



# High on the Desert Cochise County Master Gardener Newsletter

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The University of Arizona and U.S. Department of Agriculture Cooperating

## The Virtual Gardener—Farmer’s Almanac

The Farmer’s Almanac for 2007 is on the newsstand, a sure sign the end of the year is approaching. I find the almanacs fascinating and have often bought them and enjoy perusing the trivia found inside, but I don’t put much faith in their weather predictions.

The word *almanac* is in itself interesting. Somehow it just doesn’t have the ring of an Anglo-Saxon or even a Latin or Greek word. The first syllable strongly hints of an Arabic origin—*al* is the definite article in Arabic—like the word *alcohol*, another strange sounding word with Arabic roots. To check out my guess I Googled the term, “etymology: almanac.” The results of my search dumped me into a lexicographical thicket.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word was first used in English by Roger Bacon in 1267, but of the origin of the word there is no agreement. Most lexicographers

agree with my guess that the first syllable comes from Arabic but disagree about the origin of the last two syllables. Some believe they come from one Greek word and others from another Greek word. Still others think they come from Hebrew. All seem to agree that it does not come from Arabic, and none can explain why the word would have one part from Arabic and another part from some other language.

A completing theory ascribed to Richard Verstegan (English antiquarian c. 1600) maintains the word is Anglo-Saxon in origin. Whether the Saxons originally took their term from the Arabic he doesn’t say but states:

“They used to engrave upon certaine squared sticks, about a foot in length, or shorter, or longer as they pleased, the courses of the moones of the whole yeere, whereby

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they could always certainly tell when the new moon, full moon, and changes should happen, as also their festival daies; and such a carved stick they called an al-coon-aght; that is to say, al-mon-heed, to wit, the regard or observation of all the moon; and hence is derived the name of almanac.”

But, I digress. What about the Farmer’s Almanac itself?

There are actually two competing publications that go by that name in the United States. One, the *Old Farmer’s Almanac*, purports to be the oldest continuously published periodical in North America, having first appeared in 1797. Its competitor, the *Farmer’s Almanac* (note the absence of the word *Old*), is a mere child by comparison. It has been continuously published only since 1818!

The almanacs are still printed in hard copy and sold or given away, but they are also available on the Web, and one, the Farmer’s Almanac, is the subject of a show on Public Television.

At the Web sites for the Old Farmer’s Almanac (<http://www.almanac.com>) and the

“new” Farmer’s Almanac (<http://www.farmersalmanac.com>) you can find information on astronomy, weather, gardening, food preparation, and outdoor activities, and a host of really interesting miscellaneous topics such as how to use a pig spleen or the color bands on woolly bear caterpillars (*Pyrrharctia isabella*) to predict the weather, the term for a collection of cats (a *clowder*), the best days to castrate animals (December 21 and 22 this year), and the start times of the four seasons for this year and next down to the nearest minute. (In case you’re interested, winter officially begins this year on December 21 at 5:22 P.M. MST.) Of more practical use, you can find the times the sun and moon rise and set throughout the year, the dates of moon phases, how to tie 15 different kinds of knots, and how to estimate the cooking temperature of your barbecue using your hand (ouch!).

The almanacs are probably most famous for their long range weather forecasts. Both say they use secret

techniques developed by their founders many years ago, and both claim their forecasts are 80+ percent accurate. But according to an article in the Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)) modern statistical studies have found the forecasts to be little better than random guesses.

For your information, the Farmer’s Almanac forecast for the Southwest—including Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah—for December 2006 calls for strong winds and “copious” precipitation at the beginning of the month followed by clearing and colder temperatures after the middle of the month.

Check out the two almanac Web sites. You’re sure to find something of interest or diversion there.

Until next time...Happy Surfing.

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## High on the Desert

The 14<sup>th</sup> annual High Desert Gardening & Landscaping Conference will be held at The Palms, 255 W. Wilcox, Sierra Vista, AZ on February 15 & 16, 2007. The conference will feature 22 speakers over the two days. These experts will be covering “everything you want to know and more” about high desert gardening. Registration forms will be available in the January 2007 newsletter, on-line at the Web Site, or at the Cooperative Extension office after January 1<sup>st</sup>. For more information call the Cooperative Extension at 458-8278, Ext. 2141.

## Troubled Trees

A morning walk can be more than exercise; it can be a real eye-opener. Let me share with you what I have observed during recent jaunts around my neighborhood.

