

Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks and Home Horticulture

December 2021 Issue

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Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks and Home Horticulture is an online newsletter designed to provide citizens of Allen County and northeastern Indiana with up-to-date information about Horticulture and home issues, written in a lighthearted style! To subscribe, send an email to kemeryr7@frontier.com.

Pandemic Christmas

The American Christmas Tree Association has said this year's supply of real Christmas trees was squeezed by adverse weather in various parts of the nation, while supplies of artificial trees, largely coming from China, were affected by the same shipping and labor problems plaguing many industries.

The manufacturing time of artificial trees has roughly doubled since before the pandemic, and delivery from Southern China through the Panama Canal and to New York has increased from three weeks to eight.

Nearly 80 percent of household trees in the U.S. are artificial.

I looked at online prices of artificial trees from various sources. 7-ft trees start out at approximately \$200 – \$250 and can go up to \$1,000 for “premium” trees. The other thing I have noticed is increased costs for ornaments and accessories at online and local vendors because of shipping issues, inflation, and increased demand from consumers.

Live trees are a bit more cost-effective as prices run from \$45.00 - \$200.00 for most trees. There could be shortages of live you-cut trees because of tough growing conditions in the past, and increased demand for live trees from Millennials. When I purchased my 7-foot artificial pre-lit and “flocked” tree on sale several years ago at Big Lots for \$70.00, I had no idea what a deal that really was. Real trees make me sneeze, but I try and collect natural pods, cones, and dried or artificial flowers to decorate the tree to save money and be more “natural”.



This year I was going for an old - fashioned cats, cloth, and cones tree (see photo). The cones are harvested from blue spruce trees in the area, and honey locust pods from old honey locusts planted before the cultivars with no pods. I like cats despite and because of their many strange habits. There are two stuffed dogs on the tree, so dogs were not left out.

The cloth was purchased on Amazon after I realized I no longer had any flannel shirts. The oriental carpet on the wall is one of several I found at thrift stores for sound diffusion in my former living room – which is a studio for sound recording and video production.



Are Gas-Powered Mowers on the Way Out?

For many years, I have encouraged citizens to consider using electric lawn mowers and other landscape maintenance devices to reduce noise and air pollution. In my neighborhood, the peaceful tranquility of a calm weekend morning

is often interrupted by the constant drone of lawn mowers, weed whackers, and leaf blowers.

California and other cities across the nation have been banning gas-powered leaf blowers and mowers because of the air pollution those devices emit. Brookline, Massachusetts, has a seasonal ban on gas-powered leaf blowers, as does Montclair, New Jersey, and Burlington, Vermont.

Gas-powered tools emit pollutants that could lead to lung cancer, heart disease and respiratory problems, California lawmakers say. Using a gas-powered lawn mower for an hour generates the same amount of emissions roughly as a car driving from Los Angeles to Las Vegas, according to the California Air Resources Board.

Lawmakers in Illinois last year introduced a bill that, if passed, would ban the operation or sale of gas-powered leaf blowers. A similar bill in New York, introduced two months ago, now sits in a state Senate committee.

Some professional landscapers say they're open to switching to electric devices, but that battery-powered hedgers and leaf blowers don't yet pack enough power.

I know many folks are resistant to change. Yet many Gen-Z and Millennials are already willing to convert to systems that cause less air pollution. Some even use old time reel mowers to keep the lawn mowed.

My personal opinion is that over time, gas-powered mowers will become extinct. One might put the gas mower in a storage unit and wait 30 years - when it will become a priceless antique.

Demand for electric powered lawn equipment is expected to grow into a \$14.1 billion industry by 2024, according to market research from the Freedonia Group.

Congo Cake

My children would disagree, but I actually like Christmas. I especially miss the Christmases I spent long ago with my family. The Christmases were spent mostly drama free and were fun. We had fun spending time with each other, playing music, games, and enjoying delicious food. My mother was a really good cook. Her repertoire was limited to the basic recipes that were common – fried chicken, mashed potatoes, meat loaf, pot roast, etc.

