

# Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks

## and Home Horticulture

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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](mailto:kemeryr7@frontier.com).

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## Primetime 39

Your truly will be appearing live with Bruce Haines on Primetime 39 on Friday May 3 to discuss a "Celebration of Spring" from 7 - 7:30 PM on PBS Channel 39. I will answer live questions from viewers and talk about some neat perennials to plant in our garden, with a few tips to make our gardening lives easier. These go by fast but are a lot of fun!

## Star-of-Bethlehem



What isn't fun is to suddenly discover an extremely aggressive weed that appears in the garden in many areas. Sigh....

Star-of Bethlehem is a member of the lily family. It is believed to have originated in the Mediterranean region in countries such as Italy, Greece, and Turkey. The flower was highly regarded by the Egyptians, who used it for medicinal purposes and as an offering to their gods.

It is a highly aggressive poisonous plant that in my opinion should not be grown by anyone in our area. Interestingly searches on the web about this plant are confusing because many sites list information on how to grow it like an ornamental in a garden. It is also offered for sale by many internet sources.

Star-of-Bethlehem is a perennial in our area, and actually grows during the winter months and emerges in early spring. It has leaves with a distinct white midrib on older foliage.

It has naturalized in the Eastern United States. It grows especially well in disturbed and degraded waste areas.

It was introduced into the United States as an ornamental plant. No one is sure of exactly when that occurred. The plant has a ton of common names, which suggest the plant was also brought by settlers to the Americas. Here are some common names: Arabian flowers, field onions, wonder flowers, dove's dung, bird's milk, chinchinchee, common star of Bethlehem, nap at noon, pigeon dung, sleepy Dick, snowdrops, star flower, summer snowflake, and ten o'clock lady.

One common name of the plant, 'Star of Bethlehem', is based on its star-shaped flowers and referred to the Star of Bethlehem that appeared in the biblical account of Jesus birth. This plant is listed as a Class C Noxious Weed in the State of Alabama.

Star-of Bethlehem produces white flowers during the late spring and lasts about 2 weeks. There is a pleasant floral scent. The flowers open during the morning and usually close by noon. Some younger plants don't produce flowers at all.

Some folks develop skin rashes simply by handling the plant.

The bulb consists of alkaloids and is poisonous to grazing animals. A few people have died as a result of thinking the bulbs were wild onions and eating them.

If nothing is done, then the plants will continue to spread and take over an entire garden.. For small areas, digging the plant carefully to remove the entire plant can help eradicate it. Once an infested area becomes too large for physical removal, control is very difficult. Often one must excavate an entire area and start again. Herbicides such as Speed Zone applied many times can control smaller infestations. It is a nasty invasive weed.



## The Path of Totality

Many years ago my friend Gwendra and I visited a place in Ohio called Hocking Hills. It was a beautiful place filled with waterfalls and caverns. On our way back we cut across Ohio and found ourselves near a very large lake called Grand Lake near Celinas, Ohio. We purchased cold cuts and chips and found a picnic area on the shore. We shot video footage and enjoyed the view. It was beautiful.

When it came time to think about viewing the total eclipse, we saw that the path of totality passed right through where the lake was. We traveled south from Fort Wayne to the lake and found a place near a long peninsula jutting out to an island. We found a place to have lunch next to two large boulders near the path. We were surrounded on three sides by water.

As the total eclipse became nearer, everything became strangely quiet. The shadows on the ground became less distinct.

It became much cooler. Quite suddenly, the day turned into night. Stars became visible in the sky. We heard cheers from all across the lake from people watching the event. It was magical and moving. It was wonderful to share the experience of it all with my best friend. For once I just felt the joy of being alive.



## Flowering Pears Everywhere

It was interesting that in southeastern Ohio, we saw no flowering pears growing in waste areas or woods. Near Fort Wayne, the pears are everywhere. For some reason two different types of flowering pear crossed and began to produce seeds that were carried to areas by birds. It is difficult to travel anywhere without seeing the original trees planted in neighborhoods and city streets, and their offspring – filling unoccupied waste areas and forests everywhere. It is sad to think one can still purchase flowering pears in nurseries. But even if

the trees were not available, the problem with flowering pears appears insurmountable. Currently there are not enough resources available anywhere to remove these trees. Maybe someday a disease or insect will appear or be introduced to cull these trees. For now, they continue to spread rampantly into waste areas, occupying areas where once native plants were found. Too bad the eclipse didn't kill them.

