

From the Garden

Gardening has always been a great “equalizer” in that it brings together people from a cross-section of our community through their common interest in growing things - whether it’s vegetables, a specific kind of flower such as roses, or even a beautiful lawn. In this new year, you may want to consider ways of connecting with your friends and neighbors through a shared interest in your favorite garden activities.



For example, one group of friends get together once a month at someone’s home to tackle various garden tasks, whether it’s pruning a hedge, creating a new planting bed, planting bulbs,

etc. Another group is planning to get together during the coming month to review their stack of garden catalogs, place group orders to receive volume discounts and discuss plans for their various gardens during the coming season.

Meanwhile, many people have been asking about the future of *Garden Journeys* on Time Warner Cable. All I can say is “stay tuned” as there will be more to tell in the next issue of *CNYLL&G!*

Finally, I’m finding it hard to fit everything I want to say into each issue of this newsletter. Therefore, beginning with this issue, if you want more information on a particular topic, send me an e-mail with the subject line “newsletter resources” and I’ll reply with a list of appropriate website links, books and other references.

In the March/April issue . .

Creative Containers

What exactly is a “peatmoss-based” potting soil?

Livable Landscapes

Avoid mulch fever to keep your landscape healthy.

Recommended Plants

Enjoy lilacs in your landscape from early May into July!

. and much more!

Central New York Lawns, Landscapes & Gardens

Volume 5 - Issue 1

January/February 2004

Proper pruning yields awesome apples

A logical progression of pruning cuts makes this task much easier!

Pruning trees and shrubs is one of the great mysteries to many gardeners. “When, where and how much,” are all frequently asked questions.

This mystery deepens when the conversation turns to pruning fruit-bearing vines, shrubs and trees. Having previously addressed the pruning of grapevines (January/February 2001) and raspberries (January/February 2003), it’s time to tackle apple trees.

When pruning an apple tree - or any fruit tree, for that matter - the goal is to create a balance between vegetation (leaves and branches) and fruit on wood that’s healthy, structurally sound and easy to reach.



Apple trees will produce fruit even if they’re never pruned. However, they’ll bear larger, higher quality fruit more uniformly from year to year if trained properly when young and pruned every winter to maintain strong, vigorous limbs spaced evenly throughout an open canopy.



Live wood, at left, is moist and yellowish-green. Dead wood, right, is dry and tan to dark brown in color.

I know the above sentence doesn’t make the process any less mysterious, does it? So, to make this project less daunting, let’s start with the easy stuff.

Since dead and broken branches won’t produce any leaves or fruit, remove them first. Next, look for branches that are crossing and rubbing against each other. If one or the other isn’t removed, they’ll eventually wound each other as they grow together. You’ll also want to remove branches having narrow angles of attachment to avoid the development of weak seams of “imbedded” bark that can break under the weight of a heavy crop of fruit.

If pruning out the crossing and rubbing branches and narrow branch angles removes twenty-five percent or more of your tree’s shoot tips, it’s time to stop pruning. Remov-

(see Apple pruning on page 3)

Houseplant Feature -

Growing beguiling begonias

Thousands of varieties means at least one is just right for your home!

Since the first begonias were introduced to Europe by plant collectors returning from the Carribean Islands almost 300 years ago, plant breeders have created well over 10,000 named varieties! Because of their diverse growth habits and relatively undemanding nature, begonias are among the most popular of all indoor - and outdoor - plants.



Dragon Wing™ begonias have been recognized as outstanding performers in baskets, containers and as summer bedding plants that bloom from May to frost.

deep bronze leaves. By mid-summer, these popular bedding plants are covered by countless white, pink, red or orange blossoms that are effective until the first frosts of autumn.

Meanwhile, the first **angel-wing** begonias were bred in the mid-1920's. Since then, hundreds of these cane-

stemmed plants, some of which can reach six feet in height and spread, have been introduced. As a group, they tend to offer large clusters of dangling red, pink, orange or white flowers. Many varieties also feature silvery-white splotches on their leaves leading to a sometimes confusing name of "polka-dot plant." Most recently, the red and pink Dragon Wing™ begonias have been rated very highly when grown in partial shade to full sun by practically every University-based trial program in the country!