One of my favorite desserts my mother made was not per usual. Her “Congo” cake was kind - of - like a brownie, but richer, with a light brown crust –it was and still is delicious. I believe it was a recipe given to her by a friend. That was very common in those days- as recipes were passed around to others – no Internet to showcase thousands of recipes in the blink of an eye. Many churches and organizations distributed favorite recipes by printing cookbooks as fundraisers.

One of the first “Congo” cake recipes was published in the Boston Globe sometime in the 1950s and spread all over New England. Some versions included coconut and other ingredients indigenous to tropical regions that seemed exotic to mid-century Yankees. —somehow the African Congo seemed likely as the source, though the Congo was never a producer of coconut (or chocolate or walnuts).

Another version of Congo Cake’s origin was that the recipe was introduced by Nestle’s Chocolate.

Another more likely theory is that the name “Congo” is slang for Congregational churches, where these bars were a potluck staple. Some folks say that “Blondies” are the same thing as Congo Cake - but they are not.



Following is a recipe for Congo cake – or squares – as they are sometimes called. Many folks tweak the recipe

- My daughter Jessica for instance – who uses 2 cups of flour for a lighter texture cake. My mother never used coconut in the recipe, and I don’t either. One thing is very important – don’t overcook the cake- it can turn out tougher than shoe leather if you do. Enjoy! Btw, my mother was a classic cheater at

cards. When playing Euchre, for instance, she would nonchalantly finger the diamond on her wedding ring when needing trump to be diamonds. Crafty....

Recipe:

2 3/4 cups sifted flour

2 1/2 tsp baking powder

1/2 tsp. salt

2/3 cup butter or shortening

2 1/4 cups (1 lb. box) dark brown sugar

3 eggs

1 cup nuts, such as walnut or pecans, chopped (optional – my mom never used nuts in the recipe)

16-ounce package semi-sweet chocolate morsels (don’t use any more or different chocolate types)

Procedure

1. Mix together and sift the flour, baking powder and salt. (Some folks do this in a separate bowl)
2. Melt the butter or shortening and mix well with the brown sugar. Let cool a few minutes.
3. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. (I refuse to do this, mixing by hand as my mother did)
4. Add dry ingredients, chocolate and or nuts to the wet ingredients. Mix well. There should be no flour visible after mixing.
5. Pour into greased pan about 10 1/2 x 15 1/2 x 3/4 inch. Or one can use a 9 x 13 pan.
6. Bake in 350-degree oven for 25 to 30 minutes. If using 9 x 13 pan, you will want to bake it 5 to 10 minutes longer.

Upside Down Christmas Trees

Everybody wants to be different and unique and have their own “voice”. This explains hair of all colors, copious tattoos, and rings and studs everywhere. It also explains upside down Christmas trees.

Upside down Christmas trees hanging from the ceiling have been popular historically in Eastern European countries. I think maybe excess high potency eggnog, or spirits of all sorts in small flasks are also involved in the decision-making process. Folklore from the Middle Ages credits a Benedictine monk named Saint Boniface who, according to legend, saw a group of pagans worshipping an oak tree. This prompted Boniface to cut down the tree, replacing it with a fir tree, before cutting up the fir tree and hanging it upside down as a way of explaining the Holy Trinity to the pagans. St. Boniface --- complex guy.

It was during the 12th Century when the upside-down trend really took off, with a tradition called *podlazniczek*. Polish people used "fruit, nuts, sweets wrapped in shiny paper, straw, ribbons, gold-painted pinecones" to decorate a spruce hanging upside down from the ceiling in the center of the room.

It was not uncommon in the 19th Century for some to hang upside-down Christmas trees from the rafters of home, particularly for poorer families. "In the small common rooms of the lower classes," Bernd Brunner explains in his book, *Inventing Christmas*, "there was simply no space." At Galleries' Lafayette in Paris, there's a magnificent upside-down Christmas tree hanging from the ceiling, adorned with purple-hued crystals and jewels that make for the ultimate festive showstopper.

Singer Ariana Grande stirred up excitement on Instagram in 2018 when she shared a photo of an upside-down Christmas tree in her Los Angeles home. "You've got many talents," one person wrote, while another commented, "I need my house [to] look like this." Stirring up excitement on Instagram doesn't seem that difficult – though making a pancake out of Shake and Bake mix probably stirs up more excitement.



