



Highlights in

Horticulture

Baker County

December 2013

Dear Extension Friends,

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December brings warm feelings and holiday cheer, but can also bring cold weather. Don't be caught off guard when the winter weather arrives. See page 3 for cold weather plant tips. As always, if you have plant questions or need gardening advice, we are here to assist you. From our family to yours, have a wonderful holiday season!

Best Regards,

Alicia

Alicia R. Lamborn
Horticulture Extension Agent
Baker County Extension Service



Poinsettia Show & Sale



The UF Environmental Horticulture Club's 18th Annual Poinsettia Fundraiser will be held at Fifield Hall on Hull Road in Gainesville:

Thursday, Dec. 5th 8am - 5:30pm
Friday, Dec. 6th 8am - 3pm



Over 30 varieties will be offered for sale including traditional reds and novelties such as Shimmer Surprise (pictured above right), Orange Spice, Winter Rose and Ice Punch (pictured above left). 6 ½" pots are the most popular and include colorful decorative pot covers. Larger showpieces in 8" and 10" pots will also be available along with centerpiece bowls.

For more information and directions, visit:

<http://gatorpoinsettia.com>

Holiday Plants

Christmas Cactus

Written by Roberta Koniuchowsky,
Baker County Master Gardener Volunteer

Known as a popular gift during the holiday season, Christmas Cactus is a great gift choice for friends and family members who enjoy container gardening because it is a cactus with no thorns! A native of the Brazilian rainforest, this plant is naturally found growing off of tree trunks and branches, in a similar manner to orchids. The wide, flat, green segmented stems look like small paddles with blooms that hang from the tip of each branch. It blooms in a variety of different colors.

In north Florida, the Christmas Cactus will easily adapt to growing on a shady patio for most of the year, enjoying temperatures anywhere between the 70's to 80's in summer and 50's in winter. During winter months the plant will do best if brought indoors and kept away from either freezing temperatures or direct heat from fireplaces or heat vents.

In order for Christmas Cactus to bloom, it needs long periods of darkness (around 12 hours) and cool temperatures. Long night/short day treatment is important for this cactus if it is growing indoors, in order to stimulate the plant to form buds. If treatment starts in October, the plant will bloom in mid to late December. During the day it is best kept in a well-lit spot but out of direct sunlight. Water it just enough to keep it from drying out as overwatering can cause the roots to rot. Once the plant begins to bud, watering should be reduced somewhat. Drastic changes in amount of light, jumps in temperature and too much water can cause the buds to drop, so the plant needs to be treated somewhat gently.

Once the flowering period is ended, dead flowers should be removed along with the attached segment. This will cause the plant to branch during the coming growing period and then produce more blooms next winter!

Christmas Trees

Written by Mary Ann Ray,
Baker County Master Gardener Volunteer

Whether you call it a Christmas tree or holiday bush, the use of evergreen trees dates back centuries. However, Christmas trees have only been sold in the U.S. since about 1850.

An average of 35 million trees are produced each year and 95% are shipped or sold from tree farms. They are grown in every state of the U.S., taking 7 to 10 years to mature. In Florida, the main species of trees grown for this purpose are Red Cedars, Virginia Pines, Sand Pines, Spruce Pines, and Leyland Cypress.

When shopping for a tree, shake the tree to see if any green needles fall. Then break a few needles to check for fragrance. This will help you select a fresh tree that has been cut for only a short period of time. Just remember to also choose a tree that will fit in your stand.

If you aren't hand picking your tree directly from the field at the tree farm, then likely your tree has been cut for more than 1 hour, requiring a fresh cut to the base, made 1 to 3 inches from the original cut. Placing your tree immediately in the tree stand that holds 1 to 2 gallons of water will help it stay fresh through the holiday season. And don't forget to check your tree stand everyday and refill that water since a fresh tree may use more than a gallon a day.

Keeping your tree away from fireplaces, space heaters and heat vents will also help keep your tree fresh and avoid fire dangers.

After the holidays are over, recycle your tree if possible. Branches can be cut up and used as mulch in plant beds or added to a compost pile for further decomposition.



Protecting Plants from Winter Weather



 If a freeze is predicted, water plants 24-48 hours before a freeze (unless it rains). Moist soil absorbs more solar radiation during the day than dry soil and will radiate heat during the night, keeping your plants warmer. Keep in mind however, that prolonged periods of saturated soil can cause root rot problems.

 Using overhead irrigation for freeze protection is tricky since you have to start irrigating as soon as the temperature reaches 32 degrees and keep it on until thaw is complete. Not only can this be very extremely wasteful, but there is a danger of root rot and breakage due to ice buildup on limbs. This method of cold protection is used commercially where it can be carefully controlled and is best left to professional growers.

 Covering cold sensitive plants with blankets or plastic to trap heat inside can work well, but it is often done incorrectly. If you decide to use this method, make sure your cover is long enough to reach the ground. You may also want to place rocks, bricks, or heavier flower pots around the edges to keep the wind from blowing the cover open. This is the only way to truly trap heat inside. You will also need to use a stake (cut bamboo sticks work well) to keep your cover from touching your plant. Some contact may be unavoidable, but too much can lead to a transfer of heat resulting in burnt, damaged foliage.

