

Diggin' in the Dirt: Holiday Botany

By Chip Bubl
Oregon State University
Extension Service - Columbia County

Master Gardener™ class signups being taken for 2019 class in St. Helens

The OSU Extension office in Columbia County will be offering the Master Gardener™ training again this spring. This year, we are trying a new schedule that allows people that work to attend. The classes will be held on Mondays from 6:00 - 9:00 pm and on Saturday from 9:00 am - 12:00 pm for about 10 weeks starting on February 4, 2019 at the Extension office in St. Helens. Cost of the program is \$100 which includes a large resource book. Some scholarships are available. Master Gardeners are responsible for providing volunteer gardening education to the community as partial payback for the training. If interested in the program, call the Extension office at (503) 397-3462 for an information packet. Online registration is now available at <https://tinyurl.com/ColumbiaMG2019>. We can also send you an application and you can come into our office to sign up.

Holiday Botany

In pre-Christian Europe, English holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) was a powerful winter symbol. The year was believed to be governed by the Holly King from the summer solstice to the winter solstice as the days got progressively shorter and by the Oak King who battled for supremacy as the days started lengthening. The

winter solstice ritual "battle" was close to the date we now celebrate Christmas. Since holly retains its deep green leaves and bright red berries, it was widely used as adornments in those early winter rituals. With the conversion of much of Northern Europe to Christianity by the late first millennia AD, earlier non-Christian religious symbols were incorporated into the new religion. There was considerable use of young holly tips for cattle fodder in the dark winter medieval days. There was also some use of holly as medicine. Today, English holly is widely cultivated and used in Christmas wreaths and as a stand-alone landscape plant. Holly has, however, become a significant invasive species in Columbia County forests and is quite difficult to kill. The seeds are spread by birds eating the berries.

Mistletoe (*Phoradendron villosum*) also has a strong pre-Christian European history. It is an evergreen, mildly parasitic plant found mainly on oak trees. Oak trees were profoundly important to early Europeans. It provided food for them and their livestock (acorns), fuel for their hearths, and wood for construction and tools. Mistletoe was venerated because of its association with oaks. But it also had a long medicinal history going back to Roman times. Mistletoe berries were thought to be a cure-all with special abilities to reverse barrenness in livestock and humans. The ritual of kissing under a sprig of mistletoe came out of those beliefs. Apparently, early Christian proselytizers were less sure about that ritual and sought to ban it. That didn't work. Mistletoe is no longer common in Columbia County. Most of the pre-European white oak forests are gone. It can be found on some oaks on Sauvie Island, but it is much more common on oaks in the mid-Willamette Valley where I grew up. When we went to harvest a live non-plantation Christmas tree on a family friend's farm in the 1950s, we always sought out some mistletoe. The farmer shot it off the tree. At home, it was shared and hung over a few doorways in the neighborhood, a rather fun tradition.

Poinsettias are the newcomer to holiday botany traditions. This plant is native to southern Mexico and northern Central America where they were both cultivated and wild harvested. They were used in Aztec rituals for their colorful flower foliage (bracts, actually).

Since the poinsettia is a short-day plant (it needs a certain number of hours of darkness to start flowering), it bloomed as the days got shorter. The Mayan and Aztec celebrations of the shortest days of the year coincided, as noted above, with Christmas. When the Spanish conquered Mexico, they burned most of Aztec and Mayan religious texts. But conversion by force is rarely successful. So they began to allow ancient ritual symbols like the poinsettia to be incorporated into Christian rituals. In the early 1800s, the first American Ambassador to Mexico, Joel Poinsett, took an interest in this plant as a greenhouse and outdoor ornamental for his native South Carolina. He brought plants back and began to propagate them. It wasn't until the early 1900s that several greenhouse nurserymen began the cultivation, breeding, propagation, and ultimately winter holiday sales in earnest. There was lots of competition to develop plants of the right size and with an attractive flower. Multiple grafts were often used. The industry was very secretive. There was a major push in the 1950s to get the country to accept the poinsettia as an integral part of holiday décor. Television ad placements were critical to that change in the public's perception. One grower family had much of the market until the early 1990s when the propagation techniques were replicated by a university scientist and made public. Many nurseries entered the trade. Today, breeding has produced a number of different varieties of the original poinsettia. There is a perception that the plant is poisonous. It is, to a small degree, dermally toxic to sensitive people. But its toxicity is quite low in comparison with other plants in the Euphorbia family of which it is a member.

What to do for December gardens

- Apply lime
- Take a soil test if you haven't had one recently (call us at the Extension office for details)
- Stay off your lawn while it is so soggy. Wet soils compact with weight on them and the pore spaces that allow drainage and air around the roots get squished.
- Cover your compost pile to speed up the composting process
- Cover edible herbaceous perennials like rhubarb and asparagus with compost or "straw" manure. Repeat for ornamental perennials like peonies and daylilies

- Clean and refill bird feeders regularly. High moisture days tends to sprout or mold seed towards the bottoms of the feeders. Provide hummingbirds with sugar water (one part sugar to four parts water) throughout the winter. Clean those feeders regularly as well.
- Start looking at seed catalogs and planning your vegetable gardens for next year
- Water plants under eaves if you haven't recently
- The two most common pantry pests, the drug store beetle and the Indian meal moth are more evident this time of year, probably because we are home more. Call the Extension office for information on how to manage them.
- Protect container plants from severe cold by grouping them together and putting a sheet or some row cover over them on the coldest days. Some could be moved into a cold garage that stays above freezing for the periods of time when temperatures drop below 32 degrees.

Take excess produce to the food bank, senior centers, or community meals programs. Cash donations to buy food are also greatly appreciated.

The Extension Service offers its programs and materials equally to all people.

Free newsletter

The Oregon State University Extension office in Columbia County publishes a monthly newsletter on gardening and farming topics (called Country Living) written/edited by yours truly. All you need to do is ask for it and it will be mailed to you. Call (503) 397-3462 to be put on the list. Alternatively, you can sign up for email notification of when to find the latest edition on the web at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/columbia/>.

Contact information for the Extension office

Oregon State University
Extension Service - Columbia County
505 N. Columbia River Highway
(across from the Legacy clinic)
St. Helens, OR 97051
(503) 397-3462
Email: chip.bubl@oregonstate.edu

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