

Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks

and Home Horticulture

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Written and compiled by Ricky D. Kemery, Allen County Extension Educator Retired, phone: 260 - 431- 6893

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.

Ants in the House

January is the month when ants can wake up and begin to be seen in homes. I know it seems early, but ants seem to know when days become longer and its time to wake up.

Ants are social insects that live in colonies usually located in the soil near the house foundation, under concrete slabs, or in crawlspaces. In late winter, worker ants become active and begin to search for food for the queen and her young.

There are two things to consider when ants enter the home. Reckless spraying of pesticides does more potential harm than good. Colonies of ants are often difficult to find and completely control. Pavement ants are located either under your concrete slab or near the foundation of your home. Since foundations and slabs develop cracks over time, the ants have easy access to the kitchen or bathroom. Ants, like most insects, prefer areas higher in moisture. Even tiny leaks or sweating pipes can draw ants.

If hundreds of ants are seen each day, or the problem persists for longer periods than just a few weeks in late winter; then utilizing a pest professional is usually the best option. These licensed professionals can properly identify the species of ant you are dealing with, help determine where the nest is, and deal with the issue. Try to utilize a company that uses an Integrated Pest management (IPM) approach.

Many homeowners attempt to handle the problem themselves. One needs to follow the same IPM guidelines to help control ant populations.

Try to locate where the ant nest may be. Ants leave chemical trails for other ants to follow when they find food sources. It doesn't take long to observe what room in the house is the ant favorite. Sometimes one can even find a specific area where a crack or crevice is, or an area with a moisture issue.

Eliminating areas with moisture issues, and caulking cracks can also help reduce ant entry into the area.

Bait traps are one of the best ways to control ants. They work because the ants feed on a bait attractant, and then carry the bait back to the nest. Boric acid is a common last-toxic bait, usually placed in sweet syrup or gel within the trap. It's a good idea to place the bait inside a container (like a disposable plastic container used for food storage) punched with holes large enough for ants to enter and exit. This helps prevent access to the baits by small children or pets.

Orange Guard is a concentrated orange and lemon product that works well in kitchen areas as a contact spray. Don't use this product near cats or if you are allergic to citrus.

Food grade Diatomaceous Earth sprinkled along baseboards or on colonies located near the home foundation can help control ants.

Since some ants can contaminate food sources, potentially spread disease, and damage foundations and structural wood - it is necessary to control them in certain situations. Make sure to read the label before applying any product.

Here is a website with very good information on how to identify the common ant species that may be found in and around homes. It usually takes a magnifying glass or a hand lens to observe the structures on ants necessary to identify them. Knowing the species of ant can help with control measures.

<https://extension.umn.edu/insects-infest-homes/ants>

Winter Cooking

During the winter months I prefer to make soups or recipes that warm the stomach, heart, and soul as one mindlessly binge watch shows on various streaming services. Lately I have been watching old episodes of Northern Exposure – a quirky television show from the early 1990's.

The town of Cicely where the series is featured is widely thought to be based on Talkeetna, Alaska, It's main street and the filming location was that of Roslyn, Washington.

According to *The Northern Exposure Book*, the moose in the opening titles was named Mort and was provided by Washington State University, where he was part of a captive herd. To film the opening sequence, the crew fenced off Roslyn, set Mort loose, and lured him around with food.

Watching mindless television makes me hungry, so here is a favorite wintertime binging recipe that takes pork chops to a new level. (*I have also been watching old Emeril Live episodes*)

