

What's Coming Up

Janet Macunovich answers your growing concerns
#3, August 23, 2008

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Perennial's too slow? Shorten seed-to-bloom time by lengthening season.

A.N. **wonders about hellebores:** I have several hellebores and wonder 1) why it takes 3 or more years before they bloom and is there a way to speed maturity and 2) I have several seedlings that have sprung from seeds of at least one mature plant and want to know what is the best way to give them a chance to become mature plants themselves. I am near Lake Michigan in zone 5b.



Lenten rose or hellebore (*Helleborus x orientalis*) flowers are enchanting. They also look great for a long time because the colorful, petal-like sepals don't fall off when seed begins to form. They stay in place for weeks after the fertile parts in the center finish their task of setting seed.

Photo © 2008 Steven Nikkila

Long-lived perennials often take several years to reach blooming size, A.N. Lenten rose (*Helleborus x orientalis*), peony, false indigo (*Baptisia australis*), gas plant (*Dictamnus albus*), daylily, hosta and others do make us wait. Yet why begrudge the initial investment when it's offset by decades of glorious, low-care bloom? In contrast, daisies and *Coreopsis* often bloom in their first year from seed but then need division every few years to stave off old age and decline.

If you want **to shave a year** from a three year process of seedling maturation, **extend the young plants' first growing season**. Pot up those seedlings then keep them growing under lights indoors without pause for a whole year.

Return them to the outdoors next spring once the weather's settled, since the plants need the change in season and weather to form and finish a flower bud.

A hellebore can remain in place without need of division for decades, increasing gradually in size. This clump took ten years to reach this size and may remain vigorous for twenty years or more.

However, we shouldn't take this plant's ability to persist on its own to mean it resents actions such as division. It can be divided without special procedure or unusual risk. A gardener with a sharp knife could turn this clump into 20 or more starts, if he or she knows to ignore the naysayers who claim it "resents disturbance."

Photo © 2008 Steven Nikkila



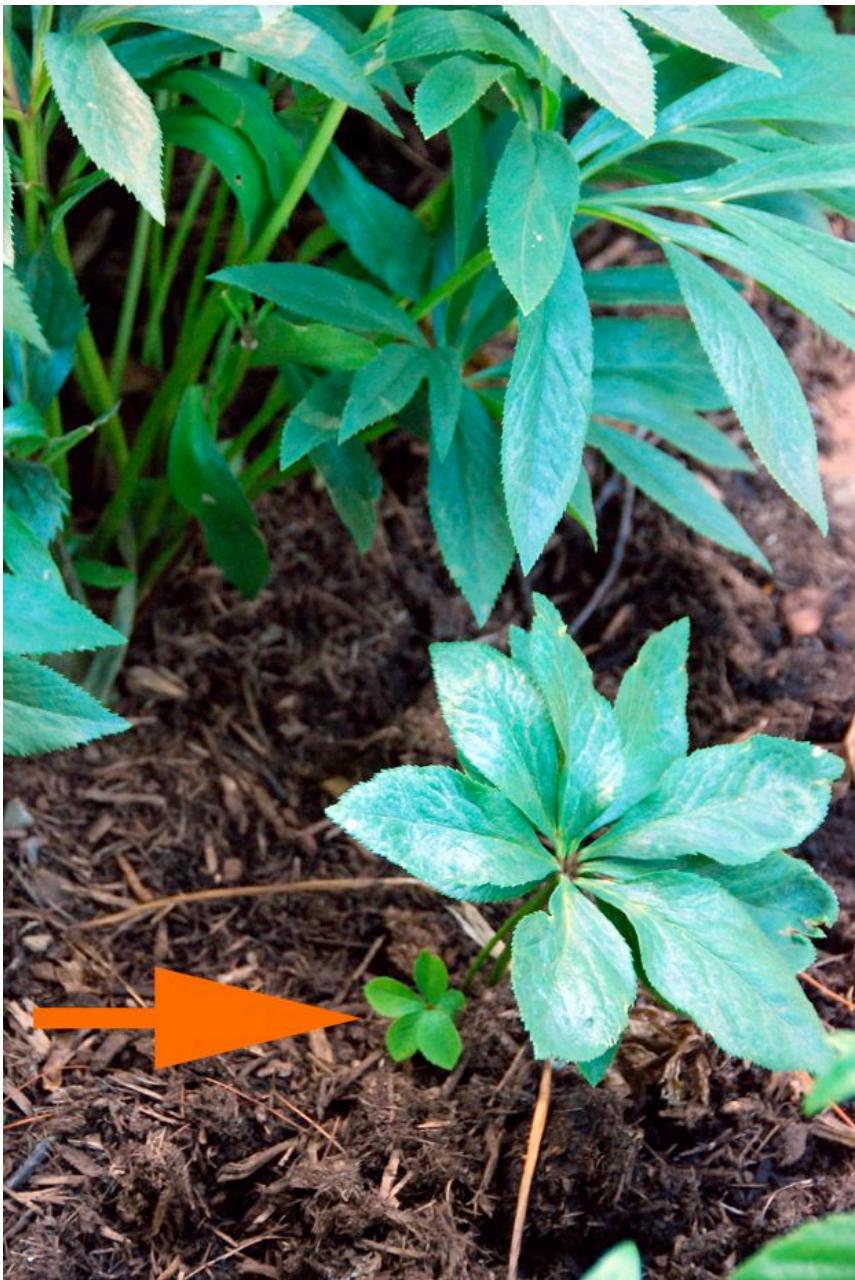
Helleborus flower buds form in fall and shelter at ground level under the leaves, which remain green through winter. New foliage replaces old after bloom time each spring. The greenery is a great addition to a winter landscape but by bloom time leaves may be tattered and detract more than they add as the buds open and stems elongate to lift the flowers to their full eighteen-inch height.

