

# Horticulture Hints

**You can't buy happiness. But you can buy plants, and that's pretty much the same thing. —**

**Unknown**

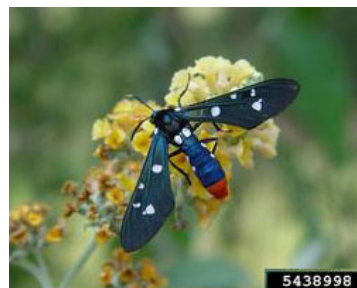
May 2022

The beginning of May shows oleanders (Nerium oleander) in full bloom, and they are



Nerium oleander

beautiful! The oleander is evergreen, fast growing, and can become a large shrub or



Oleander Moth

small tree, and the flowers are long-lasting, with some varieties being fragrant. They are tolerant of sea spray, and can form a great hedge if your home needs some privacy. How could you ask for more? But unfortunately, these beautiful plants come with a dark side. Every part of the plant is toxic to pets and children. And

the oleander moth (also known as Uncle Sam moth or polka dot moth - you can see why from the pictures) can do massive damage to them in a fairly short period of time. I had three of these in my front yard for privacy, but had to give them up, because I just couldn't keep up with the caterpillars once they discovered them. I did battle for three years. Once the weather warmed up a bit, the moths showed up. Shortly thereafter, the caterpillars. By the dozens. Sometimes, the flowers never stood a chance. Not wanting to spray, I dutifully filled a bowl each morning with soap and water, and went out to drown the little buggars. I discovered what the eggs looked like, and was able to get ahead of them for a short time, but not for



Oleander Moth Caterpillar

long. I finally gave up, put the shrubs in pots and moved them to the back yard. The moths moved on, never discovering that the plants had moved. Some years I get lovely flowers, other years I get none. One of the shrubs has hung on, but two of them bit the dust. The remaining red one never does as well as it did in the ground, but at least I can move it around if I have to. Several times I almost discarded it, but just couldn't bring myself to do that.

If you decide that the battle is worth it, here are some things to help you. They do best in full sun. Any less than that, they can become leggy, and may not bloom as profusely. They originated in northern Africa and the eastern Mediterranean, and are members of the Apocynaceae family, along with star jasmine and periwinkles (also called vinca). Oleanders can bloom throughout the year, especially in warmer weather. Blooms form on new growth, so if you decide to prune for shape or size, do so in the fall, so new growth (hence blooms) will not be compromised when warmer weather happens. The mature plants can become small trees, ten to eighteen feet in height, or kept as a mounding shrub, up to ten feet tall and across. They thrive in all kinds of soil, but do require good drainage, and are drought tolerant, rarely needing supplemental watering. They can benefit from occasional fertilization, but don't require it. There are single- and double-flowered varieties. The single-flowered varieties drop the spent petals cleanly, but it seems that the double-flowered varieties stay unattractively on the plant, and may need to be dead headed.

In doing research for summer food crops for our area, I have watched a number of Youtube videos, and have found several Youtubers in USDA growing zones very similar to ours, with one or two in Australia. I've been trying to find out what can be grown here in warm weather besides okra and sweet potatoes. Although I love okra and sweet potatoes, it just doesn't do to eat them seven suppers out of seven. I've found a number of things with which to experiment. Top of the list for me is chayote squash. If you've never heard of this vegetable, go to Walmart and check out the produce section. They always seem to have them in stock.

Chayote squash grow on a climbing vine, similar in appearance to a cucumber vine. The fruit itself is pear-shaped, looking a little like a super bumpy, pale greenish-yellow avocado. Some varieties have soft spines. The flesh is firm and white with a large edible seed. If left several weeks on the countertop, roots will start to grow out of the large end. It can be eaten raw or cooked, and when cooked, retains a smooth, firm texture. They have a slightly bland flavor that lends itself well to just about any other flavor you want



Chayote with both roots & vine

to put with it. It's used for salads, soups, stews, and even pies. And they're high in vitamins, especially vitamin C. And the nice thing is that they're perennial. If the root is protected from freezing, the vine will continue to grow for many years. I'll keep you posted on how my experiments go through the summer.

Happy gardening!