



Coming Events

Back by popular demand in 2018



Mark your calendars for another great season of learning, beginning with the perennial favorite—Grapevine Pruning on February 8th with Benjamin Vineyard's Andy Zeman. Other topics we'll explore this year include native bees, spring birds, vermicomposting, propagation, carnivorous plants, food preservation and many others. In fact, 19 great classes are in the works. The full schedule is nearly complete, so stay tuned!

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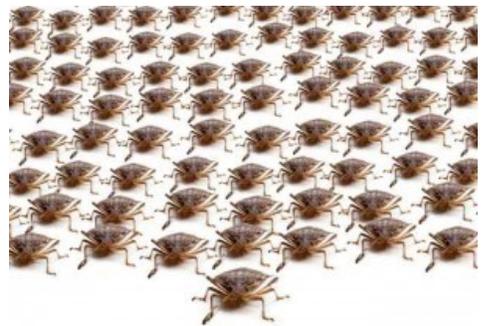
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Guess Who's Coming To Dinner?



Thanksgiving is gone and Christmas is on the way. Along with the cooler weather come some unwanted visitors to your house, but I am not talking about your less-than-favorite family members. I am referring to the insects that seem to find their way inside your home every year. The main culprits are lady beetles, boxelder bugs and stink bugs and, while they do not cause much concern outside, most folks do not seem to care for them on the bedroom wall.

Lady beetles or ladybugs are native insects that are beneficial in the garden. There is also a multicolored Asian lady beetle, which is an introduced species from Asia. Both species feed on aphids, mealybugs, spider mites, and other plant pests. An adult lady beetle may consume up to 300 aphids per day, which can be a big help in the garden.

Boxelder bugs feed primarily on the seeds of the boxelder tree, but may be found on several other species of plants. The population increases rapidly in late summer and they like to gather in large numbers. This tendency alarms most people. They think this large number of boxelder bugs will eat the entire landscape, but actually, the bugs do little plant injury and do not require any control.

Oh, Those Uninvited Guests!

Brown marmorated stink bugs are a pest of many landscape plants including butterfly bush, hibiscus and zinnia. They also can cause damage to apple and peach trees. Perhaps the biggest problem with these bugs though is their tendency to seek shelter in homes in cold weather.

As the weather gets cooler, the lady beetles, boxelder bugs and stink bugs start looking for a place to overwinter and sometimes find their way inside our homes. They can squeeze through very small cracks around windows, doors, and attic vents. They will not damage anything inside your home, but can be a nuisance. Try to seal any visible cracks that may let the insects as well as cold air inside. The insects that do get inside can be collected with the vacuum, but be sure to change the bag frequently to avoid the dead bug smell. Some people will use a shop vac to avoid getting the insect odor in the household vacuum cleaner.

If you search the internet, you may find a recommendation to spray an insecticide outside the house around windows and doors to keep the bugs out, but that is not a recommendation I would make. It would be impossible to spray every crack around the house and you may get more insecticide on you than on the house.



Another insect you may find in your home this time of year is the *Cinara* aphid. They may be found on live Christmas trees primarily Fraser fir. *Cinara* aphids survive temperatures well below freezing, thriving in cold weather when few predators are present. Consequently, live aphids are sometimes found on trees at harvest time. With warmer temperatures indoors, these aphids become active and start to reproduce by having live young. As the tree dries out, the aphids crawl from the tree to decorations, gifts and furnishings. Due to their large size, consumers often mistake them for ticks. Though *Cinara* aphids do not bite, sting, carry diseases, or feed on any other type of plant besides firs, they do leave a purple stain on fabrics when squashed, making them a costly mess.

