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# GREEN PAGES

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A newsletter for people interested in horticulture and natural resources in Western Wisconsin  
November 2009

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## About this newsletter

This monthly newsletter's purpose is to disseminate research based information on topics of horticultural and natural resources in Western WI. In addition, it's purpose is to connect the public with local events of similar topics.

*Your county extension office*



**UW**  
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Cooperative Extension  
Eau Claire County

## Christmas Cactus Care

Native to South America's tropical rainforests, Christmas, Thanksgiving and Easter cacti have different needs from other, desert cacti. Christmas cactus also looks different from other cacti.

In its native habitat, Christmas cacti grow in rocks and crevices in tree trunks and branches. Leaves and other organic materials accumulate in these spaces over time. Christmas cacti grow in this accumulation of decomposing organic material, where they thrive in the rain forest's filtered light and high humidity.

Easy to grow, Christmas cactus often thrives more on neglect than tender loving care. They can live a long time, and even become family heirlooms.

Grow your Christmas cactus in a well-drained soil mix rich in organic matter. For a good mix, combine one part potting soil, two parts peat moss or compost and one part sharp sand, perlite or vermiculite. This mix holds moisture well yet drains excess moisture, two things the Christmas cactus need.

Keep the soil evenly moist from spring through summer, but allow it to go dry before watering from fall through spring.

Fertilize your cactus when new growth starts from the branch tips in late winter or early spring, and monthly through summer. Use a one-quarter strength solution of soluble plant fertilizer or an

organic fertilizer. A strong fertilizer solution can damage your Christmas cactus's fine, scant root system.

Give your Christmas cactus high light during winter, but indirect or filtered light during summer. Too much direct light can hurt the plant.

Your cactus needs a rest in fall to encourage it to produce flower buds. In mid to late September, let the soil dry out thoroughly before you water. This is also the time to move your plant to a brighter location if you've had it in filtered light for the summer.

Most importantly, your Christmas cactus needs cooler conditions in fall in order to set flower buds. For more detail on re-flowering your cactus, listen to InfoSource message number 869.

Flower bud drop commonly plagues Christmas cactus for many reasons. Make sure you water properly, especially during blooming. Letting soil dry too much, or overwatering can both cause buds to drop.

Warm or cold drafts can also cause bud drop. And, even slight environment changes can prompt the buds to fall. Do not move your Christmas cactus to



*(Continued on page 5)*

## Fiber Optic Grass

Susan Mahr, University of WI-Madison

Fiber optic grass is a fun plant (even though it isn't really a grass), that most people acquire because of its unusual appearance. *Isolepis cernua* (= *Scirpus cernuus*), in the sedge family (Cyperaceae), is a variable ever-green species with a mop-like tuft of fine green stems. It is found in wet places, growing as a marginal water plant or in sandy or peaty areas near the sea in its native range of western and southern Europe, the British Isles, North Africa, the west coast of North America (California to British Columbia and Alaska), and Australia and New Zealand.

This bright green, grass-like plant has small flower spikes at the stem tips reminiscent of those fiber optic lamps, hence the common name (it doesn't change colors like the electric version, though). It is sometimes marketed as "Livewire", "Live Wire" or "Fairy Lights". These easy-to-grow plants grow upright as a young plant and then gracefully droop as they mature. The 10-12" clumps of fine, glossy, hair-like leaves can reach a spread of 20" at maturity. The foliage may yellow as temperatures drop in fall or turn brown if the plant doesn't receive enough moisture. Tiny flowers are produced on the tip of each leaf. The coneshaped terminal inflorescences begin a white or silver color, but eventually turn tan or brown. The plants will bloom year-round.

*I. cernua* is a tender perennial (zones 8-11) generally grown as an annual in cold climates, but it can be kept as a houseplant in a sunny window or greenhouse over the winter. Bring it indoors before freezing temperatures occur and set the pot in a shallow tray of water. Fiber optic grass grows best in full sun with plenty of moisture. Do not allow it to dry out or

the foliage will turn brown. It can be planted in containers, in the ground, or kept in a water garden or pond. It will tolerate some shade, but will become



lankier under those conditions. Grow these plants as specimens to show their unique character, or plant as accents among other plants grown for foliage or flowers. Combine it with other moisture-loving annuals in boxes or pots, or grow it in its own container in a grouping of potted plants.

Try it as an underplanting with dark-leaved elephant ears (*Colocasia esculenta* 'Black Magic' or other cultivars).

Place it on the edge of borders or beds, or between rocks at water's edge drooping over or into the water. For a novelty conversation piece, use it to top a "head" container! The fine texture of this plant is a good contrast to plants with coarse leaves, and its mounded habit is a good foil for upright plants and spiky flowers.