I counted forty-five trees with stakes still attached three years after being planted. As you would expect, the supports became imbedded in the tree trunks, and the damaging effect on the trees was obvious. I reported this to the firm that maintains the landscaping and the stakes were removed.

The emitters placed around the trunk when the trees were planted were never moved back toward the drip line. Although previously reported, no action was taken, and in a few months twelve trees died because of inadequate watering.

Trees known to exhibit rapid root growth were confined in narrow strips between the sidewalks and privacy walls. Not surprisingly, morning joggers and evening strollers were soon contending with uneven walking surfaces due to uplifting of the sidewalks, and privacy walls were damaged. In order to prevent further damage, many of these trees were subsequently removed leaving large gaps in street landscaping.

Many trees were planted too deeply and remain in deep, bowl-shaped basins. When it rains, the root collars are submerged in up to eight inches of water for extended periods of time. There is no visible damage yet, but at some time these trees will likely be affected by root rot or girdling, and they will have to be replaced.



A few trees have blown over because the ground around the planting holes was not properly prepared. Their roots were surrounded by impenetrable caliche—thus the trees were actually potted plants and were not sufficiently anchored to resist the effect of strong winds.

Many trees were planted too close to homes and now their branches hang over roofs and clog rain gutters. In an effort to give their new homes the appearance of having mature landscaping, many homeowners over-planted when they moved into their new homes and now the plants are crowded and competing for sunlight. Some residents find it hard to let go of plants they were fond of in their home states, but every year many of these plants, which have little chance for survival in our climate zone, are killed or severely damaged by our low winter temperatures or our arid climate. The different watering requirements of trees and lawns have caused many shallow tree roots to surface; their roots are damaged every time the lawn is mowed. This results in an unsightly lawn and the possibility of serious damage to the trees.

We are fortunate to have many free resources available right here in Cochise County to help everyone from the novice to the profes-

sional landscaper choose and install plants that will enhance our yards and neighborhoods for years to come. Attend Water Wise workshops, check out gardening books from the library, or call the Master Gardener hotline (520 458-8278, Ext. 2176) with your questions.

Walk around your neighborhood and look at established landscaping. Don't be afraid to ring a stranger's doorbell, tell them they have a beautiful yard, and ask them if they could answer a few questions about their landscaping. Believe me, they'll appreciate your kind words and will be more than willing to give you as much information as they can.

*Deke Descoteaux, Master Gardener*

## December Reminders

- Replace summer mulch with fresh mulch
- Start a winter herb garden
- Protect plants from frost (The bulletin **Frost and Frost Protection is available from the Cooperative Extension offices.**)

## High on the Desert

### High Desert Gardening & Landscaping Conference Scholarship Application

The Cochise County Master Gardeners Association (CCMGA) is awarding up to three full scholarships to the 2007 High Desert Gardening & Landscaping Conference to be held at The Palms, 255 West Wilcox Street, Sierra Vista, AZ, February 15 & 16, 2007. Applicants are invited to submit an essay on one of the following topics:

- Gardening for food production
- Landscaping with native plants
- Environmental stewardship

Essays must meet the following criteria:

1. 750 to 1,000 words in length.
2. Double spaced and typed on plain bond paper — if possible a disk or CD included.
3. Represent original scholarship and be suitable for publication. All references and authorities cited must be properly attributed.
4. Entries must be accompanied by an official cover sheet available from the Cooperative Extension Office at the University of Arizona South campus or from the web site: [www.ag.arizona.edu/cochise/mg](http://www.ag.arizona.edu/cochise/mg)
5. Entries must be received at the Cooperative Extension Office, 1140 N. Colombo, Sierra Vista, AZ 85635 not later than close of business on January 15, 2007.

Entries will be judged by the Cochise County Horticultural Extension Agent and a committee of Master Gardeners appointed by the President of CCMGA. The awardees will be notified not later than January 26, 2007 and their names published in the February 2007 Master Gardener Newsletter.

## Cuttings 'N' Clippings

\* The next CCMGA meeting is 5:00 p.m. Thursday, December 7, 2006 at the University of Arizona South campus, Room 505. A tour of the campus observatory is planned.