Braised Pork Chops with Apples and Mushroom Gravy

Ingredients

2-4 bone-in pork chops

2 cans mushroom soup

1 mushroom gravy

2 cups sliced mushrooms

1 small carrot and stalk of celery

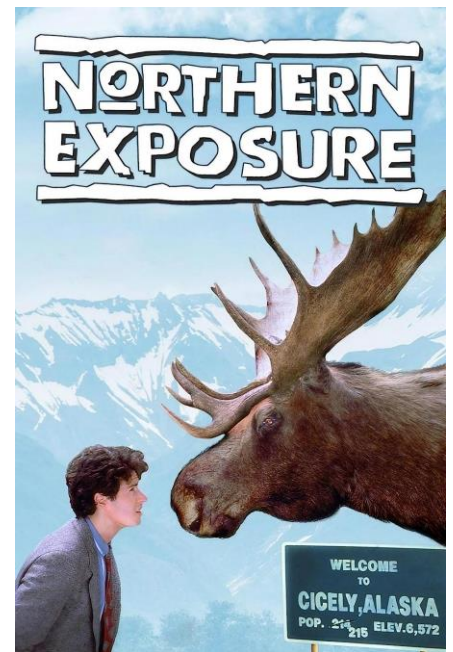
2-4 apples – peeled and cored – cut into medium slices.

2-3 onions sliced but not diced

Milk - heavy cream (optional)

Hot pepper flakes

Bay leaves



Salt and pepper to taste

Worcester sauce one teaspoon

Cayenne Pepper

I like my Dutch oven for this recipe, but one can also use a deep skillet with cover for this

Procedure

Sprinkle chops with cayenne pepper and brown in Dutch oven or skillet and remove after browning

Add onions, carrot, celery, mushrooms, and apples to Dutch oven or skillet - add butter and or olive oil = cook until onions soften.

Place chops back in Dutch oven or skillet

Add mushroom soup and or gravy

Cover chops with milk = add a bit of heavy cream if you prefer

Add bay leaf, hot pepper flakes and Worcester sauce

Simmer on low heat for 3-4 hours or whenever pork chops are tender enough to fall off the bone

Remove bones and bay leaf – serve with mash potatoes and binge watch with joy.

Is Tilling Bad for Gardens? Inquiring Minds Want to Know



Experts disagree about the pros and cons of tilling. One of the disadvantages of having a large conventional garden is the additional work involved to improve soil yearly and add fertility to the garden. The traditional large garden plot is usually tilled each year to accomplish this. Experts generally agree that the process of tilling does disturb the soil by disrupting earthworm activity and the positive effects of microorganisms that work with the plants to provide carbon to the plants in a symbiotic relationship between the microorganisms and plant roots. Another drawback of tillage is that tilling the garden will bring up dormant

weed seeds that germinate and grow. Many weeds have seeds that can remain dormant in the soil for decades, so one can always expect weeds to appear in spring as a result of tilling.

Tilling of the soil also results in poor soil structure making soil more likely to erode and less likely to absorb water efficiently.

One new trend in agriculture is regenerative agriculture – a new look at sustainably growing crops and also reducing the carbon footprint that is concerning folks nowadays.

The key elements of regenerative agriculture are minimizing soil disturbance, keeping the soil covered, maximizing plant/crop diversity, using and rotating livestock, and reducing “chemical” fertilizers and pesticides. Farmers in Great Britain have reported increased yields – organic matter in soils increased from less than 2% to near 10%. Experts say that regenerative agriculture can store large amounts of carbon in the soil – preventing its release into the atmosphere.

These same concepts can be applied to the home landscape and garden. Create raised beds that require little or no tilling. Use leaves, compost, and animal manures that are applied to the raised beds in the fall that will enrich the soil the following spring. The use of biochar has shown to enhance plant growth and it also helps a garden reduce carbon emissions. It’s easy to make by simply burning small branches and using the charcoal created by applying it to a garden. One can also add earthworms purchased at a bait store to the garden to encourage their activity. Use mulch to cover the soil, discourage weed growth, and reduce water usage. All of these concepts are typical in a garden that follows permaculture concepts, but reducing soil disturbance is a newer concept that includes the concept of regenerative agriculture.

By reducing tillage in gardens, one can encourage microorganisms and create an environment where plants can grow and flourish using a system that also reduces our carbon footprint. More information about regenerative agriculture can be found here: <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/regenerative-agriculture-101#what-is>.

