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20 December 21 PSAs

If you have a real Christmas tree, check its stand daily for watering needs. A tree stand should hold one-half to one gallon of water. The rule-of-thumb is a tree will use one quart of water per day for every inch of trunk diameter near the base. If you have a tree with a 3-inch base, it can use 3 quarts of water per day. The trunk should have been freshly cut at a slant just prior to putting it in the stand. Do not let a Christmas tree stand dry out. If the stand is empty for more than six to eight hours, the tree's pores plug up again. Water uptake is much reduced and the tree dries out sooner, with needles dropping and the tree becoming a fire hazard. If a tree stand dries out for half a day or more, the only thing that can be done is to remove the tree from the stand and recut the base; which is not a fun task with the lights and ornaments. When watering, nothing needs to be added to water in the tree stand to promote freshness.

If you had a good potato crop this year and are storing potatoes, know they will not sprout and will remain firm longest if stored at 40 degrees Fahrenheit. However, when Irish potatoes are stored at this temperature, it can lead to starches converting to sugars, which gives potatoes an undesirable sweet taste. Even so, you can store potatoes at this temperature to obtain the longest storage. If potatoes begin to develop a sweet taste, placing them at room temperature for two to three days will cause sugars to convert back to starches, and the potatoes will taste like you expect. If you do not have access to a storage area with temperatures of 40 degrees Fahrenheit, check the potatoes often for signs of sprouting or shriveling. If this occurs, the potatoes will need to be used sooner. And just for fun, when eating potatoes we are eating a tuber which is an enlarged underground stem. We are not eating roots when we eat Irish potatoes.

Bird feeding is a good way to add biodiversity to our landscapes, and it's an educational and fun past time. If you've recently put out a bird feeder and not many birds seem to be visiting, know that for winter feeding, it is best to have feeders in place by mid to late September. This will be in time to attract birds like chickadees, woodpeckers, and others that are looking for winter feeding areas. Feeders placed in September are also available to migrating birds. The number of birds that come to your feeder may be low at first but will pick up with the first cold spell, especially if bird feeders are in place and ready. Keep in mind birds depend on feeders mostly during weather extremes, especially when snow or ice covers natural food sources, and during late winter and early spring when less food is available. Ideally, continue a winter bird feeding program until May when new spring growth is underway.

Mistletoe may bring thoughts of kissing a loved one, but in the plant world Mistletoe is a tree parasite; and be aware that all parts of this plant are toxic. We may know mistletoe as a sprig of small, leathery green leaves with white berries, but there are over 1300 species; some of which look nothing like mistletoe sold at Christmas. Mistletoe is an evergreen obligate parasitic plant found hanging from the branches of trees. Many cannot live without a specific plant host. The berry has a glue-like substance that allows it to stick to trees, where it germinates and grows on the tree, getting its nutrients and water from its host plant. Some mistletoe can kill the tree they are growing on. Hardy to zone 6, we have not had to worry about Mistletoe infesting Nebraska trees. At the holidays, if you have real Mistletoe, keep in mind that all parts are toxic and it needs to be kept out of reach of children and pets.

To keep Christmas and Thanksgiving cactus blooming as long as possible, place them in bright but indirect light. Too much sun can cause their leaves to turn yellow. Keep their soil or potting mix constantly moist but not waterlogged. Even though they are cactus, they are jungle natives and prefer just moist conditions with indirect light. Avoid fertilizing Christmas and Thanksgiving cactus during the winter; but do fertilize every other week from spring through fall. Both plants seem to flower best if they are a little pot bound; but if roots become over-crowded in the container, blooming will decrease. If you haven't repotted in several years, or you notice a decrease in flowering from the previous year, repot the plant into a slightly larger pot, but wait until spring. If possible, move the plants outside for summer. Keep them in a shady area as Christmas and Thanksgiving cactus will not tolerate full sun.