

IN THE DIRT

Don't Toss Your Fresh Cut Christmas Tree!

After the holidays, take your fresh cut Christmas tree outside and prop it up and tie it securely against a post or fence. Your Christmas tree will provide winter protection for birds. If you feed the birds, position the tree several feet from the feeders. You want to make sure the tree isn't too close or predators like neighborhood cats could use it to prey on the birds.

Enlist the help of your children or grandchildren to make homemade fruit and nut garland and pinecones rolled in suet on the tree. Be sure to hang your garland and suet pinecones out of the reach of pets.



Soil Amendment? Yeah, But.....

By: Kelly Feehan, Extension Educator

When plants do not grow well and the reason why isn't obvious; gardeners may blame the soil and look for a quick fix. We all know marketing can make a product sound like the next best thing to sliced bread or a quick fix; fortunately most of us know it pays to learn a little more when something sounds too good to be true.

The role of Nebraska Extension is to extend research-based information. Here's some information related to a few soil amendment products that may sound better than they actually are.

A soil amendment is something incorporated into soil to improve soil structure. The goal is to make the soil easier to work, increase moisture and nutrient holding capacity, aeration, and drainage. Fertilizer is not a soil amendment. It adds nutrients but it does not improve structure.

A few soil amendment products that have not lived up to their hype are hydrogels, also known as water crystals and water retention granules, gypsum, and soil microbes.

Hydrogels are polyacrylamide gels. These gels or crystals absorb water and swell to several times their original size. The gels then slowly release water over time into the soil.

They might work for a while, once they begin releasing water to plants. However, within two to five years, these gels degrade into substances such as acrylamide. Acrylamide is a neurotoxin and potential carcinogen and it can be absorbed through the skin or inhaled.

Even in its intact state, polyacrylamide can cause skin irritation and mucus membrane inflammation. The use of these gels, crystals or granules is not recommended in home gardens and landscapes.

Gypsum is marketed as softening clay soils, loosening compacted soils, and treating soil salinity. In very specific soil situations, gypsum can be a helpful amendment. But rarely are these soil conditions found in home gardens and landscapes.

Gypsum is hydrated calcium sulfate. It is effective in treating sodic soils, which are soils high in exchangeable sodium. Although gypsum can improve structure in sodic soils that are well drained, it will not soften clay soil or loosen compacted soil.

Products sold as soil microbes do not work well either; with the exception of inoculating legume crops with rhizobia. In most other cases, little or no improvement in soil health and microbial populations are observed.

Soil microbes are an extremely important component of soil ecosystems. Most occur naturally and do not need to be added. Even poor quality soils contain some soil microbes. If soil is managed correctly, such as adding organic matter, not overwatering, not working the soil when wet and more, existing microbial populations increase.

Organic matter is the most important soil amendment. It improves soil structure in sandy and clay soil. As a rule, we recommend incorporating organic matter, like compost, on a regular basis. Organic matter is the next best thing to sliced bread and it can be made at home or found for free.

And by the way, sand may be free but it is not recommended for adding to clay soil. If not added in the right proportions, sand can make clay soil issues even worse. The best way to improve the structure of clay soil is to thoroughly incorporate organic matter.

Watching... and COUNTING... Birds!

John Wilson, Extension Educator - Innovative Cropping and Water Systems

Now I'm not complaining about the weather, but the open conditions we've had most of this winter has not been great for birdwatching. They don't seem to come to our feeders when the weather is nice. But my wife and I noticed an increase in activity any time we get an inch or two of snow on the ground. We enjoy being able to sit at the dining room table and see all the different birds that come to the feeders.



Keep birdfeeders clean to prevent the spread of disease as they feed.

Keep Feeders Clean

Based on our experiences, here are a few suggestions if you are feeding our feathered friends. Anyone who feeds birds knows how easy it is for seed to turn moldy in feeders. Moisture from snow or rain can leak into feeders and turn bird seed into potential sources of illness for birds. You should keep feeders clean to help prevent the spread of disease to backyard birds.

Clean and disinfect feeders on a regular basis, taking care to scrape out old moldy seed that collects in corners. Wash feeders in warm water with dish soap and rinse. Disinfect with a solution of one part liquid chlorine bleach to nine parts warm water. Make sure feeders are completely dry before refilling with seeds.

It's important to keep feeding birds once you start so they don't become dependent on you as a food source, only to run out of food during periods of severe weather like we usually get some time over winter. You know, the kind of days you really don't want to go outside to fill the bird feeders.

They Also Need Water

Also, if possible, provide water for birds. This is extremely important during the winter because other sources of water may not be available. It seems chilly, but birds regularly use our heated bird baths. Besides water to drink, they use it to help keep their feathers clean which makes them, for lack of a better term, fluffier, which gives them better insulation against bitter cold temperatures.