Bluestone Perennials

Last year I purchased a fair number of plants from Bluestone Perennials. They still had plants in inventory even in late summer. Many other online sources had already run out of stock. Bluestone in earlier years was known for offering smaller plants for cheaper prices. They often had a wide variety of plants not as generally available as in a garden center – for instance. Unfortunately in recent years – one used to be able to purchase 3 small plants for less than ten dollars ten years ago. Currently one small plant now sells for seventeen dollars. Bluestone has also gone to a system where they sell small plants whose roots are now encased in a cloth/plastic material that supposedly bio-degrades over time.



Looking through their catalog, I saw a few new plants that caught my eye. ‘Material Girl’ summer phlox is a very tall phlox (up to four feet in height) with a great color. (see picture to left). I am sure Madonna would love this phlox.

As I have mentioned in previous issues of Home Horticulture I love the color chartreuse. So when I saw a new low catmint named ‘Chartreuse on the Loose’ my interest was piqued, This ‘Walker’s Low’ type catmint looks like a real winner to me.(see below).



The thing is, I can find these plants in larger containers at the same price from other sources. Bluestone does offer quick shipping and good quality plants so.. I am torn.

One thing I learned is that it is probably better to carefully remove the biodegradable material from the roots before planting. (I used scissors). If I planted the plants as is, then I found it was difficult to water the plants enough to avoid them from drying out. The biodegradable material didn’t appear to be in any hurry to biodegrade. The plants didn’t take off as quickly as I would have hoped. I found that plants without the biodegradable container established more quickly and were easier to water effectively.

Rooting Cuttings

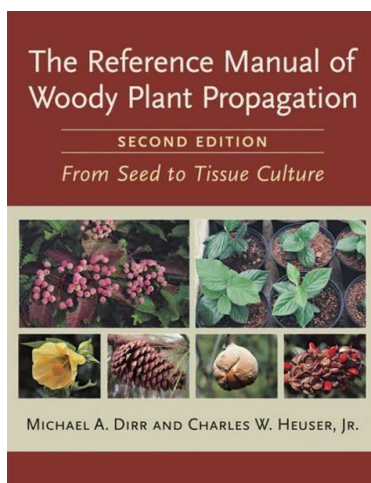
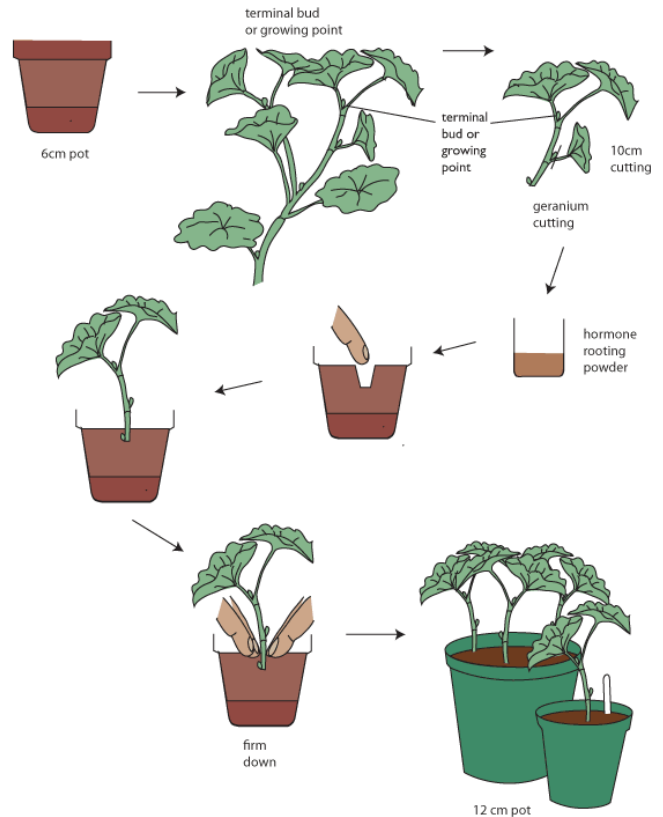
Taking cuttings of plants allows one to have more plants of your favorite species to have more plants for your own use, or to give away to others, or to sell. Many folks propagate house plants from cuttings – small pieces of the plants usually containing at least one node – a section of the plant with one lateral bud or leaf. The cutting is taken so there is a small length of stem under the node to dip in rooting hormone. Some folks take the cutting and put it in water. This works but it can take longer to root and the roots produced from water-rooted cuttings can be extremely fragile and prone to damage when the cutting is placed in soil.

