

## CROW WING COUNTY MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM

# Ask the Master Gardener

### NOVEMBER 2016 COLUMN

**Dear Master Gardener:**

**I see amaryllis bulbs in the stores, how do I plant them for holiday blooms?**

Amaryllis are classic holiday flowers that display the spirit of the season. If growing from a bulb, they take 4-6 weeks to bloom. Now is the ideal time to plant bulbs for holiday decorating.

Amaryllis have multiple showy, trumpet like flowers on thick stems. Amaryllis plants are one to two feet in height with six to ten inch trumpet shaped flowers. The long strappy foliage gives this plant prominence without being too wide. Although red and scarlet are the most popular colors, the flowers may be pink, white, salmon, apricot, rose or bicolor in both single and double forms.

According to the University of Minnesota Extension, when growing amaryllis from bulbs, careful selection of the bulbs is important because the plant's performance is influenced by both the size and condition of the bulb. It is best to select the largest bulbs available; as they will produce more stalks and blooms the first year. The bulbs should be firm and dry with no signs of mold, decay or injury.

Select a container that is deep enough to allow adequate room for good root development and has provisions for drainage. The diameter of the pot should be about one inch larger than that of the bulb. Although this may seem small, amaryllis bulbs prefer a smaller container. Select a potting medium that has high organic matter, but drains well. The bulb should be positioned so that at least one-third, preferably one-half, of the bulb is above the surface of the potting medium. Firm the potting medium around the bulb, water it thoroughly and place the container in a warm, sunny spot. Do not fertilize the bulb until it begins to grow. After growth appears, it is essential to fertilize the plants regularly with a fertilizer that has high phosphorus content. Move the plant out of direct sunlight when the flower buds have begun to show color.

**Dear Master Gardener:**

**There are little insects flying around my plants that look like fruit flies. Since they are flying around plants and not fruit, I was wondering if they are fruit flies and how to get rid of them.**

The insects you are describing sound like fungus gnats. If you shake your plant or stir up the soil, you may see a flurry of insect activity. Fungus gnats are usually associated with over-watered houseplants or houseplants that are growing in potting soil that is high in organic matter. They are pesky but do not usually harm plants.

Reducing the moisture in your soil should be your first step in combating the fungus gnat problem. Over-watering is one of the biggest mistakes people make with their houseplants. Allow the surface of the soil to dry out between watering but do not let your plant wilt.

According to the University of Minnesota entomology department, the only effective product for

treating fungus gnat larvae in the soil is a bacterial insecticide, *Bacillus thuringiensis* var. *israelensis*, (e.g. Knock-Out Gnats). Also known as Bt. H-14, this insecticide is specific to fly larvae. However this product does not kill adult fungus gnats. To reduce the number of adult fungus gnats you can place yellow sticky cards in the pots. Look for the insecticide and sticky traps in garden centers or order it by mail.

**Dear Master Gardener:**

**Is the sumac that looks so colorful and pretty now the same as poisonous sumac? How poisonous is sumac?**

Poison sumac, *Toxicodendron vernix*, can be distinguished from the harmless staghorn sumac, *Rhus typhina* and smooth sumac, *Rhus glabra*, by the berries. Poison sumac has greenish-white berries; as opposed to staghorn sumac and smooth sumac, which have red berries. Poison sumac is a coarse 6-20 foot shrub that has smooth gray bark and smooth branches. Plants have 7-13 leaflets per leaf and the leaves are opposite. The autumn foliage is orange to scarlet. They are most commonly found in wet places, such as bogs and swamps, often where tamaracks are growing, so it is unlikely you would run across it while out walking or hiking. The harmless sumacs grow only in well-drained soil or even somewhat dry soils. Poison sumac is very poisonous, even more so than poison ivy. It is usually found in the southern parts of Minnesota.

**November Garden Tips**

- Empty and store clay pots to prevent cracking during temperature extremes.
- Protect young-thin barked trees from rabbits and other animals that will gnaw on them while their preferred food is unavailable. Surround each trunk with a metal cloth cylinder, pushing it a couple of inches into the soil to prevent burrowing. Tree wrap is less effective and must be removed promptly in the spring to avoid trapping moisture against the trunk.
- Avoid winter burn on evergreens by watering until the ground freezes. Soil typically freezes between late November and mid-December.
- Fungi survive in the winter in infected leaves. Be sure to rake up and remove leaves from trees and shrubs suffering from leaf diseases like apple scab, anthracnose, tar spot and black spot.
- Remove any buckthorn shrubs still growing on your property. They are easy to spot in late autumn when most other shrubs have lost their leaves. Buckthorn has green leaves and small clusters of black berries, with sharp barbs sparsely spaced.
- Move houseplants to a brighter location. To compensate for reduced light levels, as days grow shorter. South or west facing windows are not too bright for low light plants this time of year.

University of Minnesota Extension Master Gardeners are trained and certified volunteers for the University of Minnesota Extension Service. All information given in this column is based on university research. To ask a question, call the Master Gardener Help Line at 218-454-GROW (4769) and leave a recorded message. A Master Gardener will return your call.