In an attempt to bring some order to this enormous group of plants, at least six classification systems have been developed over the years. Possibly the easiest of the six to understand, however, is based on root-type; fibrous, tuberous or rhizomatous.

Fibrous-root begonias

As their name implies, **wax-leaf begonias** feature shiny, bright green to

Tuberous-rooted begonias

Originating from a complex parentage of Andean mountain species, the drooping, rose-like blooms in brilliant reds, yellows, oranges, pinks and whites make



Tuberous begonias like the "picotee" variety, above, arise from disc-shaped tubers in March and April, left.



(see Beautiful begonias on page 4)

Central New York Lawns, Landscapes & Gardens

Volume 5, Number 1 - January/February 2004

Central New York Lawns, Landscapes & Gardens is published six times a year by Terry L. Ettinger Horticulture Consulting Services. Its purpose is to provide readers with timely, practical and unbiased information specific to the conditions found in their lawns, landscapes and gardens.

Subscription rates are \$16.50 per year. Single copies are \$3.00.

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All do-it-yourself activities involve a degree of risk. Skills, materials, tools, and site conditions vary widely. While every effort has made to ensure accuracy, the reader remains responsible for the selection and use of tools, materials, and methods. Always obey local codes and laws, follow manufacturers' operating instructions, and observe safety precautions at all times. Please read all labels carefully before purchasing, applying and storing any pesticide.

Behind the masthead: Because of the bitter cold we've experienced so far this winter, many broad-leaf evergreen trees, shrubs and vines such as English ivy shown here, will look terrible as the weather warms this coming spring. Fortunately, new leaves will replace those suffering from "winter desiccation" and plantings of ivy, holly, rhododendrons, etc. should be fine by June.

Recommended Plants - Hellebores are hot

And they're blooming right now!

Was anything blooming in your landscape on December 31st? "Nope," is probably your answer unless you have Christmas roses (*Helleborus niger*) in your garden!



Our Christmas roses, foreground above, came into full bloom on December 31st despite being buried under several feet of snow through much of the month!

This fascinating winter-blooming trait first inspired me to plant a couple of Christmas roses next to our front walk about ten years ago. It took them about five years to send up their first creamy-white December blooms in our dry, shady yard. Now they're a couple of feet in

diameter and bear dozens of flowers from the middle to end of December into early March.

Flush from my success with the slow-to-flower Christmas rose, I've since planted about a half-dozen March into April-blooming Lenten roses (*Helleborus orientalis*) in our front yard, too. Within just a couple of years these plants have rewarded us with numerous yellow-green, through pink to dusty rose blooms from mid-March through April. Because Lenten roses hybridize so readily, the num-



It's common for Christmas roses, above, to magically appear during mid-winter thaws. Meanwhile, Lenten roses, left, bloom in March and April.



(see Hellebores on page 4)

(Apple pruning, continued from page 1)

ing too much wood in a single dormant season can force a lot of lush, vigorous sprouts the following spring. These sprouts are very susceptible to diseases, they won't bear fruit and they'll shade fruit-bearing branches. To keep the number of sprouts to a minimum, it's a good idea to spread substantial corrective/renewal pruning of overgrown apple trees over two, three or even four seasons.

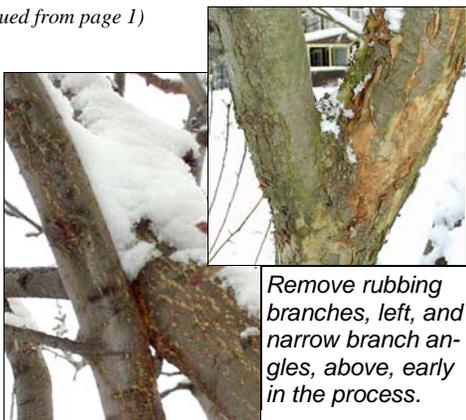
Whether this year or next, your next step will be to make a couple of really big cuts - if they're needed.