If you're a fan of the look of an upside-down Christmas tree and would like to incorporate it into your own festive décor this year, London-based Interior Designer, Rudolph Diesel, shared his top tips on how you can make the most of this trend. " There is no right or wrong, no rules... so just go for it," he tells "I would start by making it the feature and move anything out of the way that might distract the eye. Christmas trees are usually a feature in a room, but the mistake people make is surrounding them with furniture and other accessories. In this case, you want the tree to truly take center stage—a truly bold, eye-catching statement." Rudy, I would suggest another career.

Some upside-down trees are not hung from the ceiling, as the tree shown with its rather cheap-looking stand (available from Wal-Mart for about \$200.00). To me it looks like a green version of the leg lamp in the movie "The Christmas Story.



We Apologize for the Inconvenience

I have become less tolerant with age. Little disappointments and obstacles that I used to shrug off now are a big deal. I mean how difficult is it to do things correctly? What I am really tired of is the phrase "We apologize for the inconvenience" when the company or individuals who messed up even the simplest of tasks don't regret anything at all. Examples follow:

"We are sorry we messed up your take-out order and acknowledge that you asked 17 times for catsup packets to be included with your order of French fries. We cannot explain the lack of listening skills involved to blatantly ignore such a request." We apologize for the inconvenience

We take full responsibility for the fact that we overcharged your account several thousand dollars due to a clerical error causing a negative balance, overdraft fees of over a thousand dollars, and your credit score going to zero – which by the way – we never thought possible. We promise to do our utmost best to remedy this situation within the next several weeks – or so. We value you as a customer and are deeply sorry and apologize for the inconvenience

We are deeply sorry for inadvertently towing your new 2022 BMW– loaded with extra features – from the driveway of your home. We somehow went to the wrong address to repossess a 2011 Chevy Volt. The service person sent to repossess the vehicle somehow did not know the difference between a Chevy Volt and a BMW. We also deeply regret that the vehicle was taken to the junkyard and crushed for scrap. Look at it this way – every setback is an opportunity – maybe a Mercedes is in your future. We apologize for the inconvenience

Amazon is aware that our East Coast server is down, resulting in total mayhem and foolishness. We will fix it when we get around to it – in the meantime who really cares if your precious Netflix is down, and your Alexa doesn't respond to any commands? She doesn't respond to any commands anyway. We do apologize for any inconvenience that our total domination of the Internet has caused ...Yawn...

We made a wee bit of an error in calculating the trajectory of a large comet and a Mount Everest-sized asteroid which are now on a definite collision course with our beloved yet mistreated Earth. We are very sad and disappointed to announce that these objects will collide with Earth on New Years Eve 2021/22, resulting in the end of life as we know it and a possible return of dinosaurs. Talk about a rocking New Year's Eve... We apologize for the inconvenience

Nutmeg

Nutmeg is actually a spice made from the seed of a tropical tree that is native to Banda, the largest of the Molucca spice islands of Indonesia.

The English word *nutmeg* comes from the Latin *nux*, meaning nut, and *muscat*, meaning musky. Nutmeg has a distinctive pungent fragrance and a warm slightly sweet taste. It's used to flavor many kinds of baked goods, confections, puddings, potatoes, pastas, meats, sausages,



sauces, vegetables, and such beverages as eggnog. It was thought to be a cure for the plague, and its active ingredient is used in some cancer medicines, medicines for kidney disease, inflammation, and in treatment for rheumatism. Nutmeg oils are used to scent soaps and perfumes. Nutmeg oil is distilled from worm-eaten nutmeg seeds. The worms remove much of the starch and fat, leaving the portions of the seed that are rich in oil.

The fleshy membrane surrounding the nutmeg seed are the source of the spice **mace**, which has a sweeter warmer, flavor than nutmeg. It also adds an orange yellow color to dishes, similar to that of saffron.



Nutmeg and mace were discovered around the 1st century A.D. when Roman author Pliny wrote of a tree bearing nuts with two flavors. In the 1600s the Dutch East India Company took control of all but one of the Banda Islands and enslaved the native populace. They imposed the death penalty on anyone suspected of selling nutmeg without the permission of the Company. When a few islanders ignored the threat, the head of the Company, Jan Pieterszoon Coen - ordered the beheading of every Banda male over the age of 15.

