

MARYLAND Home & Garden

INFORMATION CENTER

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In this issue....

- **Grow Your Own in 2010**
- **Choosing the Best Houseplants**
- **Mouse Around the House?**
- **Mind your 4 R's in the Vegetable Garden**
- **Questions & Answers**
- **Monthly Tips from HGIC**

Websites

- **Home and Garden Information Center**
- **Grow It Eat It**
- **Maryland Master Gardeners**

The Most Rewarding New Year's Resolution: Grow Your Own in 2010

Jon Traunfeld, Extension Specialist, Fruits and Vegetables, and State Master Gardener Coordinator

This is for all of the Marylanders who don't grow their own vegetables in home or community gardens. Perhaps you don't not have enough time, space, sunlight, knowledge, confidence, or interest. Or you may have sat out the 2009 recession-driven food gardening craze because you wanted to see how it worked out for your eager-beaver neighbors. Maybe you just hate vegetables (so sad). Whatever your reasons for being gardenless, I ask that you consider the following:

Eight Reasons to Grow Some Vegetables in 2010

1. Lose weight by burning calories; gardening is exercise.
2. Maintain weight loss by eating what you grow; substitute veggies for those Doritos you've been dipping in chocolate sauce.
3. Your children will thank you (probably not until they are much older). Studies show that kids who grow their own food and taste new vegetables increase their daily consumption of vegetables and fruits.
4. The flavors of garden produce are to die for. Whether we are talking sweet potatoes, lettuce, green beans, or garlic- there is a world of difference between backyard and store-bought veggies.
5. Gain a new perspective on life. Digging in the soil, growing plants and being part of earth's natural cycles will make you a better person- we guarantee it.
6. Ok, you probably won't save money the first year, but your garden should pay for itself by year two. After that, it's all gravy...I mean tomato juice.
7. The vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals in vegetables will not bring world peace...but they will help keep you healthy.
8. The University of Maryland Extension will guide you, and listen to your tales of doe (eating your crops). We've got your back with our many experts and web resources. Call us, e-mail us, or send a tweet. We'll help you put some fresh, healthy food on the table in 2010.

Call us at 800-342-2507 (in state) 301-531-1757(out of state)
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TOP

Choosing the Best Houseplants

by Ray Bosmans, Professor Emeritus, University of MD

The most common reason for houseplants to fail is insufficient light coupled with over watering. Many of our houseplants are native to tropical regions. Foliage plants growing under the jungle canopy thrive under reduced sunlight and readily utilize the plentiful rainfall. However, the low light of the jungle floor is still much brighter than most homes. In a home the sunlight is only received through a window, and if that window is too far away, the plant does not get full benefit of the light.

Determining the brightness of light indoors can be very deceiving. We might think that we have a well-lit room but when it is tested with a light meter, it actually is much darker than thought. Plants will always react negatively to this difference. As a guide to the buyer, most houseplants have their lighting requirements noted on a label. But, what does it mean? Basically, direct sunlight is found in front of a south-facing window. Bright light is found near areas of direct sunlight but not necessarily directly in the window. Medium light is found in a north facing window. In some situations, natural sunlight can be supplemented with florescent lights.

Remember that the less light a plant receives, the less water is needed. A watering routine will vary from season to season. All houseplants use less water in the winter. Using a potting medium that drains well is also very important. Don't use garden soil - in most cases it will not drain properly in a pot. Always use what is known as a "soiless" medium. This will contain sphagnum peat moss and perlite. Some mixes may contain pine bark fines instead of, or in addition to the peat moss.

If you really must have a houseplant in a location of less than optimum light you can 'rotate it'. Keep it in bright light most of the time to keep it healthy and then move to a lower light for no longer than a couple of weeks. Water it less often and move it back to bright light before it deteriorates. This is a technique used in many shopping malls and other commercial businesses.

