

The Hoe Truth

newsletter

HELPING YOU GROW!



The 2026 wheelbarrow catalog will be out in January!

December To Do's

Cover your rose bud unions as soon as the temperatures reach the upper teens and low twenties with 8 inches of mulch or soil. You can go ahead and do this anytime now.

Cut your Christmas Tree yourself; it will last the longest.

Keep fresh Christmas trees away from direct heat; they will dry out much faster.

Cut your lawn one last time if you haven't been. It will keep it looking nice this winter and reduce disease problems this winter and spring.

After Christmas, mulch your Christmas tree by running it through a chipper shredder. It will decompose and make great compost.

If you find some time between the holidays and shopping, December is a really good time to apply a layer of compost or manure to the garden. It protects the soil and provides nutrients for spring plantings.

Now is still a good time to make a compost pile!

December is a good time to apply fertilizer to lawns and landscapes.

Spray liquid lime sulfur or Chlorothalonil on peach trees to stop peach tree leaf curl next year.

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We'd BEE delighted if you'd join us for Bee Keepers meetings.

The first Monday of each month
at 6:30 PM.

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Useful Gardening Gift Ideas

Annette Meyer Heisdorffer, Ph.D., Extension Agent for Horticulture Education, Daviess County

The holidays are quickly approaching. What are some useful and fun gardening related gift ideas?

At the beginning of a task, a good pair of gardening gloves protects the hands. Even child-sized gloves are available so they can join in the fun. A pair of rubberized gloves work best for muddy jobs. In addition, two pairs of cotton gloves are handy so that one pair is always ready while the other pair is in the laundry.

Small hand tools like pruners and pruning saws are used to maintain shrubs and trees. The bypass type of pruning tool has a scissors cutting action that cleanly cuts the stem without crushing it. Pruning saws are designed to cut on the pull stroke. The blades are narrow to fit into tight spaces and make clean cuts.

Hand pruners cut stems up to three-quarters inch in diameter. In comparison, two-handed lopping shears cut branches up to 1 to 1.5 inches in diameter. Pruning saws are recommended for removing branches over 1 inch in diameter. Following these guidelines help to make the tools last longer and result in good, clean cuts, which are better for the plant.

Garden and spading forks are useful tools to turn over garden soil. Garden forks have four tines that are thick and rectangular or square. They are used to break up heavy soil that has not been disturbed. The spading fork has four flat tines that may have diamond or triangular backs. They are used to turn loose soil. Other uses for both tools include turning over compost and digging root crops.

Wheelbarrows and carts make gardening work easier to transport unwanted plant material, branches, mulch, bags of potting soil, and other items needed in the garden. Select one suited to the person's physical abilities and needs. One that is too big or heavy is not useful.

Supplies specifically for growing transplants to prepare for the growing season are useful gifts. These may include light stands, light bulbs, a heat mat, seed starting media, seedling containers, trays to catch water, a plastic dome to hold in moisture, and a timer for the lights to manage the appropriate day lengths needed by the seedlings.

After growing the transplants, they could be transplanted into a raised bed, which fits into small spaces or near the home. Kits are available to purchase, or consider making one. Four feet wide is the widest suggested width of the bed. The length of the bed depends on the available space, money, and time. A frame to hold the soil may be constructed of untreated wood, stone, or brick. Woods naturally resistant to decay and good to use include cedar, redwood, and black locust.

Tall, self-contained raised beds, already fabricated, are available, allowing a person to avoid bending over. Some come with a type of clear cover to trap heat to start an early crop or to protect the crop from a late-season frost. Provide gift certificates to purchase media to fill the bed. These beds are great for growing lettuce, spinach, herbs, or pepper plants, as examples.

A battery-operated timer for irrigation lines or soaker hoses saves water by keeping it from running all night when someone forgets to turn the water off. It is also handy when on vacation for a few days.

Making a compost bin would be another gift idea. Composting yard waste turns it into a good amendment to improve the condition of the soil. Compost bins can be very elaborate and made from untreated wood or very simple and made out of wire.