Photo © 2008 Steven Nikkila



Many gardeners clip away the old foliage as flowering time approaches in late winter. The fresh flower stalks can be more attractive without the company of old leaves. The practice may also reduce the incidence of leaf disease by eliminating damaged leaves that may otherwise fall prey to fungus and become sources of contagion.

Photo © 2008 Steven Nikkila



The seed falls close to the mother hellebore's crown so a first-year seedling (arrow) has the protection of the foliage during any unsettled weather during its first spring. However, if the original plant continues growing well its refreshed foliage will shade out the newcomer. It's as if this long-lived species knows it has no need to raise many children, only enough to replace itself if it begins to fail. So the gardener who wants more hellebores digs the seedlings in spring and plants them where they have their own space.

Photo © 2008 Steven Nikkila

To grow a hellebore from seed, rather than waiting for volunteer seedlings, collect the seed as it ripens. Press the seed pod to check for ripeness. A ripe pod will split readily and reveal black seeds. Wear gloves to handle fresh seed as hellebore sap can cause a rash.

Sow the seed right away. It may not germinate until it's had at least eight weeks of warm weather -- $\geq 70^{\circ}\text{F}$ -- followed by eight weeks below 40°F . Seed that doesn't complete this cycle may slip into deep dormancy and wait two or more years to sprout.

Lenten roses can be divided. Dig the clump, rinse the soil from the crown, then use a knife to split off sections with buds and roots.

Hellebores were once hard to come by at garden centers but they're more widely sold now, at local retailers and by mail. Hellebore specialist Barry Glick at Sunshine Farm* puts great information into his on-line catalogue. Plant Delights Nursery* is another source of new and unusual lenten roses.

*To learn more, paste www.sunfarm.com or www.plantdelights.com to your browser bar.

Ready, set, transplant and divide.

Amy asks: **When is the best time to transplant tiger lilies?"** I have three individual plants that have tripled in size and I wanted to space them out. Also, I have a hosta that has gotten rather large that I want to split and move. I wasn't sure when in the season was the best time for moving and splitting.

Once the nights become cool in late summer it's a great time to transplant and divide all kinds of plants. The heat just broke this week in my neck of the woods and as I pulled the covers to my chin at night I was reminded that, "When comforters and crickets thrill you at night, then divisions and transplants will grow all right."