Not all houseplants are 'forever'. Some holiday plants are best handled as cut flowers, enjoy them for a few weeks and then dispose of them when they

deteriorate. If you select a plant that is tolerant of low light, chances are that it will do very well in any light exposure that meets or exceeds its threshold. Here is a list of suggested "low light" houseplants:

Snake Plant (*Sansevieria*)

The Snake plant, also called "mother-in-law tongue", is of the toughest plants on the planet!

It comes in two forms, the tall upright type with strap-like foliage of very tough leaves, and a second type



has a dwarf rosette form that is only a few inches tall. Both are available in either green leaves or leaves edged with yellow. Snake plants are very long lived and will tolerate low light better than any other house plant. They will also withstand prolonged periods of dryness, but will not tolerate over watering.

Philodendron Vine

Philodendron vine is the most well-known member of the philodendrons. It has attractive dark green, heart-shaped leaves on trailing stems. It prefers bright light but will tolerate low light. Its growth becomes more spindly in lower light. This is a favorite plant in offices, it thrives under the florescent lights. Regular pinching of the tips will encourage compact, dense growth.

Pothos Vine (*Scindapsis*)

Another vining plant related to the philodendron, (also called devil's ivy), is a definite must for anyone wanting a vigorous attractive vine. The species *Scindapsis aureus* has attractive yellow or



off-white variegation in the leaves. However, if kept in very low light the yellow fades out to green.

Peace Lily (*Spathiphyllum*)

Peace lilies are 2-3 feet tall floor plants. The leaves are attractive dark green and fairly glossy. This is an excellent houseplant. It needs more water than most houseplants and if you let it go too long without water, it quickly wilts. There is no real harm in an occasional wilting. Eventually you will know exactly when to water before it wilts. There is also a much smaller form (8-10 inches) often used in florist dish gardens.



Chinese Evergreen (*Aglaonema*)

These are very attractive plants with silver or light gray-green markings in the foliage. They grow from a central point but old plants develop tall stems. These overgrown stems should be cut back to promote more compact growth. Aglaonemas do well in average light, and like the peace lily will quickly “tell” you when they need water by wilting. Again, establish a watering program that prevents excessive wilting.



Draceana (*Dracaena fragrans* ‘Warneckeii’)

Dracaenas are large houseplants. Most are well under four feet tall, but some reach eight feet in height. All have attractive foliage, either striped or patterned. They prefer to be kept on the dry side and thrive in bright light. They are also very tolerant of lower light conditions.



Bromeliad

Bromeliads are colorful plants that usually grow on tree trunks and branches in the jungles. They used to be hard to buy and were expensive; they are now readily available at moderate prices. Bromeliads are grown in pots with a bark mix or plenty of peat moss. Water them by pouring water into their foliar “cup” and into the growing medium. Bromeliads grow best in bright light, not direct sunlight, but are amazingly tolerant of lower light for long periods of time.



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Mouse Around the House?

by Mary Kay Malinoski, Extension Specialist, Entomology

In most homes, the only mouse around the house is connected to a computer! However mice of the 4-legged variety become a problem in the fall when the colder weather drives them indoors. The common house mouse is a small rodent, grayish-brown with a gray underside, that can become a serious pest in the home. Another mouse that may also be found indoors is the white-footed mouse.

Mice feed on a variety of stored foods, particularly seeds and grains, and sugary products. Mice can live without free water because they usually get enough moisture from their food. They are nibblers, and move from food to food causing considerable damage and spoiling the food with their droppings and urine. They also damage insulation in the walls and ceilings by tunneling through it. Mice must gnaw to keep their constantly growing teeth trimmed. They may do damage to electrical wire insulation and cause fires.

To control mice, prevent their entry to your home by sealing all openings $\frac{3}{8}$ of an inch or larger. Steel wool makes a good temporary plug. Use snap or live traps, or poison baits indoors where there is evidence of mouse activity. Glue boards are also available, but the mice may suffer a long time and the homeowner must kill the mouse stuck on the board. The best places to position traps are along walls, inside and under kitchen cabinets, and in suspended ceilings. Baits can also be placed in ceilings or under cabinets, but not out in the open unless they are placed in a bait

station. A bait station should only provide the rodents access to the bait. It is important to remove all other sources of food. Pet food should not be left out over night. A house cat skilled in 'mousing' can also be helpful. Outdoors, natural predators such as snakes, foxes and birds of prey will help control rodent populations. After several weeks of trapping, baiting and habitat modification, you should be able to eliminate the problem of mice in your house.