Even though a person must wait to plant them, a collection of vegetable, herb, and flower seeds helps a person look forward to the next growing season. Zinnias, sunflowers, cosmos, and marigolds are easy to grow and can be sown directly into the garden. Vegetables, such as spinach, lettuce, peas, beets, beans, and cucumbers, are also easy to grow directly sown into the garden. Tomato, pepper, eggplant, cabbage, broccoli, and cauliflower need to be seeded indoors and transplanted out in the garden at the appropriate time.

Don't forget about holiday plants such as poinsettia, Christmas cactus, and amaryllis, which brighten gloomy winter days. Even succulents and houseplants make great gifts. These plants are available locally. Before purchasing them, especially a poinsettia, check to see if the receiver has a plant allergy.

With care some holiday plants can brighten your home throughout the year

The colorful plants you enjoy during the holidays can linger beyond the season. If you care for them, they may become a welcome addition to your houseplant collection.

Traditional Christmas plants, such as poinsettia, holiday cactus, Christmas pepper, kalanchoe, Jerusalem cherry or cyclamen, require a bright, sunny location in the home. Regular thorough watering whenever the soil is dry is also very important. A sunny location and regular watering are enough for these plants throughout December, but they will need more specialized care if you plan for them flower again next year.

In January, decide whether to keep or discard your holiday plants. That decision is easy for Christmas pepper, Jerusalem cherry and chrysanthemum because they will not flower again in the home environment.

Holiday cactus, kalanchoe, or cyclamen can remain colorful through February with proper care. You may even keep them as houseplants after February if you provide the correct conditions. Holiday cacti are relatively easy to grow while kalanchoes and cyclamen are more difficult. While poinsettias may continue growing, they are difficult to bring into flower for the next holiday season and are best discarded.

The major difference you'll see in your holiday plant after a year will be its size. If you are successful, you may have plants with 40 to 50 flowers from the same plant that had only six to eight flowers the previous year. Holiday cacti with many flowers will be two to five times as large next year. Kalanchoe will also increase in size while cyclamen tend to stay compact.

For this season's poinsettias, choose plants with small, tightly clustered yellow buds in the center of the colorful leaf-like bracts commonly referred to as the flowers. Look for crisp, undamaged foliage. Water the plant when it feels dry and discard excess water in the saucer under the plant. Place the plant in a bright, naturally lit location with some direct sunlight. Keep the plant out of drafty areas and away from heat-producing appliances. After a few weeks, apply houseplant fertilizer according to the label directions. The colorful bracts may stay nice into January and February.

If you're wanting to make your poinsettia last, remove the faded flowers, bracts and dry leaves around St. Patrick's Day. Add more soil if the level in the pot seems low and fertilize again. Move the plant to the brightest window in your house; full sun is fine if you gradually allow the plant to adjust to higher light.

Around Mother's Day, your plant could be approaching three feet tall. Trim two to six inches off the branches to promote side branching. Repot in a larger container and move the plant outside to a location that receives full sun for at least six hours daily. Again, gradually introduce the plant to full sun and start in a shady area. Over a few weeks, gradually move the plant to higher light conditions. Fertilize the plant again in June. Trim your poinsettia again around July 4 and slightly increase the amount of fertilizer. Fertilize weekly August through September.

By Labor Day, the plant could be 3-5 feet tall. Prune it to a height of 18-24 inches. This will be your last chance to reduce the height. Around the first day of fall, Sept. 22, selectively remove the smallest new branches so that only 10-25 stems remain to produce flowers. This is also the time to move the plant indoors. The plant will need about 14 hours of uninterrupted darkness and 10 hours of bright sunlight daily. For example, place the plant in a light-free closet or under a box at 6 p.m. each evening and return it to the sunny window at 8 a.m. You can also place the plant in a little used south facing room, and do not turn the lights on from 6 p.m. to 8 a.m. daily. Any day you forget and accidentally turn the lights on will cause a delay in flowering.

Continue to water and apply fertilizer about every two weeks. Rotate the plant each day to give all sides even light. If the window does not get direct sun, you can supplement the daytime light with fluorescent or LED lights, but turn them off by 6 p.m.

Around Halloween, stop the day/night, light/dark treatment and keep the plant in a sunny area. Reduce fertilizer applications. The plant can remain in its usual full sun location as the upper leaves (bracts) turn red, pink or white. During November and December, fertilize every three weeks and water regularly. Next Christmas enjoy your beautiful "new" poinsettia.