If you plan to use this plant in a water garden, gradually increase the water level it sits in unless you purchased it from an aquatic plants display. This will allow the roots to become accustomed to being submerged. In a water garden it combines well with horsetails (*Equisetum*), dwarf papyrus, and cannas (but it best to keep each in separate pots). It can be planted on the water's edge or in the shallows of ponds, positioned so that the water level is no more than 2" above the soil. The leaves trailing in the water will provide shelter for frogs and fish.

*I. cernua* is easy to grow from seed (and will readily self seed under the right conditions - I still have seed-

(Continued on page 5)

# Bacterial Wetwood

Mary Grancis Heimann, O.S.F. and Brian Hudelson, UW-Madison Plant Pathology

**What is bacterial wetwood?** Bacterial wetwood, also known as “slime flux”, is a visually frightening-looking, but typically non-lethal, disorder of many types of deciduous trees. This disorder can reduce the aesthetic appeal of landscape trees, and more seriously, can substantially reduce the value of forest trees used for lumber. Bacterial wetwood most commonly affects elm and poplar, but can also be a serious problem on aspen, maple, and mulberry.

**What does bacterial wetwood look like?** Trees suffering from bacterial wetwood are characterized by having areas where liquid oozes from their trunks. This ooze may flow quite freely at certain times of the growing season, but then may stop flowing at others. The ooze leads to streaked, discolored, water-soaked areas on tree trunks. The ooze is often colonized by bacteria, as well as yeasts and other fungi. These organisms can give the ooze a slimy, sometimes brightly-colored (i.e., pink or orange) appearance as well as a highly disagreeable, rancid smell. Internally, bacterial wetwood can be associated with localized areas of wood decay.

**Where does bacterial wetwood come from?** Bacterial wetwood arises when localized wet areas develop in the heartwood or sapwood of tree trunks. These areas are colonized by a diverse assortment of bacteria (e.g., Enterobacterium, Klebsiella, Pseudomonas and many others) that can enter trees through root,

branch or trunk wounds. As these bacteria feed and grow, often under anaerobic conditions (i.e., conditions without oxygen), they can produce gases such as methane, carbon dioxide, or nitrogen gas. These gases build up pressure causing movement of interior liquids to the exterior of the trunk where they escape through wounds and cracks.



*Bacterial wetwood leads to discolored, rancid-smelling areas on tree trunks.*

**How do I save a tree with bacterial wetwood?** Bacterial wetwood is a chronic disorder, and affected trees cannot be cured. To limit the unsightly staining of bark caused by bacterial wetwood, try to identify where the ooze is exiting from the trunk and insert a long, plastic tube at this location to direct the ooze away from the trunk and to the ground at the base of the tree.

There has been some speculation that the build-up of gases due to bacterial wetwood might cause a tree to explode. However, there have been no reliable reports of this ever happening.

**How do I avoid problems with bacterial wetwood in the future?** There is little you can do to prevent problems with bacterial wetwood. Many affected trees were likely invaded by wetwood-associated bacteria in the seedling stage. Developing a healthy tolerance for bacterial wetwood, when it occurs, is perhaps the best method for coping with this disorder.

## Protecting Trees & Shrubs for Winter

by Ann Weid, Waukesha County UW Extension

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Winter is on its way. Before we know it, we will be protecting ourselves from the season's cold temperatures and wicked winds. As we prepare for winter, remember some of your shrubs and trees may benefit from some winter protection too.

**Mulch.** Many of our trees and shrubs can dry out over winter. In some cases, drying out causes considerable damage to the plants. Mulches conserve moisture. They also have many other wonderful qualities.

For recently planted trees and shrubs mulch gives new roots more time to develop. Mulch also helps minimize the effect of temperature fluctuations that can heave plant crowns out of the ground as it freezes and thaws during late winter and early spring. Mulch also prolongs plant dormancy in the spring and reduces the chance of late spring frost injury to new leaves and flowers.

Wood chips, shredded bark, and pine needles all make good mulches. The mulch should be coarse enough not to blow away. Apply about two to four inches of mulch around the base of the shrub. Do not mound mulch around the trunk of the tree.

**Water.** Trees and shrubs are most susceptible to drought or over watering injuries while they settle into your yard. They depend on proper watering for their first three years in your landscape. In the first two years, a tree replaces its original root system it lost in the nursery. Excess water loss can lead to "winter burn" or death. If November is a dry month, water all trees and shrubs that have been in your landscape less than three years one last time before the ground freezes (usually around Thanksgiving).