The Dutch control of the nutmeg industry ended when Pierre Poivre, a French horticulturalist smuggled out nutmeg seeds and successfully transplanted trees planted in the French colonies of Mauritius. Eventually the nutmeg tree was grown in Singapore, India, Sri Lanka, the West Indies, and most notably Grenada, where it is one the island's major exports. However, according to the Illinois Poison Center, even 5 grams (approximately 1 teaspoon) of nutmeg is enough to cause symptoms of toxicity. Nutmeg contains a substance called *myristicin*, a narcotic with very unpleasant toxic side effects. Ingestion of small amounts of nutmeg is harmless to the body, including the amounts called for in all standard recipes. Pregnant women should not ingest large amounts of nutmeg as they risk birth defects or miscarriage. Nutmeg can be especially dangerous when mixed with other drugs. Cooking with nutmeg in small amounts is perfectly safe, so enjoy nutmeg in your favorite holiday recipes.

Hank's Big Adventure

— compiled from *Newsweek*

Hank, a 1½-year-old cat, usually spent his days in his yard in Northeast Washington and sometimes wandered into the garden of the nuns who lived on the block. He enjoyed sniffing their flowers.

Hank lived with Delores Bushong, 74, who got him from a rescue shelter in the Shenandoah Valley area.



Hank's big adventure, as Bushong and the animal rescue volunteers dubbed it, started Nov. 6.

Bushong had gone to a farmers market and come home when she realized Hank hadn't come in for his midday snack with Effie, his 2½-year-old sister. The siblings are indoor and outdoor cats.

She looked for him, calling out his name, in alleys and streets around her home near Hamlin and King streets in the Langdon neighborhood. As it got dark, she started to worry.

Then she heard a cat crying, looked up and spotted Hank, stuck in a neighbor's tree.

Bushong believes Hank got under a fence and then got spooked by a neighbor's dogs. The more scared he got, animal rescue experts suggested, the higher he climbed.

"Cats have an amazing ability to climb up trees, but actually they aren't that good at climbing down," said Dan D'Eramo, director of field services for the Humane Rescue Alliance.

Bushong now worried about getting him down. The Humane Rescue Alliance took the lead, but it was no easy task. They called the D.C. fire department, which said they couldn't go up in the tree for him with their ladders.

Then Bushong called a construction company to ask about renting scaffolding but was told she would have to book the equipment 48 days in advance. Renting a tall ladder was expensive and hard to find.



Hank obviously has been eating well

Bushong called Casey Trees, where she's a volunteer, and they sent an expert, who analyzed Hank's predicament and said it wasn't safe for a person to go up the tree because the branches weren't sturdy.

Ed Baptiste, the neighbor whose tree Hank had climbed, let Bushong sit in his backyard to be near him. She said sometimes she'd just take the newspaper and sit under the tree, occasionally trying to talk Hank down, but that didn't work.

"I could hear him crying, and my neighbors could hear him crying," Bushong said. "I think it really got to people's hearts."

One of the volunteers in Hank’s rescue suggested Bushong call the owner of a nearby pest control business, EJ’s Pest Control, which had a tall ladder. She did and the owner — Ijeoma Maduforo-Barry — told her she could use her 42-foot-tall ladder.

“I wanted to make sure they were all taken care of,” Maduforo-Barry said. “I don’t have any pets, but I’m human, and I do have a soft heart.”

One neighbor gave a can of sardines to put out to try to lure Hank down - but no luck. By the fifth day of Hank’s adventure, word had gotten around at the offices of the Humane Rescue Alliance about the failed rescue attempts.

Lydia Krassensky, who works on the agency’s customer care team, told another staff member how her sister and brother-in-law years ago had set up a rope system and a basket, with a few items inside that had their scent to lure their cat and successfully lowered it from a tree.

Word of Krassensky’s idea spread: Her colleague D’Eramo — who had tried every trick of luring cats out of trees that he’d ever used in his 12 years at the D.C. animal group — decided to give it a try.

