Low Light Levels

The days are at their shortest this time of year and the sun is at its lowest in the sky so your sun-loving houseplants might languish somewhat. The good news is that the lower angle of the sun mean the sunlight will actually move farther into your house than when it is high overhead in summer. Some houseplants prefer different living quarters during these short, dark days while others adapt just fine where they are year round. If a houseplant isn’t doing well, try moving it and see if the plant responds.

Poinsettia Flowers

The colorful parts of poinsettias are actually leaf-like structures called bracts. The flowers are quite small, only about ¼” across, yellow and clustered together at the center of the bracts. When selecting a poinsettia to buy, look at its flowers. The plants whose flowers haven’t opened up yet will last even longer than those whose flowers are already open. They look like tiny yellow daisies when open but they are so inconspicuous next to the showy bracts that many people don’t even notice them. A healthy poinsettia will last for weeks, if not months, before it loses its good looks. Then you can decide if you want to cut it back and grow it on as a houseplant or send it to the compost pile. Either way, poinsettias are a good investment, providing you with weeks of bright color.

Sticky Hands

I’ve passed this tip along before, but it was such a big help to me the year I discovered it, I’m passing it along again in case you missed it.

Anyone who handles or works with fresh greens or some kinds of pine cones has ended up with extremely sticky hands. Soap and water have no effect on this pitch and sap. The best solution I’ve found is the hand cleaner used by mechanics to remove grease and oil. The citrus oil based cleaning products also work well. Check the label – some of the citrus oil products can be used to get sap off your clothing, too, but read the label carefully first. If your tools get sticky, wipe them with a rag soaked in paint thinner and then apply a light coat of lubricating oil to prevent them from getting rusty.
Western Conifer Seed Bug  (I have a line drawing, too)

We’ve been getting a lot of calls about a rather large, strange looking bug showing up in people’s houses. Yes, it’s another one of those creatures that really doesn’t cause any problems, but likes to overwinter in our homes.

It’s called the Western Conifer Seed Bug, which means it’s originally from the western US and feeds on the cones of pines, spruce and hemlock. It does NOT harm these trees.

These bugs are easy to spot. They are quite large, about ¾” long with long legs that protrude from their sides, almost like a spider’s legs. They are usually seen walking slowly up a wall or window frame and many people comment that they have a rather prehistoric look to them. They are dull brown in color and their body is somewhat flattened. They give off a sharp, pungent odor when crushed and make a buzzing sound when they fly. When in doubt, please drop a sample by our office for identification.

Remember, these Western Conifer Seed Bug are *not* harmful! They are large and look funny, but they don’t bite, eat anything or lay eggs in your house. You might have seen a program on the nature channel about a harmful bug called the kissing bug. Although the bugs I’m talking about resemble that bug, they are different. They do not bite or sting or damage your house. No pesticides are recommended or necessary, just sweep or vacuum up the bugs and toss them outdoors. Luckily, they don’t appear in large numbers so they should be quite easy to deal with. I have had more calls this year than last year, so they do seem to be moving into the area, but they are more of a curiosity than a danger.

**Save Those Catalogs**

Along with all the gift catalogs arriving in the mail this time of year, be on the lookout for the many seed and nursery catalogs in your mailbox, too. You're plenty busy right now, so I suggest you set the garden catalogs aside in a safe place for now. Haul them out when you’re ready this winter and leaf through them for ideas of new plants to try, new arrangements for your garden,
and new tools or equipment. Even if you don’t order any seeds, plants or supplies through the mail, the catalogs are a useful resource.

We are forever telling gardeners to plan ahead to match the right plants to the right places in their yards. Read between the lines of sales hype in the catalogs for information about old favorites and new, improved cultivars you might want to try. Draw sketches of different garden layouts or new shrub groupings you might want to try next year. The color pictures in the catalogs will help keep you inspired during the short days of winter. Just be careful to curb all that enthusiasm a little before you place your final order!

Protect the Albertas
Dwarf Alberta spruce is a very popular shrub in our local landscapes, easily recognized by its near perfect ‘ice-cream cone’ shape and compact size. Its needles are fine and densely packed and since the plant grows so slowly it needs little if any pruning.

But this plant is also easy to recognize in the springtime when it turns a bright orange color just before it drops all the needles that died over the winter. The problem isn’t the cold; this plant is hardy throughout Canada. Dwarf Alberta spruce is quite susceptible to cold winter winds. The side(s) of the plant exposed to winter wind turns bright orange in spring and looks dead. In most cases the buds survive and the plant eventually fills back in, more or less. It’s rather simple to avoid this damage, however, if you simply wrap the plant in burlap or set up a wind barrier for it in early winter before the ground freezes (like right now).

This simple protection should be left in place until March and will help these compact little plants retain the good looks you originally selected them for. Do not plant these along a driveway, parking lot or any other site exposed to winter wind where setting up wind protection is impractical.

Water Your Tree
There are all kinds of ‘home remedy’ type of suggestions for helping your fresh Christmas tree last longer indoors. I’ve heard of adding pennies, aspirin, lemon-lime soda and all kinds of other things to the water in the tree stand. But nothing is more important than simply making sure there is water in the tree stand.

I know this sounds obvious but it’s happened to me, too. The first day or two inside (after you’ve made a fresh cut to the base of your tree before bringing it indoors) is when your tree will take up the most amount of water. It’s easy to forget to check the water level each night and morning. The problem is that when the cut end runs out of water the cut surface dries out and the tree begins to seal off the surface in an effort to conserve its moisture. This makes it harder for the tree to take up water once you refill the tree stand. The tree continues to lose moisture through the stomates in the needles through a process called respiration.

Your goal is to never let the cut surface dry out. You should check the level twice a day for the first couple of days, then once a day there after. This simple step will help your tree hold on to as much moisture as possible so it can hold on to its needles as long as possible.