You'll first use "thinning" cuts to create a central "leader" and reduce the height of the tree to no more than twelve to fifteen feet - maybe eight to ten feet if you're working with a dwarf or semi-dwarf tree. (Note: a thinning cut involves the removal of a branch at its point of attachment to a subtending limb.)

These cuts will establish a Christmas tree-like shape. This will allow more sunlight to reach the tree's lower branches where most of the fruit will be set at a height that's convenient to pick with both feet on the ground. More sunlight and better air movement will also reduce the incidence of disease during the growing season.



The twenty foot-tall apple tree above has never been pruned. Removal of the two tallest limbs and about one-third of its large scaffold branches, at right, over two or three years can go along way toward making this a productive tree.



Remove rubbing branches, left, and narrow branch angles, above, early in the process.

After making these cuts you'll again evaluate how much wood has been to avoid stimulating too much growth during the coming spring.

Once you've reduced the height of your tree(s), you'll want to create a set of well-spaced "scaffold" limbs. Growing directly from the trunk, these limbs bear the smaller stems on which the fruit are borne. Scaffold limbs are strongest and most fruitful when attached to the trunk at roughly a forty-five degree angle. There should be about a foot of vertical space between each limb to accommodate their increase in diameter over the course of several years. And, they should "spiral" around the trunk so they don't shade limbs closer to the ground.

In keeping with the development of a Christmas tree-like form, first identify potential scaffold limbs just below the leader. To prevent them from casting shade on lower, more fruitful limbs use thinning cuts to shorten them by twenty-five to fifty percent. Closer the ground, remove scaffold limbs that are too upright, too close together, or shading desirable limbs beneath them. Finally, the lowest scaffold limbs won't need to be shortened as their tips should be exposed to full sun after those higher in the tree have been shortened.

Alright, at the end of this potentially multiple-year process, your tree(s) will be shorter and they'll have a well-developed set of scaffold limbs. The final step will be to remove any small, unproductive wood that develops from one year to the next. This includes vigorous "water sprouts"

growing along the top of the scaffold limbs, small branches hanging down from the scaffold limbs and other branches that are simply growing too close together. In addition, the selective removal of older fruiting stems and lower, less productive scaffold limbs every couple of years will force the growth of young shoots that will bear heavily for many years.

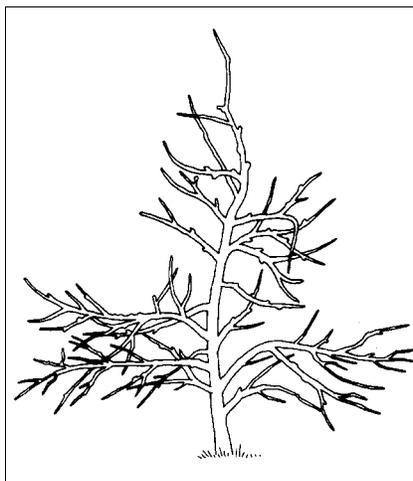
So, now that I've got you all revved up and ready to go, let me offer a couple of final thoughts.

First, if your tree is really old, diseased and/or produces fruit that don't taste good, you may just want to cut it down! In its place you can plant two or three modern, disease-resistant dwarf trees that produce tastier, higher quality apples with a lot less effort.

Second, don't get bent out of shape if your tree(s) don't look exactly like the one at left. A weird form isn't necessarily bad if your tree is vigorous and pro-ductive. In fact, some people have been known to display their "creative" side when pruning fruit trees.

And, finally, you can't prune a tree to death! If you don't like the results of this year's effort, you can always correct and improve upon it next year as you gain confidence and experience.

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When pruned correctly, a free-standing apple tree should have a pyramidal form made up of a series of evenly spaced scaffold branches surrounding the main trunk.

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For more information on pruning apple trees . . .