 Citrus fruit is damaged when temperatures stay at 28 degrees or less for 4 hours, so be sure to harvest ripe fruit (fruit won't ripen once picked) prior to a hard freeze. You will want to protect the graft union during a hard freeze to prevent damage, especially if you have young citrus. To do this, you can purchase pipe insulation and/or a special tree wrap product. Both are inexpensive and last for years. Just remember to remove your insulating wrap as soon as spring arrives and the threat of freezing temperatures is gone.

 Use your fallen oak leaves and pine straw to your advantage! These items are valuable for several reasons. They can be used as mulch to repel weeds and hold in moisture, but they can also be used to protect your plants during hard freezes. Many of our perennials die back to the ground in winter, only to grow back from the roots and crown the next spring. Piling leaves and straw on top of these crowns will help hold the heat in and protect the roots from damage during those hard freezes.

 Containerized plants can be pushed together and covered with an old sheet to conserve heat, or moved under a sheltering tree or eave where radiant heat will be trapped after dark.

 Keep in mind that many of our landscape plants don't need protecting from winter weather, even when the temperatures drop into the teens. In fact, cold damage can in some cases be worse when the covering is done improperly than if the plant hadn't been covered at all. If you're debating on the need to cover or protect a plant in your yard, the Extension Office can help you make an informed decision as to what will be best for the plant.

 If all of this covering and moving of plants sounds like a lot of work to you, remember that there are plenty of cold-hardy plants—trees, shrubs, vines, groundcovers, and perennials—that are suited for surviving our cold winters without any help from us. When out shopping for new plants, just remember to select plants that are hardy in zone 8 (Baker County is zone 8B) and if you're not sure about a plant's hardiness zone, give us a call at the Extension Office. For lists of landscape plants suited for Baker County, see the *Florida-Friendly Landscaping: Plants for Baker County* series on our website: <http://baker.ifas.ufl.edu/Horticulture/fact%20sheets.html>

Growing Blueberries

The best time to plant blueberries is from mid-December to mid-February.



Blueberries are a great choice for edible landscapes, but a little planning and preparation is required for success. Blueberries require highly acidic (pH 4.0 to 5.5), well-drained soils high in organic matter, and a place in full sun (4-5 hours of full sun per day) with plenty of room to grow (away from tree roots, except pines, and at least 20 feet away from building foundations). A soil test from the Extension Office can determine your current soil pH and adding sphagnum peat moss before planting will help lower the pH for your blueberries. Blueberries should be planted in winter, set a few inches above soil level and mulched with pine bark to improve soil condition and acidity.

In North Florida, select Rabbiteye varieties which are better suited for our climate than the Southern Highbush varieties grown in Central and South Florida. Rabbiteyes require cross-pollination and growing different varieties will result in higher yields of fruit. Planting a mix of early-season varieties and mid- to late-season varieties will also extend the harvest season from May to July. Early-season cultivars include 'Austin', 'Beckyblue', 'Bonita', and 'Climax', and for best pollination, plant 'Climax' with any of the others. Mid- to late-season cultivars include 'Brightwell', 'Powderblue', 'Tifblue', and 'Woodard', all of which are generally more productive because they are far less susceptible to late winter freezes.

Blueberries should be pruned at the time of planting. Select the tallest, strongest cane and leave it unpruned. Remove the weak, "twiggy" growth at the base of the plant. If the plant has a large top compared with the root system, remove about one-third of the top by selectively pruning the least vigorous growth and cutting back the tops of vigorous canes by several inches.

While extremely difficult for some people, it is important to remove the flowers before fruit set occurs during the first growing season. This will prevent fruiting during the first year, but will promote strong vegetative growth and good plant establishment which will ultimately be better for your plant in the long run.

For more information on blueberries, their care, plus pests and diseases, visit:

<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/MG/MG35900.pdf>

Did You Know?

Blueberries were first cultivated in Florida in 1886 when native blueberries, called wild rabbiteyes, were dug from areas of the St. Mary's River and Suwannee River and planted in rows. But it wasn't until 1951 that Ralph Sharpe with the University of Florida crossed New Jersey highbush varieties with a Florida scrub blueberry, creating a new variety. Twenty-five years later, his blueberry breeding program paid off, and the University of Florida released its first cultivar named 'Sharpblue' in Ralph's honor.



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Extension programs are open to all people regardless of race, color, age, sex, handicap, or national origin. In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, any person needing a special accommodation to participate in any activity, should contact the Baker County Cooperative Extension Service at 1025 West Macclenny Avenue, Macclenny, FL 32063 or telephone (904) 259-3520 no later than ten (10) days prior to the event. Hearing impaired persons can access the foregoing telephone by contacting the Florida Relay Service at 1-800-955-8770 (voice) or 1-800-955-8771 (TDD).