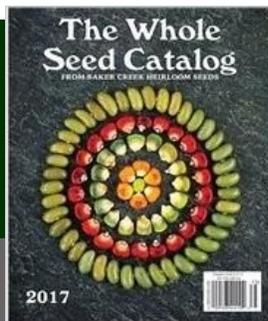
Trees that are infested with *Cinara* aphids can be treated with a household aerosol spray insecticide or insecticidal soap. Be sure to disconnect any lights or ornaments that use electricity before treating. Vacuum up any aphids that are on furnishings with a vacuum cleaner that does not have a beater bar. Do not squash or smear aphids, as they will leave a purple stain. If after treatment aphids reappear, remove the tree from the home.

If you have any questions about these insects or any other gardening questions, please give me or Chris a call.

~Mark

NC STATE

Extension Master Gardener



December Garden Tips

Go ahead and take cuttings for holiday decorations now. Light pruning of evergreens such as holly and boxwood won't harm them. Those long, trailing grapevines make great wreaths; just be sure to shape your wreath shortly after cutting the vine, before they become dry and hard to manage.

Keepest bird feeders clean and filled with seed and suet. Use a hot pot or kettle to melt any ice that forms in bird-baths and change the water at least once a week.

Overwatering is the number one cause of houseplant death in December. Be sure the soil is dry before you water, allow for drainage and save the fertilizer for spring. This goes for that favorite holiday houseplant - the poinsettia - as well. If you observe the watering rules and keep poinsettias in bright, indirect light but away from cold drafts and excessive heat, they will hold on to their cheery, colorful bracts all season.

Fertilize pansies and other hardy annuals and remove spent flowers. Apply a layer of mulch to prevent frost heaving.

Enclose a thoughtful gift in holiday cards. A small envelope of seeds collected from your garden will be appreciated by your gardening friends. Label the envelope with the collection date, the name of the flower and planting instructions.

Take inventory of your leftover and saved seeds. If the seed has been stored under cool, dry conditions, you can expect a good stand of healthy seedlings as follows: Seeds one year old or less: onions, parsley, parsnips and salsify. 2 years: corn, okra and peppers. 3 years: beans, southern peas and peas. 4 years: beets, fennel, mustard, pumpkins, rutabagas, squash, Swiss chard, tomatoes, turnips and watermelons. 5 years: Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, collards, eggplant, muskmelons, radishes and spinach.



Going with a living tree this year? While this is a great time of year to plant a new tree outside, it's not a great idea to store a living evergreen tree indoors. Hot (more than 60 degrees), dry indoor conditions are just bad for a tree's health. Keep your tree's indoor time at a minimum, turn down the thermostat and make sure the rootball stays moist, but not sopping wet. Plant outside ASAP.

Plant asparagus crowns between now and March 15th. For a faster harvest, buy 2-year-old crowns. Choose a rust-resistant male variety to ensure the plant's energy goes into making new stalks and not seeds.

In between holiday parties, take a few minutes to evaluate your garden's performance this year. Decide what worked and what didn't and take a few notes. Do a little garden research here:

<https://goo.gl/S3YxVP>

When those catalogs start rolling in, you'll be ready!



Christmas Fern

Polystichum acrostichoides



Whether you see Santa on his sleigh or the outline of a Christmas stocking in this fern's pinnae, *Polystichum acrostichoides* should have a place in your shade garden. Tough as nails once established, Christmas fern makes a perfect evergreen woodland groundcover, thriving even in dry shade once established and, like many ferns, this plant is not a favorite of deer. Christmas fern does require a well-drained soil, particularly in winter, as constant cold wet feet may cause crown rot.

Christmas fern is rhizomatous, but doesn't spread. Instead, clumps increase in size over time—growing 1-2 feet tall by 1-2 feet wide. Plant them in spaces between roots of shade trees and enjoy a touch of green throughout the holiday season. Perhaps the name comes from the fact that its fronds are still green and can be cut for holiday decorations? Regardless of how *Polystichum acrostichoides* came upon its common moniker, this east coast native will brighten up many a dreary winter day in the shade garden.

Read more here: <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/all/polystichum-acrostichoides/>