House mouse (Photo courtesy of UC State)



White-footed mouse (Photo courtesy of Purdue Univ.)

Mind Your 4 R's in the Vegetable Garden- Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Re-think

Jon Traunfeld, Extension Specialist, Fruits and Vegetables, and
State Master Gardener Coordinator

Food gardeners are some of the most earth-loving, resourceful people I know. They are adept at recycling materials for use in the garden and cutting costs. Thinking about and practicing the 4 R's is essential to our future on this planet.

Reduce the amount of fertilizer you apply to your garden if your plants grow and produce well. Many gardeners find that the compost and organic matter they add each year can supply most of the nutrients required by their vegetable crops. Try backing down fertilizer amounts and frequency and monitor the results. Continue to add

compost and organic matter that will slowly release nutrients for uptake by plant roots. Don't buy a new gardening tool if you don't really need it. See if you can borrow the tools you do need. Sharing plants, seeds, tools, and the harvest is a great way to spread the gardening bug and reduce costs.

Re-use yogurt containers for growing transplants; 5-gallon buckets for picking produce, making compost tea, and growing container gardens; discarded wood for raised beds and plant supports. There are dozens of household and garden items regularly discarded that may have a good use in your vegetable garden. It is better for us and our planet if we re-use these items rather than recycle them.

Recycle nutrients by covering soil at all times with shredded leaves, newspaper, grass clippings, compost, straw, and cover crops. Nutrients pulled up from the soil by garden plants, grass, and tree roots can be recycled on site in your garden! Recycle food scraps (no meats, dairy products or cooked foods) in outdoor compost bins (monitor for critter issues), indoor or outdoor redworm composting bins, or by burying them directly in garden beds. Saving seed to re-plant next year is a type of recycling that can save you \$.

Re-think how you garden. Are your methods sustainable? Harvest and use local bamboo for plant supports rather than purchasing bamboo poles through a catalog. Why pay good money to ship chicken manure from a far-away state when we've got plenty right here in Maryland? Don't purchase beneficial insects that can be easily attracted to your garden. Simply plant a variety of flowering plants (see the Nov.-Dec. newsletter for a list of these plants). Re-think what you plant and how you use those plants (did you know that sweet potato leaves are delicious and nutritious?)

Keep the 4 R's in mind as you digest the new seed catalogs and plan for a productive and sustainable garden this coming season.

Questions and Answers

by Debra Ricigliano, Certified Professional Horticulturist

Question:

Over the past few years I have noticed an increase in what looks like wild pear trees growing in the field on our property. If I am not mistaken I see many growing on the sides of the roads and even along the highway. What kind of trees are they and why am I starting to see so many?

Answer:

This is an invasive pear tree. It is a relative of the Bradford pear, which were supposedly sterile. Bradford pears began to cross pollinate with other Callery pear cultivars that were introduced into the nursery trade to replace poorly branched and problematic Bradfords. They produce fruits and seeds. Unfortunately, these trees have become a huge problem in the Mid-Atlantic region, taking over natural areas and parks and crowding out native plants. Loss of our natives could potentially result in

the disappearance of birds, plants and animals that have a symbiotic relationship with these plants. We would recommend that you remove the pear trees in your field and replant with native alternatives, such as *Viburnum prunifolium* (black haw), *Amelanchier canadensis* (Serviceberry), *Chionanthus virginicus* (fringetree), *Oxydendron arboreum* (sourwood), or *Magnolia virginiana* (sweetbay magnolia). For more information, [read our list of native tree nurseries](#) or [call us at 800-342-2507](#).