Longer, cooler nights signal perennials, trees and shrubs to stop growing new foliage, grow more roots and harden their cells for a coming winter. Move or divide when the weather's cool and nights are long in fall or spring so **a plant will take to a new spot most quickly.**

Although I divide and move all kinds of plants all year, I kick it into high gear now and **continue through September.** This week I moved a Japanese maple, two conifers and a range of perennials to create new combinations in an already-beautiful garden. Next week I'll dig another Japanese maple for a ride to its gardener's new home, relocate a redtwig dogwood and dwarf spruce that have overgrown their site in another yard, and divide several perennials to fill the gaps this shrub-poaching left behind.

Clean and clip now for pest free plants indoors this winter

Nata wants to overwinter only her plants, not their pests: I have a few rex begonias, a fern and an ivy that are planted in individual containers. They have been doing so well outside. I would like to hang on to them. What is the best way to prepare them for coming indoors for the cold season? I don't want any tag-along bugs to invade my other indoor plants.

Aim for clean plants with maximum energy, Nata, and your indoor garden will have few, if any pest problems. Now is the time I begin rinsing foliage more frequently. I also clip plants now that have grown too large to fit into their winter quarters. It's a good time to repot those that have become potbound, if you can allow the increase in size. Plants have a month or more to fuel new shoot- and root growth with the great light only Nature can provide.

I often **add two tablespoons of oil-based soap** or two teaspoons of dish soap to each quart of water I **spray on the plant** in fall. I let the foliage sit soapy in a shaded spot for about fifteen minutes before I rinse it with a forceful stream of clear water. The detergent loosens grime that reduces the leaf's ability to use sunlight and helps flush away pesty insects, their eggs and also fungal spores.

I **don't apply pesticides unless a plant actually has problems.** Most don't need and some don't appreciate prophylactic treatment. When I do use a bug killer or disease control, I select

the product for the specific problem and apply it on a schedule geared to that pest's schedule. For instance, the eggs of many insects are impervious to insecticide so after I spray to kill adults, it's essential to wait long enough for eggs that were on the plant to develop and then do a follow-up spray. The interval and need for repeated follow-up varies by insect, such as 4 to 5 days between each of 3 or 4 applications to control whitefly. The aim is to kill the new generation before it can take its turn to mate and lay more eggs.

Most plants that are growing well outdoors are also staying ahead of their pests by producing its own fungicides and insecticides. **Give the plant good growing conditions indoors** and this can continue all winter. **Supplemental light** is a must for most plants. Adequate humidity can stave off disease problems such as mildew of begonia.

Plants that are pest-ridden outdoors are poor candidates for an indoor garden. Their tendencies toward disease or inability to put a damper on insect development only become worse as the plants' energy levels drop in the dim interior and short days of winter, and leaves weaken in stagnant, dry air. So a sickly plant never makes my short list for the move indoors and I think twice about taking in healthy-but-pesty plants such as lantana, which at its best has at least a few whiteflies.

Ah, now I real-eyes: There's little common ground between gardeners' and builders' idea of junky soil

Some garden tales seem to convey nothing but aggravation, except for the alternate reality they can reveal. Stand in the other guy's shoes to think about this situation, and hope one day you'll recall it to avoid such trouble in your own garden:

"**The builder left debris-filled soil spread all over my garden,**" says Dennis. "He asked if there was any place on the property where they could put what they had to dig out to pour footings. He didn't want to have to haul anything away he didn't have to, and I can understand that. So I told him that if it was good soil, they didn't have to take it away but could leave it back here in the vegetable garden area. But if it had junk in it, I said, they should take it away."

"I guess his idea of junk and mine are pretty different. I'm looking now at piles of soil loaded with pieces of brick, concrete and rock-hard clods of clay. It's certainly not what I call good soil. Now I have to sift out all this debris."

"Next time I'll clarify what I think constitutes 'good soil.' However, I don't think I'll ask what kind of awful stuff it is that would rate as *bad* dirt to a builder!"

The 45 mph garden

You can put a gardener behind the wheel but you can't take the flowers out of his eyes. Turn the page for what's catching drivers' eyes and raising questions this week.