- "The Home Fruit Planting"**
Cornell Cooperative Extension
Information Bulletin 156
- "Pruning and Training: A Fully Illustrated Plant-by-Plant Manual"**
Christopher Brickell, editor
D.K. Publishing, Inc., 1996
ISBN 1-56458-331-7
- "Small Scale Fruit Production - A Comprehensive (Online) Guide"**
Pennsylvania State University
<http://ssfruit.cas.psu.edu/default.htm>
(accessed February 22, 2005)

Listen

“The Weeder’s Digest” on A.M. 570
WSYR Saturday mornings at 11:00.

Read

“Let’s Get Growing” in the Eagle Group
of Community Newspapers.

(Beautiful begonias, from page 2)

these plants practically irresistible in hanging baskets at local greenhouses each spring! If you keep the soil in which they’re growing evenly moist, fertilize them once a month and give them morning light and light afternoon shade they’ll bloom until the first frosts of autumn. Then, instead of throwing them out, cut off the frost damaged tops and set your basket/pot in a cool (40°F-50°F), dry, dark spot for a winter rest. As the days get longer in early March, clean last year’s potting soil off the disc-like tubers and replant them - concave side up - so that fresh potting soil just barely covers them. Water thoroughly to settle the soil and set the pots in a bright spot where temperatures are 60°F-70°F. By mid-May your plants should be growing well and ready to go back outside!

Rhizomatous begonias

Best exemplified by **rex begonias**, this group features dramatic, multi-colored leaves of different sizes, textures and shapes. These begonias prefer temperatures between 70°F during the day and 60°F at night, plenty of humidity, evenly moist soils and bright, indirect sunlight.

A unique trait of this group is their ability to form new plants along leaf veins. Simply remove a leaf from a healthy plant, make several cuts across the large



New tuberous and rhizomatous begonia plantlets will form after several months, above, where leaf veins are cut and pressed onto the surface of moist potting soil, right.



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**Come to the Clay Fire Station on Route 31
at 6:30 p.m. on Thursday, March 4th where I’ll be
sharing tips for getting your lawn growing this coming spring!**

January and February Chores

- ☞ Dig deep, crusted snow away from the trunks and stems of fruit trees, crabapples, burning bush and other plants to protect them from rabbit and vole damage.
- ☞ Shovel piled and drifted snow off your lawn and onto your driveway during midwinter thaws. This will reduce snowmold damage in your lawn this coming spring.
- ☞ Spread ice melting products an hour or two *before* snowstorms begin. The resulting brine will prevent snow and ice from sticking to your sidewalks and driveway.
- ☞ Don’t start seed indoors too early. Sow seed only eight weeks before transplanting.

(Hellebores, continued from page 2)

readily, the number of named hybrids and seedling-grown “strains” has exploded in the past decade. In fact, as a group the dozens of Lenten rose hybrids, known collectively as *Helleborus x hybridus*, have been selected as the Perennial Plant Association’s 2005 Plant of the Year.

As evidenced by their performance in our front yard, hellebores are tolerant of very dry, shaded conditions under large trees. On the other hand, they’ll grow even better in gardens having evenly moist, fluffy soils and light shade. Do not, however, try to grow these woodland plants in constantly wet soils or in full sun.

Given their cultural preferences, my experience is that the hellebores can be a



The “teeth” along the edges of Christmas rose leaves (on top, above) are spaced further apart than those of Lenten rose (underneath, above). Winter-worn leaves cut to the ground in April will be replaced by new leaves in May.

great addition to practically any Central New York shade garden! Their clusters of early flowers are great in combination with spring flowering bulbs. And, after their flowers fade their thick, dark green leaves provide a perfect backdrop for summer blooming, shade-loving perennials such as hostas, astilbes, etc.

Plant them as specimens along a sidewalk where you can see them as the snow melts in February (hopefully) or March. They’re also impressive in large masses of dozens of plants under shade trees. This doesn’t need to be expensive as hellebores reseed themselves quite readily once they’re established! Regardless of how you use them, hellebores will let you say that something’s blooming in your garden all winter long!☞



Our hellebores have produced dozens of seedlings like this one. Transplanted into its own spot in our garden, it will flower and produce its own seedlings in two or three years.