\* There will not be a December Water Wise lecture. For information on the 2007 schedule contact Cado Daily at 458-8278, Ext. 2139 or check the web site: [www.ag.arizona.edu/cochise/waterwise](http://www.ag.arizona.edu/cochise/waterwise)

\* Due to popular demand, the Sierra Vista Farmers Market will be open the first Thursday of each month this winter. The next market day is Thursday, December 7 from noon to 4:00 p.m. at the corner of Wilcox and Carmichael. Lots of unsprayed fall produce, healthy meats, farm eggs & wild fish, desert health foods, honey, fair-trade coffee, pickles and preserves, baked goods, herbal remedies and healthy body care will be available. For more information e-mail [vallimac@cox.net](mailto:vallimac@cox.net) or call 266-1976.



## The Agent's Observations

**Q** Should I fertilize and water my trees during the winter? How about my house plants?

**A** Fertilizing of trees and shrubs during the winter in the high desert should not be done. Fertilizer applied in the fall will help with tree growth next spring. If mild winter weather occurs the fertilizer might stimulate plants to come out of dormancy and start to grow and winter damage could occur. These plants are "resting" above the ground but do have activity in the roots if soil temperatures are warm. Normally trees and shrubs that go into winter with adequate soil moisture do not need watering during the winter. Usually winter rains or snow provide enough water. Deciduous plants do not need much water because the leaves, where transpiration occurs, are gone and nutrients needed for growth are not required because there is no shoot growth. The same holds true for most evergreen plants such as pines, junipers and native oak trees. When the soil and air temperatures are cold and sunlight is reduced why grow? That is what spring, summer and fall are for!

Houseplants are generally tropical in origin and survive best in warm humid environments. Houseplants need to be watered and fertilized because of the

limited soil volume they are confined to. House temperatures are warm and allow plants to continue to grow. The best way to determine soil moisture is to stick a finger in the soil one to two inches. If the soil feels dry, water; if soil feels moist, don't water.

Fertilizing houseplants during the winter months is not encouraged because of reduced light from the sun. However, if you are "spoon feeding" your plants, that is giving a little fertilizer at each watering cut back on the fertilizer by giving 1/4 to 1/2 the normal amount. I like using slow release fertilizers for houseplants. Then fertilizing is only needed a couple of times a year.

Many house plants need high humidity to be "happy." This is especially true with ferns. With forced air heating in many homes, house humidity can be lower during the winter than during the hot summer because of swamp cooler use and the rainy season. Humidity can be created by placing the potted plant on top of a pebble filled shallow dish. Fill the dish with water as needed, maintaining the water level near the top. The dish should have a diameter nearly as large as the plant canopy diameter. The pebbles are important so that the potted plant is not sitting in water which will cause soil saturation and thus root rot because of

suffocation. As the water evaporates a humid environment is created in the tropical plant canopy and it should grow and thrive. This is much better and less work than using a squirt bottle three times a day to try and humidify the plant!



**Q** Why are the fall leaves not as colorful as other parts of the country?

**A** Brilliant fall leaf color occurs in many deciduous plants where night time temperatures are cool. In the mountains of Southern Arizona many times the fall leaf colors are really beautiful. Plants are making the green pigment chlorophyll throughout the growing season. This is because sunlight degrades chlorophyll over time. When day lengths shorten, (really when night lengths increase), chlorophyll production gradually decreases and then stops. The other colorful light receptive pigments in the leaves have been masked all along by the green pigment. Now the yellow (carotenoids, carotenes, and xanthophylls) and red and purple  
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(anthocyanin and betacyanin) pigments show through because these compounds do not break down and are left in the leaves.

**Q** I have several fruit and shade trees that need to be pruned. Is now the time to prune them?

**A** **DO NOT PRUNE NOW!** Plants are preparing to go into winter on the high deserts. Pruning is a dwarfing, stimulating, and stressful event. Trees and shrubs are moving compounds from the leaves and branches and storing carbohydrates in the trunks and roots. If pruning is done now buds that are going dormant are stimulated and might begin to grow using energy and other



resources that are normally stored to survive winter and the spring push of rapid growth and development of leaves and shoots. Next springs' growth takes a lot of energy and if used up in the fall and winter because of pruning stimulation can cause plants to become stressed and even die if winter conditions are severe. All of this growth needs to occur in the spring before photosynthesis can begin anew in deciduous plants. Even

evergreens' growing activity in the winter slows and in some cases stops. Stimulating new growth is just opposite of what the plant needs to have happen to survive the winter season.

Prune most fruit and shade trees just before bud swell occurs in late winter or early spring, between February and April. With many flowering ornamental plants the recommendation is to prune after flowering occurs. If you have a question on a specific plants' pruning requirements contact the Extension offices in Sierra Vista or Willcox

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February 15 & 16, 2007