All needle and broadleaf evergreens need to be watered one last time before the ground freezes since they will continue to lose water from their foliage all winter. This is important especially for all newly-planted evergreens since they often have root systems too small to absorb enough water during the winter.

**Screen.** To protect new plantings and sensitive plants from winter damage, you may want to consider install-

ing a screen. A screen can protect a plant from wind, sun, and salt. Use a screen of burlap for a taller shrub or encircle a smaller shrub with wire or hardware and fill with straw or evergreen boughs.

**Wrap.** If you experienced problems last year with the heavy snow damaging your arborvitae, yews, and junipers, you may want to wrap these plants now. This will prevent damage from snow building up and causing the plant to split and bend. Loosely tie the multiple stems together with strips of cotton cloth or old nylon stockings.

You may want to wrap the trunks of newly planted, thin-barked trees with tree-wrap paper to prevent sun scalding of the bark. Closely spaced trees in nurseries help shade each other, but when they are transplanted to open areas, such as your yard, they may receive full exposure to winter sunlight. If you do not protect them, sun scalding can occur. This can damage or kill tissue under the bark. Paper tree wrap can prevent the rapid temperature changes in the bark that cause frost cracking and sunscald.

All paper wrap should be removed in the spring. Wrap can cause damage to the tree if left on the tree too long. Wrap does not provide protection from the rodents.

**Rodent Protection.** You may also need to protect your trees and shrubs plants from rodents. If you've had rodent damage in previous years, you may want to place wire, hardware cloth, or a plastic spiral around the trunks of small trees to protect them. It should be at least one to two feet higher up the trunk than the expected snow level and be sure to submerge the material two to three inches into the ground. Also, clean up old, diseased or insect-infected foliage or fruit around your yard. Clean away weeds, tall grass, and leaves from the trunk area to reduce nesting sites for these pests, too.

## Fiber Optic Grass (continued from page 2)

lings coning up in the cracks between flagstones two years after growing a plant in a container set on the flagstone patio), but is faster and easier to propagate vegetatively. Divide when it outgrows its container. Just chop it into pieces and replant. (It is best to do this only in spring if the plants are to be overwintered outdoors.) If it gets too long and lanky, give it a haircut and it will grow right back (I found this out after a raccoon or other animal raided the water garden and sheared my plant to the ground; it regrew to look just fine within a few weeks). Now I cut the plants back

to a few inches after dividing them in the spring and they quickly put out new growth. Avoid shearing in winter when the plant is not growing, however. This plant has few pest problems and is resistant to deer. Mealybugs may infest it indoors if not submerged in water.

– Susan Mahr, University of Wisconsin - Madison

## Christmas Cactus (continued from page 1)

another site if it has buds or open flowers. Want to grow more Christmas cacti? Try rooting some from cuttings. Make the cuttings at least two stem segments long and let them dry for several days before you plant them. The drying lets the cut end form a callus which prevents rotting. This is true for all succulents.

Place Christmas cactus cuttings in sharp sand, vermiculite or a mix of seventy percent perlite and

thirty percent peat moss. Once rooted, plant in the recommended soil mix.

By Sharon Morrisey UW Extension



## Deadheading to Prolong Bloom

Deadheading to Prolong Bloom Promote new flowers and make your garden look better by deadheading — the process of removing spent flower blossoms. You can snip, prune, pinch, cut or use any means you want to remove the old, dead blooms. It is best to remove spent blooms shortly after the flower has died.

Plants have flowers to make seeds. Once seeds have been produced, the plant has satisfied it's need to reproduce and flower production stops. By deadheading, you trick the plant into trying to make seed by making more flowers.

Not all plants will produce more flowers after

deadheading. Many perennial plants and flowering shrubs are pre-programmed to bloom only once. However, deadheading will improve the appearance, and often the vigor, of these plants.

Provided by UW-Extension Master Gardeners  
[www.hort.wisc.edu/mastergardener/](http://www.hort.wisc.edu/mastergardener/)



## November Gardening Tips

### Houseplants, Perennials, and Annuals

- Finish planting spring bulbs. Tulips can be planted all the way up until the ground freezes.
- After the ground freezes, mulch perennial beds with straw, marsh hay or pine bows.
- Reduce watering and stop fertilizing houseplants as we enter into the months where light levels are reduced. November and December are known for shortened days as well as cloudy and over-caste.
- Watch for whiteflies, aphids, mites, scale and other insects that may have moved indoors on your plants.
- Clean window boxes and outdoor planters. Add evergreen branches and berries for winter interest
- Make a bouquet from berries and interesting woody branches for indoor display.




