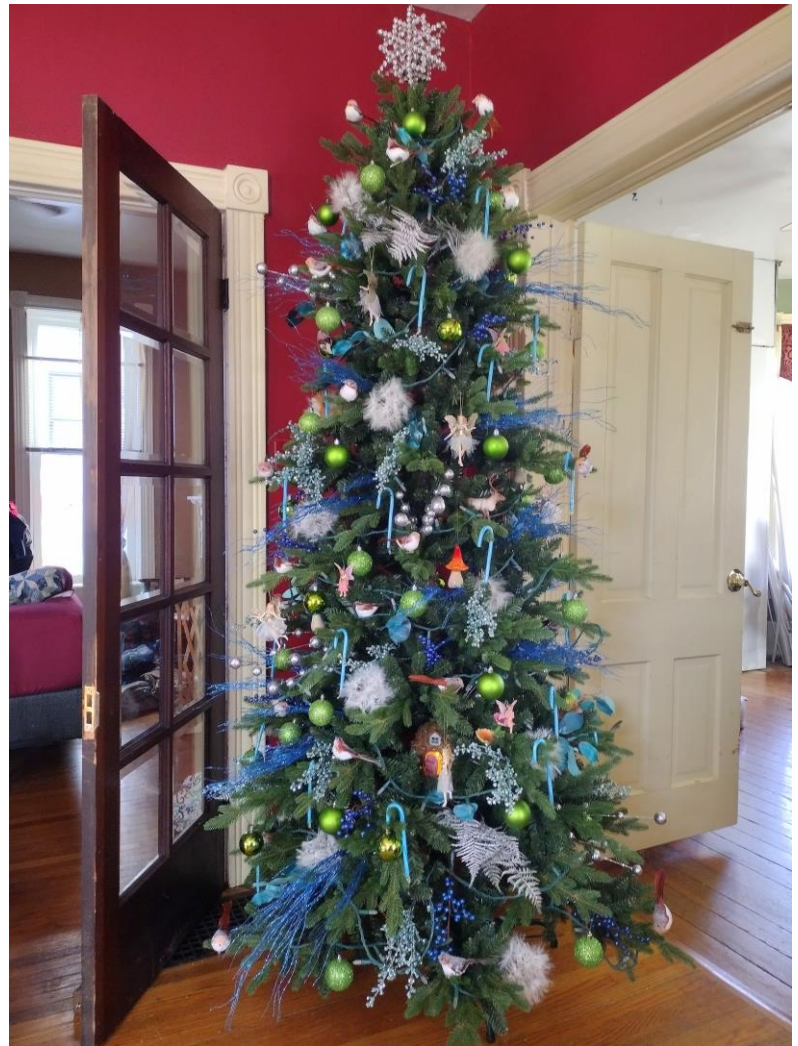
The winter lasted clear into April. There was still snow on the ground in early May. It was the most miserable winter I ever experienced. The winter was the primary reason I moved my family to new Mexico the following year. I had enough of winter.....

The Christmas Tree

I wasn't so hot on having a Christmas Tree this year. We are still putting away items from the move, and my holiday cheer quotient has been at an all time low. My memories of past Christmases were haunting me. They were not so good times of both economical and emotional hardship. One of my best memories of Christmas past was watching a travel marathon with my daughter Jessica one year long ago. We watched for hours as perfect couple Allison and Ken (not married) visited exotic destinations, ate wonderful food, and lived the dream while we ate cheap frozen pizza that we "improved" with extra mozzarella cheese and pepperoni.

In recent years I have tried to get into the Christmas spirit more by having special Christmas trees more highly decorated. Shopping for special decorations gets me more involved.

This year my friend and I decided on a fairie fae tree. My friend's house is over 150 years old, with very high ceilings and lots of woodwork. The tree is an eight foot artificial tree. We decided that the tree would have a silver, blue, white, and chartreuse theme. Fairies prefer shiny things, and we added a bit of nature also. Legend says that fairies come indoors during the winter - hide in out of the way places, and then inhabit Christmas trees during the holidays. They use special magical doorways to come indoors and out during the year. We have had special gardens for fairies outdoors. We have tried hard to keep the fairies happy. Below you can see the fairies hanging from the tree. A special house illuminated with a flameless candle is located in the interior of the tree.





These pictures show small birds perched on branches and more fairies perched near my chartreuse ornaments. In a garden, and a Christmas tree, I have found the color chartreuse goes with anything or any other color combination. It is why I scatter dill seed in a flower garden just for the color and texture contrast. It makes me happy.



Lemon Tree

This year I purchased a Meyer lemon tree for my friend Gwendra. She wanted an unusual houseplant for her office area. I explained to her that it wasn't impossible to have a tropical fruit tree indoors, but one had to provide additional light in order to have better success. This is her creative way to provide additional light.

She purchased an inexpensive chandelier at the Habitat for Humanity Restore on Lima Road. It is always fun to shop for unusual bargain items at the store. We purchased LED grow lights online that produce about a thousand lumens – which is an appropriate amount of light for the lemon tree. She installed a pulley system made of items from a hardware store to hang the grow light chandelier. The pulley system is attached to the door so that the whole apparatus can be raised or lowered depending on how well the lemon tree grows. The doorway is not used by the way and faces west. The lights are controlled by an Alexa hub and are on from sunset to dawn. Hopefully lemons are in the future. To me it's a brilliant decorative way to provide additional light for a houseplant.





Hoggles – Demented Cat Logic

To my caregiver: You have never placed a stocking for me near any of your highly fancy Christmas trees. This will change this season or I will turn your tree into rubble jumping on it repeatably as ornaments will be scattered everywhere. My list for my stocking include Tins of gourmet cat food. The highest quality catnip acquired from a border state where it is legal. Cat food treats made in your image so I can gleefully eat while thinking of you. A ballerina cat outfit – don't ask questions – and a seven page letter of apology that lists and asks forgiveness for every transgression in your caregiver responsibilities – signed in blood. .

Happy Holidays!

Thank you all for sending me wonderful comments and observations about Home Horticulture and your own gardens. Those comments keep me motivated to press on writing monthly observations on gardening and life that hopefully enhance your experience making it through this very complex world we live in. Be nice and try to make the world a better place for others – and yourselves. Happy Holidays everyone!

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