## Verbena Bonariensis

Verbena Bonariensis is a reseeding annual which can be used in our gardens in this area to attract pollinators.

This plant was first grown as a garden ornamental in 1726 by Englishmen James & William Sherard, who got the seeds from a dried specimen sent back England from Buenos Aires, Argentina.

The species name *bonariensis* means it comes from Buenos Aires. This very tall verbena is native to South America but has naturalized in the United States from North Carolina to Florida and west to Texas. Some experts consider it a weed that spreads by reseeding – especially in the south. This species of verbena is commonly known as tall verbena, Brazilian verbena and purple top vervain, It grows taller than all other verbenas that we use as bedding and container annuals.

This pretty plant produces clusters of small purple flowers on top of long, stiff stems which, despite their height, won't topple. Verbena bonariensis leaves cluster in a rosette at the base of plants and are minimal on the flowering stems. All in all, tall verbena is reassuringly low maintenance, with minimal care needs.

The dark green leaves are very narrow and very sparse, so the plants are remarkably light and airy. They can be put at the front of the border without blocking the plants behind. Plant in groups to create a lilac haze, or scatter here and there to provide color through the garden. Even mature gardens can accommodate this upright, narrow annual, which reseeds itself to create pleasant surprises the following year. A first-rate cut flower.

In addition to butterflies and songbirds, keep an eye out for hummingbirds to stop by this plant (which is sometimes called purple top verbena) that can grow to be 4 feet tall. Plant it in an area with full to part sun for the best season-long displays of purple flowers to draw in pollinators.



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# Landscaping Mistakes

As it turns out, spending money on landscaping is the last expense that people think about when purchasing a house. Often trips to a garden center to purchase plants for a landscape are spent looking for bargains and placing plants in a landscape haphazardly. Often landscapes can become overgrown when plants are not sited properly, or plants placed too close together. Then landscapes can look like the photos below when the landscapes are ignored and not properly maintained.



An improperly placed large shrub that overgrows the house



Yew or privet hedges become maintenance nightmares



Way too many plants in too small of a space



Planting flowers in a "well" around trees results in rotting tree trunks over time



One or two trees would be more than enough for this space



Row of arborvitae in a wet area very bad.. now what do you do?



Huge spruce on the corner of a house = poor root growth and a leaning tower of spruce



Gravel / rocks around trees only temporarily controls weeds. Once weeds move in- and they will- weed control becomes a nightmare.

# Primrose That I Have Known – and Grown

Primroses represent eternal love. In Irish folklore, primroses in the doorway protected the home from fairies.

The name primrose derives from the Latin word, *primus*, meaning “early” or “first”. This is because these are typically the very first flowers you’ll see bloom in the spring. There are some species that are very common in England, which you may have even heard of the English Primrose. It blooms freely all throughout Great Britain and is a favorite of many royals. .

In England and Europe, primroses, along with their close relations, cowslips and oxlips, bloom in March. All three are yellow-flowered and were considered to be variations of a single species by Linnaeus, the Swedish naturalist who devised our modern classification system. Later, botanists assigned a discrete specific name to each.



Primrose is an extremely large genus of more than 400 species of mostly low-growing, herbaceous perennials. Many primrose are low growing flowers grown in greenhouses in our area because they are adapted to cooler conditions. Some folks grow these primrose as houseplants, and sometimes put them outdoors in shaded areas. Even then they tend to be short-lived.

In New England a primrose with its dainty single blossoms, each balanced on a 6-inch stem, became *P. vulgaris*; the cowslip, bearing umbels of little bright-yellow flowers, and the oxlip, with one-sided clusters of larger moonlight-yellow blossoms,

I have not grown cowslip, though I like the look of it. These types of primrose are popular in New England. They prefer shaded areas and are a cottage garden favorite.

Primroses have been around since ancient times. They were used medicinally by ancient Greeks and Romans. Fast forward to medieval times, where primroses symbolized spring and rebirth

The common Evening primrose is a species many are familiar with. This tall perennial is a big attraction to birds, and deer do not find these flowers attractive at all. These flowers are easy to maintain. If you don’t like the fuss of worrying with the many different insect and disease problems that often affect other types of flowers, you’ll discover that this species of flower seems to be free of diseases and insects that often plague other species of plants and flowers.