Rooting compounds such as Rootone contain auxin – a plant hormone found in minute quantities in plants. Auxins were discovered in part by Charles Darwin and his son who did experiments to try and determine how and why plants grew towards light sources. They determined that an unknown compound accumulated on the dark side of the twig that caused cell elongation to occur- hence causing the plant to grow toward the light. This compound was later called auxin and further studies with auxin found that when applied to plants, it helped them produce roots at the locations where the auxins were applied. Amazing stuff- plant hormones.

Anyway, applying a root hormone to a cutting will produce roots, so the cutting can be treated and then “stuck” in soil and most of the time – rooting will occur. The diagram to the right shows the process.

In the olden days of horticulture, before rooting compounds – folks had to use other methods to root cuttings. Landscapers in the 1950’s used willow bark extract to help root cuttings of woody plants. Willows are notoriously famous for producing dense root systems that clog water lines, so someone figured that using extracts from willow bark would promote rooting. They were correct.

If you have a favorite houseplant, then do research to see if your plant can be easily rooted from cuttings.



Trees can also be propagated from cuttings. Since trees are expensive, this is a good thing. Some trees are easier than others and the timing of when to take cuttings is important. When I was a student long ago, I rooted many cuttings of red maple. The best time to take cuttings of red maple are in June. One clips the tips of branches containing leaves so that one or two nodes are a part of the cutting. The stem below the node is treated with root hormone, and “stuck” in a small container of soil. The container is usually placed in a greenhouse with a mist system so the cuttings don’t dry out. When roots form, the container can be placed outdoors. The plant can be potted up over time as the plant grows larger. Viola! A new tree! There are a few now large red maples on the campus that were once just rooted cuttings produced by yours truly. A very good resource is the book pictured to the left *The Reference Manual of Woody Plant Propagation*. It is an awesome resource.

All America Selections for 2024

Every year, the All American Selections committee selects – in their opinion – the best new plants for the season. The plants are grown on test sites all over the country and rated for appearance and performance. In general, AAs winners are a good bet to grow because they have performed well in different climates. Look for them in catalogs and selected garden centers. The winners are:

Broccoli ‘Purple Magic’ F1 (National Winner)

Broccoli ‘Skytree’ F1 (Regional Winner)

Celosia ‘Burning Embers’ (National Winner)

Geranium ‘Interspecific Big EEZE Pink Batik’ (National Winner)

Impatiens ‘Interspecific Solarscape XL Pink Jewel’ (National Winner)

Pepper ‘Red Impact’ F1 (National Winner)

Petchoa ‘EnViva Pink’ (National Winner)

Petunia ‘SureShot White’ (Regional Winner)

Marigold ‘Slam Gold’

Broccoli ‘Purple Magic’

This purple broccoli is magical! How else do you explain a broccoli that has it all? From its beautiful purple color, tight uniform heads and bright beads to its great broccoli flavor, this easy to grow broccoli is also stress and heat tolerant. A showstopper. Excellent broccoli to try growing in cooler seasons. Can be eaten raw, stir-fried, roasted, lightly blanched, or steamed for the best texture, either way, you will find it sweeter and more tender than traditional green broccoli. Bred by Sakata Seed America



Broccoli ‘Skytree’



Skytree broccoli is a towering AAS Winner that will take your garden and your taste buds to new heights. Its upright stems make it easy to harvest, and its deliciously tender stems and florets are sure to please even the most discerning broccoli lover. Skytree broccoli is very versatile and can be steamed, roasted, stir-fried and eaten raw. Bred by Bayer Vegetable Seeds