Golden rain tree (*Koelreuteria paniculata*), a 30- to 40-foot tree that blooms yellow in July, drew attention this week for its ripening seed pods that shone like ivory bangles.

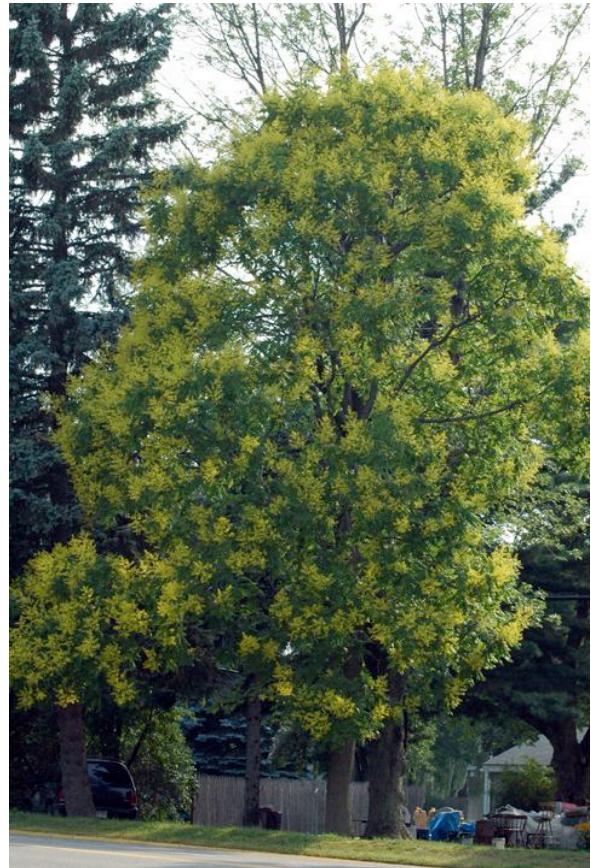


A golden rain tree is an eye catcher even after bloom. This one decked with ripening seed was turning heads on August 18.



Collect and sow the seed in fall and you can have a six foot, blooming tree in about 4 years.

All photos, this page: © 2008 Steven Nikkila



While most golden rain trees are developing their seeds, this one has only begun to bloom. I keep an eye on this individual because it has an advantage over some named late bloomers such as the variety 'September.' Its commendable quality is that it has weathered 60 years of unmitigated zone 5 cold without damage, outlasting many others of its kind in the area. 'September' is one of those more tender types. I have often collected and shared its seed to spread those desirable traits -- reliable zone 5 hardiness and late season bloom.



This week in Janet's garden

Grow with me! This week I will:

Fluff up mulch gone crusty so rain and irrigation water will soak in rather than run off.

Keep on pruning until I've addressed all the trees and shrubs in my care that must be kept smaller than their potential.

Add fall interest to my planters. I remove what is waning or will decline soon, such as heat-loving globe amaranth (*Gomphrena globosa*) and lantana. I cut back overextended stems of petunia and million bells (*Calibrachoe*). In the open space I plant starts of mum, kale, pansy and other cool season winners.

Wrap up with Grins and Grow-ans that turn our green thumbs up or down

Grins: to spacing annuals for ample room to grow. They repay us well in late summer with health and great bloom in high contrast to crowded plantings gone pale and spindly.



On June 2, I planted blue salvia, marigolds and ageratum among the fading foliage of tulips, daffodils and hyacinths. They were the butt of jokes such as, "They're so teeny, I can't see them!" and "So when are you going to plant?" Returning the laughter, I stood my ground. "Right now, there are plenty of perennials to carry the show -- Siberian iris, dianthus, dwarf lilacs... Even if I crammed in more plants, these annuals couldn't compete with those."