The Missouri evening primrose is a herbaceous flowering perennial of the *Onagraceae*, or the evening primrose family. Native to the southern and central United States, the plant is often found growing naturally in dry forest clearings, along roadsides, in limey soils, and on well-lit and well-draining rocky bluffs.

Reaching a mature size of approximately nine to 12 inches tall and 12 to 18 inches wide, *O. macrocarpa* has a low and sprawling habit.

The plant flaunts two- to four-inch, lance-shaped green leaves alongside yellow, fragrant, and floppy flowers, which are about three to four inches wide. Beginning in summer, the show-stopping flowers open in the evening, leaving them ready for pollination from night-flying insects such as sphinx moths. The following morning, the flowers close up and expire. But don't worry – new flowers will take their place throughout a beautiful blooming period of at least two whole months! This low growing species can spread in some gardens, so one has to keep an eye out for volunteer plants.

Tina James evening primrose is a fast growing biennial. The first year it grows as a foot-wide evergreen rosette of broad, pointed leaves that may mound to 6 inches tall. In the spring of its second year it sends up branched but erect growing stems that reach 3-4 feet tall. Tina James is believed to be a garden hybrid between *O. elata* and *O. biennis* that occurred in Europe during the 19th century. It has been known since at least 1860 and was introduced back to the United States during this period where it escaped back into the wilds.

This primrose was forgotten until Tina Nield, then living in Frizzellburg, MD, walked down the lane to buy some milk from her neighbors. As dusk arrived, she was blown away when this non-descript flower in their pasture suddenly burst into bloom. They dug a plant for her and sent her home with both the milk and a plant that would later bear her name.

Over the next few years she grew the plant, eventually providing seeds to the Virginia based Southern Exposure Seed Exchange, which introduced seeds of "Tina James" in 1987. Tina James is a stage name Nield took when she performed as "Aunt Tina" on a Maryland based PBS show about organic gardening.

Tina James evening primrose is a fast, easy to grow biennial that requires full sun and any reasonable garden soil to thrive. If you want it to bloom year-after-year, then keep an area around the plant bare so seedlings can develop, grow, and then flower in succeeding years. It is a great conversation plant for evening cookouts when all can gather round to watch the plant bloom in seconds when the sun goes down. It is scarce in the trades, and one might have to seed an area to get Tina James started on its two-year cycles.

## Mole Recap

I receive lots of questions from folks about moles in the yard. This would be the time of the year when moles become active, and their tunneling behavior causes great consternation for homeowners.

Here are some mole facts:

Moles do not eat vegetation or roots of plants. Their absolute favorite food are earthworms.

Moles have decently large territories, so usually in an average yard, there is only one mole mom who tunnels around the yard looking for food (previously named earthworms).

The mole mom raises her kits during the winter and early spring. In late spring she has had enough and drives away her kits to find their own territory – usually a neighboring yard or field.

Even if something bad happens to mom- other moles nearby quickly take over her tunnel network.

When moles search for food they use active tunnels to reach particular areas. These active tunnels are often found on the edges or perimeter of the property or along sidewalks or shrub rows.



To find active tunnels, tamp down the soil of the suspected tunnel and see if the mole comes by to fix it. If so it is an active run.

To try and control moles one can try to set traps in active runs. Scissor traps have been shown to be most effective. One has to set the trap in the tunnel so that the mole must go through the trap in the tunnel to be killed. These traps have a lot of tension and can be difficult and even somewhat dangerous to set. Sometimes clever moles will go around the trap, so one might have to drive stakes in the ground near the run to prevent this from happening. Harpoon or spike traps can also be used, but research shows they are not quite as effective.



One newer way to trap and control moles is to use poison baits that look like earthworms. These baits can be placed inside an active run. The hope is the mole will eat the bait and perish. Do not be lured into using poison grain baits for moles. Moles do not eat grain- they eat earthworms.

One can hire critter control folks to trap the moles for you. They are quite expensive, but some folks are willing to pay the price to avoid unsightly mole tunneling.

Oh by the way, moles don't eat chewing gum, they don't care about vibrations from whirrigig or sonic devices, and castor oil drenches usually are not effective. Effects to flood mole tunnels or pump car exhaust or even blow up tunnels can be disastrous.



## Hoggles – Demented Cat Logic

I am formally denying your request to go out into the yard and kill moles for you. I think they are cute little furry creatures, and I could care less if your precious grass is not perfect. I have spoken....

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