



Alamance Gardener

Alamance County Cooperative Extension Horticulture Department

Coming Events



We are working on scheduling classes to begin in February 2022. We look forward to hosting more demonstrations at Buster Sykes Orchard throughout the season and returning to in-person Think Green Thursdays in the Ag Building auditorium. What would you like to learn next year?—Just e-mail or call.

Happy Holidays!!

~Bill and Chris

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The Festive Fir

The North Carolina Christmas tree industry is ranked second in the nation, and over 94 percent of the trees grown are Fraser firs. Thirty-eight thousand acres are devoted to growing more than 58,000,000 Fraser firs. But why is Fraser fir the favorite? Is it the wonderful fragrance? The soft needles and strong branches? Odds are, it's because Fraser fir has the unique ability to retain its needles after it's been cut that many consider it to be world's best Christmas tree.



It's Not Easy Being Green

The Fraser fir, named after Scottish botanist John Fraser, has the ability to retain its needles when it's cut. This is because the Frasers have adapted to living in fog and wind by shutting their stomates to reduce moisture loss. Stomates are the openings in the undersides of needles that allow for exchange of gases like oxygen and carbon dioxide between the plant and the atmosphere. Because they shut their stomates when they're cut, Fraser firs are slow to dry out. This means they maintain their needles longer than most Christmas trees.



The Fraser fir has many great qualities as a Christmas tree, but you still need to look out for post-harvest pests when bringing them into your home. Remember, the trees are grown out in a natural setting, close to woods and weeds, so your chances of having insects on your tree is fairly high. When bringing a tree into your home, part of your routine should be to shake the tree before setting it up. This takes off the dead needles, leaves, pollen and other debris. If possible, consider washing the tree with water from a garden hose. Let it dry and start looking for any post-harvest pests. Various insects love to spend their overwintering stage in a well-protected place like the branches of your Christmas tree. When you bring the tree into your warm home, the bugs think it is spring and become active again. Some of the common pests you might find are the Cinara aphids, spider mites, and praying mantid egg cases. These insects become a nuisance more than anything. You won't want to mash the aphids because they might leave a purple or red stain on the floor or carpet. Use a vacuum with an attachment without the beater bar to clean them up. If you have large numbers of aphids and are thinking at all about using a pesticide, use the least toxic insecticide, like insecticidal soap, and spray outdoors. The Cinara aphid, one of the largest aphids in the world, is probably the main insect nuisance you might find on the Fraser fir. Details on the Cinara aphid on Christmas trees in North Carolina can be found at this site: <https://christmastrees.ces.ncsu.edu/christmastrees-cinara-aphids-on-christmas-trees-in-north-carolina/> You can identify these three insects at this site and read further information on them here: <https://christmastrees.ces.ncsu.edu/badbugs/>



A Fraser fir tree will last through the Christmas season if a few steps are taken to keep it fresh. After shaking it and checking for insects, make a fresh cut to the trunk. Cut off approximately one-half inch before placing the tree in a stand. Use a stand that will hold at least a gallon of water. Remember, a fresh tree will take up a gallon of water in the first 24 hours, so you need to check your water level in the stand frequently. After the first day in the stand, the tree will take up about a quart of water a day. Some common sense, like keeping the room cool and the tree away from drying sources like heating vents and fireplaces, will help you keep your North Carolina Fraser fir fresh through the Christmas season.

~ Bill

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 vines, before they become dry and hard to manage.

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.

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, pars-

ley, 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.

Remember to keep that previously-living Christmas tree in water. Immediately before set up, cut off at least 1/2" from the bottom of the trunk to open up new pores for water. A fresh tree will drink a lot of water. You will need to check the reservoir at least twice a day for the first week it stands in your home.

Read all about North Carolina's favorite Christmas tree in Bill's article this month.

Plant asparagus crowns between now and March 15. For a faster harvest, buy 2-year-old crowns. Choose a male of a rust-resistant 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://alamance.ces.ncsu.edu/categories/lawn-garden/>

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

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

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



Extension Master Gardeners are available to answer your gardening questions. Send your question to our e-mail address:

askanemgee@gmail.com

or call Cooperative Extension at 336-570-6740 and ask to speak to a Master Gardener.

Arbor Gate Plant of the Month



Christmas rose/Lenten rose

Helleborus spp.

At the very least, hellebores make a lovely evergreen, no-maintenance groundcover in the shady garden. But, what's really special are the lovely, seemingly weather-proof, flowers that start up in December and carry on until the first of April. The species are named for their season of bloom with *Helleborus niger* starting the show as the official "Christmas rose," although some *Helleborus x hybridus* bloom precociously as well, such as the one pictured above. Whichever the species, hellebores are the lights of the winter shade garden. Brush away the snow and the petals shine on in shades of ivory, green and rose. The glossy foliage stays green year-round and makes a pretty foil for hostas, ferns and other shade lovers. The shade under deciduous trees is ideal for hellebores and a well-drained soil is preferred. Good news—these winter "roses" are left alone by browsing deer and rabbits. Pollinators venturing out on a warm winter day will find hellebores a welcome food source in a landscape that is mostly flowers-free this time of year.

Read more about these winter roses here: <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/helleborus/>