Is It Pine, Spruce, or Fir?



Pine (*Pinus* spp.), spruce (*Picea* spp.), and fir (*Abies* spp.) are all types, or genera, of medium to tall (60-200 feet), evergreen, needle-bearing, cone-producing trees that have a conical or pyramidal shape. Collectively, they are called conifers because of their cone production.

Conifers are commonly found growing in Ohio landscapes and several species are used as Christmas trees. To the casual observer, these trees look similar, but they belong to different genera. Homeowners, landowners, and consumers often get these trees confused and even some well-versed gardeners have difficulties keeping them straight. And yet, it is very important to be able to identify these trees to understand where they will grow well, how to take good care of them, and when needed, how to diagnose why they might be ailing.



Identification—Where to Begin

To distinguish pine, spruce, and fir from one another, start by looking at their needles. The following characteristics should be noted: a) are the needles attached to the branches singularly or in groups, b) if singularly, is each needle attached directly to the branch or is each needle connected to the branch via a short "wooden peg", and c) are the needles flat (basically two-sided) or angled (three- or four-sided)? Additional needle characteristics (e.g., needle length, sharpness, flexibility, scent, and color) are needed when separating tree species from one another within the genera (pines, spruces, and firs).

Pines (*Pinus* spp.)

Pines have slender needles (leaves) arranged in bundles of two, three or five with a permanent or deciduous papery wrap or sheath at their bases called a fascicle (Fig. 2). This characteristic of having needles in bundles is unique to pines and immediately separates them from the spruces and firs, which present their needles on the branches singularly.

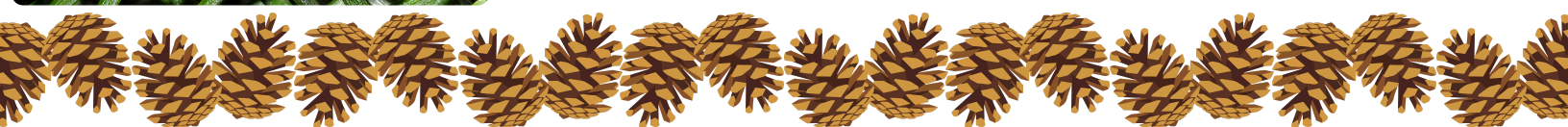
Spruce (*Picea* spp.)

Spruces have needles attached individually to the branches via short wooden, peg-like structures called pulvini (Fig. 3). Spruces retain their needles for four to 10 years before shedding them. When the needles are shed, the pegs remain attached to the branches making the spruce branches feel rough after the needles are gone. Spruce needles tend to be stiff and sharply pointed making them somewhat unpleasant to work around when doing yardwork, pruning or removal, or decorating. Spruce needles easily roll between one's fingers and have a distinctive square (four-sided) shape.



Fir (*Abies* spp.)

Firs also have needles attached individually to the branches. However, fir needles lack pegs and thus the branches are not rough after the needles are shed. The base of the fir needle is expanded into a round base giving the needle the appearance of a suction-cup tipped dart. When the needle is pulled off the branch or is naturally shed, a small, circular leaf scar is left behind. Fir needles are soft, flat (two-sided) and cannot be rolled between one's fingers. Fir needles give off a citrusy scent when crushed, which is a desirable aroma for candles.





Cones

Beyond the needle characteristics of pines, spruces, and firs, the next characteristic for identification are the female cones or strobili that each genera produces. These characteristics include position in which the mature cone is held, flexibility of the cone, and whether the cone remains intact at maturity.

Female cones of pine, spruce, and fir start development pointing upward. Mature pine and spruce cones are pendulant or hang downward from their point of attachment to the branch. Fir cones on the other hand remain upright or erect (figures 5-7).

Cones consist of scales attached to a central stalk. At maturity, the scales of pine and spruce remain attached to the central stalk and the entire cone frequently falls to the ground intact after most of the winged seeds are dispersed from between the scales. The scales and seeds of fir cones break loose and crumble away from the central stalk while it is still attached to the tree. Fir cones are seldom found intact on the ground.

The thickness or woodiness of the scales of the cones determines how flexible the cone may be. Pine cone scales tend to be thicker and woodier than spruce cone scales which are more papery in texture. As a result, pine cones tend to be more rigid than spruce cones. Many species of pine have cone scales that are armed with spines or prickles. The length, sharpness, and persistence of these spines can help to identify the pines.