- Cut back fall blooming hydrangeas, leaving one or two pairs of buds on each flower stem.
- Wrap the trunks of young trees with tree wrap to protect from sunscald. A 4-foot high cylinder of hardware cloth around the trunk of young trees will reduce the risk of rabbit and vole damage.
- Start applying repellants to plants that are favored by deer and rabbits. Start before feeding begins, encouraging them to go elsewhere.



### Fruits

- Cut back to the ground fall bearing raspberries.
- Prune grape vines and bury the remaining vines in a shallow trench.
- Mulch strawberries and raspberries after the ground freezes.
- Wrap trunks of young fruit trees.

### Vegetables and Herbs

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- Rototill fallen leaves right into your garden to condition and improve soil structure.
  - Mulch asparagus beds with chopped leaves or straw to protect crowns from frost.
  - Organize, clean and put away garden tools for winter.
  - Drain gasoline from tiller, weed whackers and any other gasoline powered equipment.
  - Keep harvesting hardy vegetables as long as you can. Brussels sprouts, kale and bok choy are a few of the hardy veggies you might want to put on your list for next years garden.

### Lawns, Trees, and Shrubs

- Evergreens and young trees will benefit from one last deep watering before the ground freezes.

### Recycling Leaves

This year, recycle your leaves at home rather than burning, leaving them for street-side pickup or sending them to a municipal compost site. There are a variety of ways to use your own leaves in your yard. Oak leaves do not make soils too acidic so they can be used, too.

- Let leaves lie as they fall on gardens and wooded areas, but remove them from lawns.
- Use shredded or chopped leaves as mulch around trees, shrubs and perennials. A blanket of leaves is also good insulation during winter months.
- Turn your leaves into “black gold” by composting them yourself, then use the finished compost to improve your garden soil. Consult extension publications or other sources for information on composting to get started with this easy process.

*Provided by UW-Extension Master Gardeners  
www.hort.wisc.edu/mastergardener/*

# Events

## Master Gardener Volunteer Training Offered

The Eau Claire County University Cooperative Extension will offer Master Gardener Volunteer Training this spring. Classes will be held on Tuesday evenings at UW-Eau Claire from 5:45 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. beginning on February 9, 2009 and continuing until April 27, 2009.

This is the most comprehensive gardening course offered by UW-Cooperative Extension. Students will learn recommended practices for caring for trees and shrubs, lawns, annual and perennial flowers, vegetables and fruits. Landscape design, garden preparation, plant propagation, and pest management will also be taught. Trainings are broadcast live from UW-Madison to UW-Eau Claire via fiber-optics.

The focus of this general training is to educate individuals with the basics of gardening in order to prepare them to be volunteers. At the end of the training, students are required to volunteer 24 hours in one year to assist with gardening or environmental education projects that benefit the local community. Many volunteer options are available from office help to garden upkeep at the Eau Claire Expo Center.

The fee for this training is \$120. Seating is limited and the registration deadline is January 15, 2010. Participants must be at least 18 years old and pass a background check. For more information and a registration brochure, please contact:

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Eau Claire County UW-Extension  
227 1st Street West  
Altoona, WI 54720  
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### Make Your Own Snowshoes

Snowshoeing is a popular winter activity. Make your own snowshoes in this two-day workshop. Choose from three styles of snowshoes: Green mountain bear paw (10" x 36"), Alaskan trail shoe (10" x 56") or the great all-purpose Ojibwa style (11" x 54"). Class fee includes snowshoe kit, bindings and instruction. Be sure to state which style snowshoe you would like to make when registering for the class. All shoes are laced with tubular nylon, which is comfortable to work with, and have great strength when varnished. Bring to class: PATIENCE, bag lunch, tape measure, pencil, scissors and matches or lighter.

Date: Saturday December 05, 2009  
Time: 09:30 AM to 03:30 PM  
Location: Wise Nature Center  
Fee: Friends \$155 Nonmembers \$165



### Holiday Crafting for Kids

Bring the children to the Reserve for a morning of creative fun. Using a variety of materials including natural and /or recycled items, children will make simple ornaments and decorations for the upcoming holidays. Activities are suitable for school-age children. Preschoolers need an accompanying adult. (No charge for the assisting adult.)

Date: Saturday November 14, 2009  
Time: 09:30 AM to 11:30 AM  
Fee: \$6 Friends \$8 Nonmembers



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Unless otherwise noted, articles for this newsletter are submitted and/or written by Eau Claire County UW-Cooperative Extension Horticulture Educator Erin LaFaive. Unless otherwise noted, graphics are from clipart.

Eau Claire County UW Cooperative Extension

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