Question:

A woodpecker or other small pecking bird has been making multiple holes the size of a golf ball in the wood on our home for some time. We have heard that these birds are protected and we can't do anything about it. Can you suggest how I can protect my home from further damage by this bird?

Answer:

A woodpecker is the probably culprit. Woodpeckers are a federally protected bird. The key to reducing woodpecker activity is to begin control tactics when the damage first occurs. Once a woodpecker has established a feeding or nesting territory, it will be harder to change the behavior. Wooden or stucco houses can be attacked but cedar and redwood siding seem to be preferred. Woodpeckers drum to attract mates, to establish and/or defend a territory, to excavate nesting or roosting sites, and to search for insects. Drumming also occurs on trees or even metal such as gutters or downspouts.

Try scaring them off by hanging strips of aluminum foil, mylar tape or brightly colored windsocks near the damaged area. Physical exclusion is the most effective means of control. Cover problem areas with bird netting or plastic sheeting. The birds may move to a different location so the netting may have to be moved. Sections of lightweight sheet metal or ¼" hardware cloth placed over damaged areas may encourage them to relocate. Harass the birds using an air horn, squirting water at them from a hose or using any device that will make a loud noise can also be tried. If the problem persists contact the Wildlife Hotline at 1-877-463-6497. This service, that assists with nuisance wildlife, is provided jointly by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Wildlife and Heritage Services, and the United States Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Wildlife Services Program (USDA-APHIS). For additional information see the [Wildlife section](#) of our website.

MONTHLY TIPS FROM HGIC

Every month we publish timely tips on our website. This year we will be highlighting some "best of" tips. If we pique your interest, please visit our website to read more (www.hgic.umd.edu) or call us with your questions - 800-342-2507.

JANUARY

Lawns

- This is a good time to have your soil tested.
- Do not attempt to fertilize your lawn when the ground is frozen.
- Keeping the soil pH in the 6.0 - 7.0 range is very important in maintaining healthy turf.
- Agricultural limestone can be applied to raise soil pH during the winter when the ground is not frozen or covered with snow. Pelletized lime is slightly more expensive than ground limestone but is easier to apply. Soil test results and recommendations are very important for proper nutrient management of lawns, flowers, vegetables and landscape plants. But don't guess, do it right the first time and follow the instructions on a soil test.

Woody Ornamental Plants

- January and February are the two most severe winter months for "winter burning" (marginal leaf scorch) of evergreens.

- Gently sweep snow loads off of shrubs to prevent breakage.

Ornamental Plants

- This is a good time to inspect susceptible woody ornamental plants such as winter creeper and Japanese euonymus foliage for scale problems.
- Scale insects can be controlled with a dormant oil spray - Be sure that temperatures are expected to remain above freezing for a 24 hour period after spraying.

Aquatic Gardens

- If you haven't yet placed a chicken wire screen over your pond you'll need to remove leaves that are now sunken to the bottom of the pond.
- These leaves will contaminate the water with nutrients and gases that will harm or even kill your fish.
- If you have not already stopped feeding your pond fish, do not feed them anymore. They cannot metabolize food easily during cold weather and can become very sick.

Fruits

- Remove and dispose of all rotted or diseased fruits and fallen



leaves from trees, vines and bushes. This will help reduce the amount of disease inoculum and number of insect pests that over-winter and attack your orchard next spring.

Vegetable Gardening

- One wonderful advantage of home food gardening in Maryland is producing healthy leafy greens. Attentive gardeners in warmer sections of the state grow and harvest salad greens through the fall and winter months using row covers, cold frames, and unheated greenhouses (high tunnels).

Fertilizer

- Keep stored dry fertilizers sealed up in your shed or basement to keep moisture out.