[Great Backyard Bird Count \(http://gbbc.birdcount.org/\)](http://gbbc.birdcount.org/)

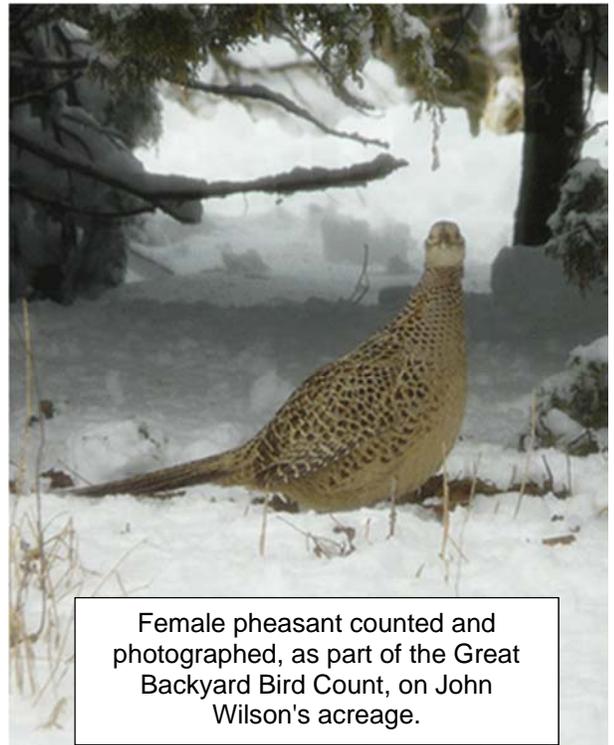
Now for anyone who really enjoys bird watching, there's an event in February you won't want to miss ...and you can take part from the comfort of your own home. The 20th annual Great Backyard Bird Count will be held on February 17–20. Participants are needed to count birds in their yards, neighborhoods, or other locations. Simply tally birds for at least 15 minutes on any day of the count, then go to birdcount.org and enter the highest number of each species you observe at any one time.

This program is conducted across the United States and Canada. Coordinated by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Audubon, and Bird Studies Canada, the count provides an instant snapshot of birdlife around the world. Organizers hope to receive more than 160,000 checklists during the event. Also, you can watch as the tallies come in at birdcount.org.

Whether you observe birds in your backyard, a park, or a wilderness area, the Great Backyard Bird Count is an opportunity to share your results at mbirdcount.org. It's fun and rewarding for people of all ages and skill levels--and it gets people outside... or you can watch from inside, too!

Information from the Great Backyard Bird Count participants is even more valuable as scientists try to learn how birds are affected by environmental changes. The information you send in can provide the first sign that individual species may be increasing or declining from year to year. It shows how a species' range expands or shrinks over time. A big change, noted consistently over a period of years, is an indication that something is happening in the environment that is affecting the birds and that should be followed up on.

So, to take part in this activity for the birds, go to birdcount.org for online instructions and tally sheets... then enjoy our feathered friends. My wife and I participated for many years... it's easy and it's fun! Just go to birdcount.org for all the information you will need.



Female pheasant counted and photographed, as part of the Great Backyard Bird Count, on John Wilson's acreage.

Limit Traffic on Frozen Turf

frozen blades are damaged by foot or vehicle traffic

It is best to minimize winter traffic on any turf area and especially when frost is present on green turf. If ice crystals (frost) have formed and foot or vehicle traffic occurs, the physical abrasion can damage turfgrass. Winter traffic can cause cosmetic damage, physical abrasion, and/or soil damage depending on the situation. Too much traffic on turfgrass at a time when it cannot recover also leads to winter injury. Winter golf or over-using soccer fields during winter are examples.

Poinsettia

By: Kelly Feehan, UNL Extension Horticulture Educator

Have you heard about the large weed that, despite the fact the plants flowers have no colorful petals, has become the most popular blooming plant at Christmas? You have since the plant is poinsettia. How did this plant become such a marketing success and why is Johnny Carson mentioned in the story?

History

A native plant of Mexico, poinsettia's history in the United States begins in the 1800s when the first United States Ambassador to Mexico was appointed by John Quincy Adams. His name was Joel Roberts Poinsett.

A hobby of Poinsett's was to wander the countryside looking for new plants. In 1828, he noticed a shrubby plant with large red leafy bracts growing next to a road. He took cuttings from the plant to grow in his South Carolina greenhouse. This is how poinsettia came by its common name.

Prior to this, poinsettia had been assigned its botanical name by a German botanist Wilenow. He was impressed by the plants color when it grew through a crack in his greenhouse. Wilenow gave the plant the botanical name, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, meaning "very beautiful."



Introduction as a Holiday Plant

How poinsettia became the number one Christmas plant may best be credited to the Paul Ecke Ranch in California. Poinsettia grew wild in the area near the ranch. The tall, leggy plant bloomed during winter, giving Ecke the idea it would make a good holiday flowering plant. In the early 1920s, Ecke grew field grown plants and marketed them at roadside stands in the Beverly Hills and Hollywood area.

From 1923 to the 1960s, his main business was producing field-grown plants which were spring harvested and shipped by rail to greenhouse growers across the country. Ecke traveled the country, promoting the plant to greenhouse growers, teaching them what he had learned and encouraging them to market the plant as a holiday flower.

In 1963, poinsettia breeding developments yielded the first commercial quality cultivars that grew well as potted plants. At this time, Paul Ecke Jr. joined his father in the business. With formal training in horticulture, he encouraged his dad to move toward greenhouse culture. Ecke Sr. was skeptical but by the mid-1960s most of their operation had changed from field grown to greenhouse grown plants.

With a vision of what the poinsettia could become, Ecke Jr. used the media to promote poinsettias as a necessary part of any holiday experience. The business worked with television, such as *The Tonight Show* and *Bob Hope Christmas Specials*, to make certain poinsettias were always a part of holiday sets.

This story goes to show that with vision and a lot of persistence even a weed can become a success. Just be careful about introducing wild plants into the landscape. Some of them can become invasive weeds.

And are poinsettia flowers really without petals? The colorful parts of poinsettias are modified leaf bracts. The yellow button-like, petal-less objects in the center of the leaf bracts are the true flowers. The colorful bracts last longest if the plant is provided bright, but indirect light; the potting mix is kept moist but not saturated; and the plant is located away from air drafts and heat sources.

Sources: University of Illinois Poinsettia History Page and the Paul Ecke Ranch website