Celosia ‘Burning Embers

Burning Embers is a new celosia bred for its gorgeous bronze foliage with dark pink veins that contrast nicely with the vibrant pink flower plumes. Plants are well branched and produce more flowers over a longer bloom time. Numerous AAS Judges commented that this entry had the largest and longest lasting flowers of all the celosia varieties they trialed. Plus, Burning Embers does very well in both heat and humidity while remaining completely covered with blooms that withstood the test of time. Bred by Clover Seed Company. Distributed by Sakata Seed

Geranium ‘Interspecific Big EEZE Pink Batik

The Big EEZE geranium series is known for its superior container performance, medium vigor, and heat tolerance. The newest addition to the series, Pink Batik, is an AAS National Winner that is sure to impress gardeners with its unique coloration and minimal maintenance requirements. Batiking is known for being a labor-intensive way to produce beautiful colorations on fabric but this new geranium is a super “EEZE” way to get stunning petal colors on a very floriferous plant with very little effort needed. Says one judge: “The combined flower output of all our entry plants totaled well over 100 blooms and each one was the same size with an equal amount of pink and white striations.”



Impatiens ‘Interspecific Solarscape XL Pink Jewel’



Solarscape seed-propagated impatiens provide unbeatable color in full or partial-sun garden areas. Durable Solarscape outperformed the comparison varieties and because it is grown from seed, gives you more options for starting impatiens at home. Vibrant pink satiny blooms cover the mounded plants non-stop all season, adding a bright and pleasing tropical appeal to the garden. Solarscape XL Pink Jewel has superior disease resistance, especially to the dreaded impatiens downy mildew. Looks great when massed in beds and borders and since it was trialed in both containers and in-ground, we know it does well in both. Try Solarscape for a showy display in your garden!

Pepper ‘Red Impact’



Lamuyo-type peppers are notoriously difficult to grow, but the new Red Impact variety is here to change that. This AAS Winning pepper is easy to grow and produces thick, sweet walls, even when green. It is also much sweeter than other varieties and loaded with fruits for a high yielding gem. Red Impact plants are upright and tidy, with a strong disease package that protects your investment. The fruit is dark red, highly uniform in shape and size, and if you are looking for a delicious and easy-to-grow pepper, Red Impact is the perfect choice for you.

Petchoa ‘EnViva Pink’

AAS Judges were wowed by the well-controlled mounding plant habit of EnViva Pink over the entire season. The bright pink flower with a yellow throat is very eye catching... “Absolutely stunning!” according to one judge. The flowers have a nice iridescent shimmer that toughed it out even when conditions got tough, like an irrigation system failure! All season long, EnViva stayed in glorious color even during the heat of the summer. Large flowers bloom from Spring through Fall in garden beds, containers and hanging baskets. Plants are heat tolerant and flowers bounce back after rain.



Petunia ‘SureShot White’

The versatile SureShot petunias are garden gladiators that can withstand any bizarre weather conditions. Whether you plant them in garden beds, containers, or hanging baskets, these beauties will thrive, come rain or shine, heat or cold. Their vibrant white blooms cover the plants, attracting bees and other pollinators to their lightly fragrant blossoms. SureShots are a "sure bet" for any garden, and they're sure to turn heads with their stunning display of color. If you're looking for a petunia that can handle anything your garden throws at it, then SureShots are the perfect choice for you. Plant them today and watch as they transform your garden into a show-stopping oasis!



Marigold Siam Gold F1



Growing this marigold in your garden is like taking a trot around the globe! Named for a former country located halfway across the world, Siam Gold has beautiful, mounded foliage that produces globe-like, fully double golden flowers all season long. The large flowers are held on top of sturdy stems and above the foliage for full color visibility making a striking focal point in the garden. Blooms were very tight and held up all summer long. The uniformity of the plant gives a neat, tidy appearance in the garden. Siam Gold is excellent for cut flowers but no staking is needed. Try this beauty for a staycation where no travel is needed!



Hoggles – Demented Cat Logic

To my caregiver: I also like to cook to enhance my diet. Here is my most recent recipe.

Ingredient: Spam

Procedure Place spam in skillet – cook for 3 minutes.

Enjoy!!

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