Melting Ice

- Don't use granular fertilizer to melt ice. Using fertilizer was recommended years ago, but it is actually very corrosive to concrete and metal, and contributes to waterway pollution.
- Look for deicing materials containing magnesium chloride.
- Other formulas containing sodium chloride, potassium chloride and calcium chloride are also suitable but they too can be corrosive and burn plants if not applied correctly.
- Avoid all products containing urea (another form of nitrogen fertilizer) because of its potential to contaminate watersheds and its corrosiveness.
- It's very important to keep all ice melting materials away from landscape plants.
- "Builder's" also known as "all purpose" sand is very good to use to improve traction on slippery surfaces.

Indoor Pests

- Store leftover nuts from the holiday season in the freezer and store dried fruit in your refrigerator to avoid pantry pest problems.
- Indian meal moths are a common problem of grains and grain products, cereals, bird seeds, dried pet food, etc. You may see adult moths flying, larvae crawling or webbing. Remove the source of the infestation and clean all jars

and containers that are affected. Always check bulk foods prior to purchase for signs of meal moth infestation. Do not use insecticides around stored food to control these pests.

Wildlife

- Where deer are feeding on garden and landscape plants, apply a repellent, such as "Deer-Away", "Hinder" or "Ro-Pel" to vulnerable plants. If deer pressure is heavy, try rotating repellents. Small deodorant soap bars and other types of repellents are used with some success.

FEBRUARY

Lawns

- Late February through the end of March is the second best time (the optimum time is late August through mid October) to over-seed your lawn to make it thicker or to cover bare areas. The freezing and thawing of the soil this time of the year helps the seed to get good soil contact.
- Remove leaves and other debris and rake the soil to ensure good seed-soil contact.
- To over seed an existing tall fescue lawn, broadcast tall fescue seed at a rate of 3-4 pounds per 1,000 sq. ft.

Herbaceous Ornamental Plants

- Some slow growing flowers like begonia, geraniums, and impatiens should be started 12-14 weeks before the last expected frost.
- Most other annuals are started about 6-8 weeks before the [last frost date](#). Do not depend on window sill light to grow these seedlings.
- Annual flower plants are best started and grown indoors under cool, white fluorescent lights.
- The tubes should be lit for 14-16 hours per day and kept only 1-2 inches from the top of the young seedlings.

Fruit

- Dormant oil sprays are very effective at reducing populations of some tree fruit pests such as aphids, mites and scale insects.
- If you've had problems with these pests, spray trees thoroughly with a dormant oil spray before bud break, making sure that temperatures are

expected to remain above 40 degrees F. for the 24 hour period after spraying.

- It is only necessary to spray dormant oil one time.

Vegetable Gardening

- In late February, you can start sowing seeds of early season greens such as spinach, lettuce, kale, mustard, sorrel, corn salad and other greens indoors under fluorescent tubes.
- These plants tolerate cool soil temperatures and will be ready to transplant outdoors in 4-5 weeks but should be protected by a cold frame or floating row cover until warmer weather arrives.
- Start the seeds of long-season chile peppers indoors under lights at this time.

Indoor Plants

- Fungus gnats are small, harmless black flies that hover around many houseplants. They breed in and feed in overly wet growing media.
- Severe infestations result in root rots and size reduction.
- They can be prevented by being careful not to over-water houseplants. Growing media should be allowed to dry out before watering again.

Fertilizer

- Be careful to keep ice melting products away from landscape plants. Avoid using granular fertilizers to melt ice.

Indoor and Outdoor Pests

- Many hibernating insects wake up during spells of mild weather in February. Elm leaf beetle, leaf-footed bugs, Asian ladybird beetles, boxelder bugs, cluster flies, stink bugs and other species may appear both outdoors and indoors in large numbers.
- Although a nuisance indoors they are all harmless and can be vacuumed or swept up.

Wildlife

- The USDA, APHIS, Wildlife Services program has a cooperative agreement with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife and Heritage Division, to provide the residents of Maryland with information on how to deal with nuisance wild animals. The USDA, APHIS, Wildlife Service operates a toll-free Nuisance Wildlife Information Line. The phone number has been recently changed to 877-463-6497. Normal working hours are 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. People calling after hours, or on weekends and holidays, may leave a message on the answering machine and calls will be returned during the next work day.

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