With ropes and a contraption that shot a bean bag into the tree and looped some string around a branch, they maneuvered into place a small crate with special items inside — catnip, a pair of Bushong’s slippers, a cat scratch pad, and a fuzzy blanket. They put it in just the right spot, and Hank took the bait: He jumped in.

The 33 people who’d helped in the rescue effort were surprised it worked. When he got to the ground, Bushong scooped Hank into her arms, and he purred. Afterward, Hank went inside, ate and rested in his favorite armchair. The next day, Bushong recalled, when he wanted to go outside, “I said, ‘Oh no.’ ”

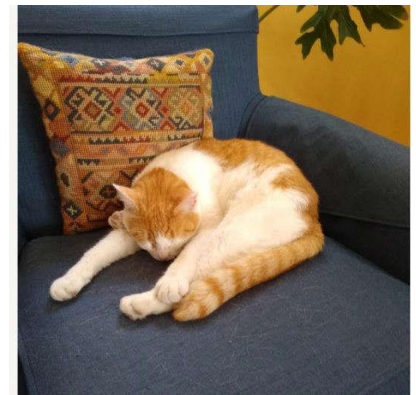
Bushong put chicken wire under a few gaps at the bottom of her fence and her neighbor’s so Hank couldn’t prowl into his yard.

For her, Hank’s adventure became a lesson about neighbors helping neighbors.

I can’t believe how many people went out of their way to help me with this cat.

... No one ever said, ‘You’re being ridiculous,’” Bushong said. “It made me

feel good that I live in a neighborhood where people would help to do whatever they could to get him down.



Hank rests on his favorite chair



Hoggles – Demented Cat Logic

To my caregiver: What’s the deal with Hank? This very large and out-of shape feline is rewarded for stupid? I am heading for the nearest tree to pretend I am “stuck” to receive the attention and food rewards I deserve....

Long Ago and Far Away

My mother's family lived in and around Lafayette, Indiana. During the late 1950's and early 1960's, Lafayette seemed very far away. My mother left her family behind when she married my father. He was from Columbia City, Indiana, where I was born, and worked for Dana Corporation for 28 years. My father loved the lakes, so he commuted from Hamilton Lake to Fort Wayne every day and sometimes many weekends. My mom missed her family and saw them very little. They wrote letters back and forth to keep in touch. Real handwritten letters full of news and events and pleas for her to visit. My mother was the oldest daughter of eleven children. Her father had died young, so the family was raised by her mother Edith, who was about 4 ½ feet in height and very formidable.



Downtown Logansport Indiana
circa 1960

Sometimes my mother convinced my father to take her to family reunions' and rarely - Christmas - with her family in Lafayette. Since my father worked so much, we had to make the trip all in one day. It took about 4 ½ hours to get from Hamilton to downtown Lafayette in those days. There were no freeways, by-passes – and it was almost all a two-lane highway. This would drive my father crazy, as he did not like to be slowed down by traffic.

We seemed to always get behind a slow truck, a farm vehicle, or other families making the Christmas trek. When there was a straight stretch of road, - which was rare - my father would accelerate rapidly in an effort to make it around as many vehicles as possible. There were many close calls when everyone held their breath until we made it by.



An early 60's T bird exactly like my father's T-bird. The hood opened from the driver's side.

My father loved T-birds, which were unusual and sporty, but were not the best family travel vehicle. My two sisters and I shared the small, cramped back seat. I always got the middle.

I passed away the time by reading road signs. I had just learned to read and I loved reading books of all sorts. I read every sign along the road out loud – announcing proudly every gas station, restaurant, or highway road sign along the way. I am sure I drove my family crazy. I was like a savant – the words came out without me really thinking. I remember my parents being surprised on how many difficult words I knew. I especially loved the small Burma Shave signs which told a story as they advertised, and the large Mail Pouch tobacco signs painted on barns. The long road took us through every town along the way: Waterloo, Auburn, Huntington, Wabash, Peru, Logansport, Americus - to name a few. It is hard to explain to others now about the sense of space that existed where there wasn't much at all except fields, forests, and clouds between towns.