This week the planting is covered in flower and still bulking up. (I clipped off the bulb foliage on June 10.) It's in shape to make the most of fall's fine growing conditions. It will have the last laugh as it shines right into October, having contributed as much as a month more color than annuals crowded for immediate effect in early summer. Perhaps most important, this planting's show came when color was truly needed, after most perennials had bloomed.
Photos © 2008 Steven Nikkila

Grow-ans: to remembering great advice a little too late. As I dashed toward the house, slapping bees away from my head, the words of the fine gardeners at Niagara Falls School of Horticulture ran with me. "The most important step in clipping a hedge," they

told us, "is to ruffle the whole length with a bamboo rake before you start, to check for bees or wasps. Don't be up a ladder holding shears when you find that nest!"

Who's Janet?

"**A woman who gets a lot of mileage out of a garden**" is how Janet Macunovich was described by the owner of a garden she maintains through her business, Perennial Favorites. "You design it and plant it, Janet. I enjoy it. Then you come here and look where I do but see so much more!" She explained. "I love hearing all the stories you know about the plants, and it's fascinating when you explain *why* something is growing a certain way or having trouble." Janet brings the same depth of knowledge and enthusiasm to the books and articles she writes, classes she teaches and practical how-to materials she develops. Email questions to her at JMaxGarden@aol.com.

To learn more, email JMaxGarden@aol.com and ask for What's Coming Up, Issue #1.

Places to catch Janet in-person:

Thursday, August 28, 2:00 - 6:00 p.m., "**Working With Janet - Bring Your Gloves and Tools!**" A chance for hands-on pruning lessons. Janet's reducing the size of both a blue spruce and a crabapple tree at a residence in Livonia, Michigan on West Chicago road. Limited space. No fee. To attend, email Janet at JMaxGarden@aol.com for directions.

Saturday, September 13, 8:00 a.m. - noon, "**Working With Janet - Bring Your Gloves and Tools!**" At the Detroit Zoo, Woodward Avenue at I-696. Your chance to volunteer at the zoo in exchange for Janet's hands-on instruction in fall perennial garden maintenance. For instructions, send an email to mstgarden@yahoo.com with subject line "I'll volunteer at the Zoo with Janet."

Thursday, September 18, 7 p.m., "**The Art of Fall Garden Clean-up**" An illustrated lecture at the Waterford Township, Michigan Library. Free. To attend, call 248-618-7694 to reserve a seat.

Saturday, September 27, 9:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m., "**Holiday Decorations from Your Garden**" A hands-on workshop sponsored by the Alpine Master Gardeners and the Michigan State University Extension. At the Livingston Township Hall in Gaylord, Michigan. \$30. For more information, contact Amanda at 989-983-4401, spiderwebranch@peoplepc.com.

Saturday, October 4, 2008, "Ohio State University Extension Master Gardener Conference." A whole day and a great line-up of topics, including Janet's descriptions of "Cutting back the rambunctious garden," "Doubling Up Perennials" and "The Collector: Engaging harmony from intriguing diversity." In Warren, Ohio at Kent State University, Trumbull campus. Open to Ohio State Master Gardeners and friends. For a complete description of the conference and registration information, check the website* or call Steve Hudkins at the OSU Extension (330-637-3530).

*Paste www.ohiomastergardener.com to your browser bar.

About Working-to-learn with me:

Call or email to be part of an opportunity I list here. Dress for work and the weather.

At the gardens I tend through my business, Perennial Favorites: I've been working for 20 years with some of the people I garden for. They trust me with their landscape and

they also understand my enthusiasm for teaching. So they open their gardens to small groups who want to see and practice "how to." When I can, I invite you to participate. At the Detroit Zoo and other public gardens: I've tended gardens as a volunteer at the Detroit Zoo's Adopt-a-Garden program for 20 years, and I have relationships with other gardens through their regular gardeners. Over the years a hundred or more people have worked with me at such locations, some for a day and others for years. We have fun, we learn, we accomplish a lot. The Detroit Zoo program requires that you complete an interview and orientation to become a regular garden volunteer, but allows me to bring students in under temporary passes. If you'd like to help at the Detroit Zoo, email mstgarden@yahoo.com, and put in the subject line "I'll volunteer at the Zoo with Janet" for our upcoming work dates and instructions to join us. That email will put you in touch with my good friend Deb Tosch, who keeps the zoo schedule straight while I plan and lead the work.

Watch this space for opportunities to help me at other non-profit working events.