Eastern white pine.



Norway spruce.



Virginia pine cones.



Colorado spruce.



Canaan fir and
white fir.

Which Pine, Spruce, or Fir?

Additional, more detailed characteristics are used to separate the different species of these three groups of coniferous evergreens. Some of these characteristics include needle length, needle color, bark characteristics, and additional cone characteristics. These characteristics are detailed in many field guides for field identification of trees. Below are commonly found pines, spruces, and firs in Ohio.

Common pines in Ohio include Austrian pine, eastern white pine, loblolly pine, mugo (Swiss mountain) pine, pitch pine, red pine, Scotch pine, and Virginia pine. Other pines that are sometimes found in arboreta, parks, and cemeteries include Ponderosa pine, shortleaf pine, Jack pine, Korean pine, Himalayan pine, lacebark pine, and Japanese red pine.

Common spruces in Ohio include Colorado spruce, Norway spruce, and white spruce (including dwarf Alberta spruce). Another spruce sometimes found in arboreta, parks, and cemeteries is Serbian spruce (it is also becoming a more regular choice for landscapes).

Fir trees are not nearly as common in Ohio as spruce and pine. However, they are often grown as Christmas trees. The most common firs in Ohio include balsam fir (including Canaan fir), Fraser fir, and white fir.

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Washington County Cooperative Extension Service

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around the office
in December

- 1st - Bee Club
- 3rd - Heritage Homemakers Winter Potluck @Noon
- 3rd - Sewing Club @6PM
- 5th - Annual Holiday Wreath Workshop
- 12th - Wits Workout @10AM (WCPL)
- 12th - District Board Luncheon
- 24th through January 4th WCEO closed for the holidays

Dec. 1st - Dec. 14th Holiday Assistance Collection

Recipe of the month

Cauliflower Mac and Cheese

- 1 small head cauliflower, cut into 1-inch florets
- 1 medium sweet potato
- 1 1/2 cups low-fat milk
- 1 1/2 cups uncooked elbow macaroni
- 1 1/2 cups shredded cheddar cheese
- 1 1/2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon dry mustard
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon cooking oil
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper
- Oil-based cooking spray
- **To taste:** garlic powder or o-salt seasoning
- **Optional toppings:** parsley, cracked or coarse black pepper

Place rack in center of oven and **preheat** to 425 degrees F. **Wash** hands with soap and warm water, **scrubbing** for at least 20 seconds. **Gently clean** all produce under cool running water. **Spray** baking sheet with oil, with a fork **prick** the sweet potato and place on one side of baking sheet, **bake 20 minutes**. Cook macaroni according to package directions, **drain** and set aside in colander. In mixing bowl, **drizzle** cauliflower with oil and **season** well with o-salt seasoning; **stir** to coat florets evenly. After 20 minutes of baking, **add** cauliflower in a single layer on the baking sheet next to the sweet potato, **bake 15 to 20 minutes** more until potato is very soft. **Test** with a knife, **remove** from oven. In a saucepan, **melt** butter over low heat. **Add** flour and **stir** constantly 1 to 2 minutes, until smooth. **Stir** in dry mustard, black pepper, salt. **Whisk** in milk, **stirring constantly** over **medium heat** until smooth. When sauce begins to thicken slightly, **add** cheese **stirring** until fully melted. **Remove** skin from baked sweet potato and **mash** until smooth, then **stir** into the cheese sauce. **Place** macaroni and cauliflower into serving bowl, **add** sauce, **mix** well. **Optional:** Top with parsley or cracked or coarse black pepper, **cool** 10 minutes before serving, **sauce will thicken**.

Yield: 6 servings. Serving size: 1 cup. **Nutrition Analysis:** 330 calories; 15g total fat; 8g saturated fat; 0g trans fat; 40mg cholesterol; 640mg sodium; 37g carbohydrate; 4g fiber; 7g total sugar; 0g added sugar; 15g protein; 6% DV vitamin D; 25% DV calcium; 4% DV iron; 10% DV potassium.



plant of the month



Tune in to 100.9 WLSK every Tuesday morning at 8:30 for extension updates and daily farm tips!



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