Gas stations were located occasionally along the road. Gas contained lead and cost about 40 cents a gallon. A service station attendant would always come out to pump the gas in the car after the bell rang when you parked by the pumps. They always checked the oil and water and cleaned off the windows while we waited.

I loved the trains that would come and go almost the same speed of the car. Sometimes we would see the conductor in the engine car as we passed by. Sometimes they would blow the train whistle on the way by to amuse us kids.



Finally, we made it to my grandmother’s house for Christmas. I was very shy, and always felt out of place when we arrived. There were no boys my age, but my three cousins, Randy, Beth, and Kim always made me feel welcome. Randy in particular was very outgoing. Her hair was a brilliant red-orange and she teased me a lot. I took to calling her the Chicken Hawk based after a cartoon, and the nickname stuck over the years. Red hair ran in the family, evidence of the Irish ancestry that both of my grandparents had. My Mom’s brothers and sisters were boisterous and fun – loving. After stuffing themselves on turkey and the fixings- including my Mom’s Congo cake-which was a favorite – the adults all played cards – either Euchre or penny ante poker. I would sit and listen to them laugh, tell stories, and jokes.

Even though I always complained about going on the long trip, it always seemed too soon when it was time to leave. One thing that made to long trip back easier was the Christmas decorations that lined the streets of each town. It seemed as if the whole town put out decorations to line the street. Each town was like a colorful oasis in the rural wilderness. The town of Logansport was especially festive.

On the way back, we always stopped at the Don Hall’s restaurant located on Coliseum Blvd. by the Roller Dome in Fort Wayne. It was very unusual for the entire family ever to eat at a restaurant together. I remember the hamburgers and fries were delicious, and I always finished the meal off with a delicious strawberry malt. It made the rest of the trip easier. Once home we collapsed into our beds safe and warm. Of course, nowadays I look on those trips fondly and with some sadness. The world was simpler then and my mother, fathers, and all my moms brothers and sisters are all gone. I was sad to hear recently that the original Don Hall’s on Bluffton Road is closing.

I guess as I have become older, I realize how important it is to cherish the good times, and the people who are close to you. It seems as if the “olden days” are always better days, compared to any generation. The world nowadays is definitely more complex, crowded, and expensive as my days as a youth. Try and cherish the holiday season, no matter what generation you belong to - don’t take yourself or others too seriously and try to make a positive difference in the world. It all passes by much too quickly.



Downtown Fort Wayne 1962
Christmas

Winter Identification of Walnuts

Recently a reader asked me to look at a grove of trees planted by the fire station near Holland Elementary School in Fort Wayne. I visited the property and found the grove of trees. I sent a friend to collect twig samples, since there were no leaves on the trees.



I knew immediately the trees were walnuts. I cut into the stem to find the pith contained little nautilus - shaped chambers (see picture). The leaf scars – where the compound leaves were attached earlier in the year - looked like a shield carried by a Knight of the Round Table. I learned about tree identification from the best Purdue instructors ever - Dr James Tabloski and Dr. Harrison Flint. From them, I not only learned about how to identify trees and landscape shrubs, but I also tried to later teach my students about the value of trees. I would tell my students they were blind to the world around them, and knowing what was around them gave nature even more value.

To me, trees are like friends - each has unique qualities that make them special. Some trees carry baggage and drama and have quirks or issues that can be annoying. Some trees live just nearby, and others come from exotic places from all over the world. They are all special and make the world more beautiful by them just being trees.

These trees by the fire station were part of a research study by a professor of forestry at Purdue named Walt Beinke. Dr. Beinke was developing walnuts that grew quicker and produced superior nuts than existing walnuts in the trades. These walnuts were developed and were sold by selected growers who agreed to not propagate and sell the trees in their own. I am pretty sure that Holland Elementary students and teachers planted and monitored the trees. Chris Danly (also an advanced Master Gardener) was the wonderful teacher at Holland who taught students how to grow vegetables and flowers and taught them a love of nature by developing a pond located on the property.

I was sad to see almost all the raised beds and teaching areas near the school had been removed. After Chris retired, the school decided a math and science curriculum was more important that what she taught, not realizing that one can integrate a science-based curriculum with a nature based one. They really can work together. Such a shame.



Chambered pith of a walnut



Shield-shaped leaf scar

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