

Horticulture Hints

Gardening is how I relax. It's another form of creating and playing with colors. -Oscar de la Renta

December/January 2021-22

Yes, I missed December. It was a very busy time, and writing was just out of my wheelhouse at that time. I will try to make up for lost time.

I believe our last time together I talked about getting my soil tested...no, I didn't do anything about that either. I'm going to really try to get that done this month, so I'll have something to report next month. I did say last month that I didn't know if there was any plant that liked to grow in alkaline soil, and I have since found out that begonias like to be slightly alkaline. That may explain my lack of success in growing some begonias. I kind of assumed they were like other plants I was familiar with, like ivies and corn plants. So, I can repot my begonias that are not doing so well. Report to come later.

In my fall garden I started kale (Brassica) in two different beds. In one bed was Red Russian (Brassica napus), and the other Blue Vates (Brassica oleracea). Though planted at the same time, the Red Russian was ready to eat about two weeks before the Blue Vates. That was a little surprising, considering the



Brassica napus var Red Russian

fact that RR had an anticipated mature time of 60 days, and the BV 55 days. But it's been very warm this winter, and kale does better in cooler weather. I wonder if the warmth had anything to do with the difference, and I look forward to seeing if cooler weather is on the horizon for us.



Brassica oleracea (Tuscan)

Kale is first mentioned as a food in literature in the Mediterranean and Asia Minor around 2000 BCE. It's thought to have originated with wild cabbages, and brought into domestication. From there, it spread northeast and northwest into Europe and Russia. Red Russian kale came to us through Canada, brought by Russian fur traders coming across the Bering Strait. The

Vates kales were taken to Scotland, where they became a staple food known as a 'gap crop', the one thing that could be depended on between harvests of other crops. The Europeans then brought kale to the 'New World'. For most of the twentieth century, kales have been used for decorative purposes only. During World War II, however, growing of kale and other vegetables was encouraged by the Dig for Victory campaign. Kale was inexpensive, easy to grow and procure seeds, and filled nutritional needs left by rationing. Still today, seeds are easy to find, not expensive, and easy to grow in the cooler season we enjoy right now.



Ornamental Kale

The kales we enjoy today fall basically into three categories: the curly kales, which are ruffled or flat, green or purple, and taste like cabbage; Tuscan kale leaves have smooth edges, but the leaves themselves are bumpy, slightly sweeter, and more tender when cooked; and decorative kale, which is edible, but tougher and less palatable than other kales.

On other fronts, if you should need to move any of your ornamentals, January is a great time to do this. Since they are fully or partially dormant, they should move well. Try to get as much of the root ball as possible, cutting roots by hand if necessary, and use an old nursery pot, or a tarp to move it to its new location. Dig a hole twice as wide as the root ball, but only just as deep. A method that I swear by these days is to fill the hole with water one or two times, then let it all drain out. Plant your ornamental, putting a little compost and a small amount of all purpose fertilizer in the backfill. Then water well, and your ornamental should be good to go for spring.

I know all of you got at least one poinsettia around the Christmas holiday. So what to do with it now? Yeah, you can compost it, but if you're like me, you just hate to compost a perfectly good plant. How about either potting it up, or putting it in the ground? If you choose to pot it up, choose a container only just a little bigger than what it's currently in. Keep it in the house or outside, best in bright light, but not direct sun. But protect it from cold. Bring it in the house if the temperature goes much below 50 degrees. In a pot, it's more susceptible to the cold. However, if you choose to put it in the ground, you can place it (see instructions above) in full or partial sun. Plan to fertilize monthly. According to Tom Maccubbin, in March, cut the plant back to within twelve inches of the ground. Then when it produces ten to twelve inches of new growth, cut back the top six inches of each shoot. Continue pruning this way until August. Then, starting mid-October, make sure the plant receives no light at night. You should be ready to show off your beautiful poinsettia for the holidays in 2022.

Happy gardening! Cheers!