

Janet Macunovich's Growing Concerns:

Answers to your gardening questions

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Tip of the week:

Overwatering kills more houseplants than any other problem. To **avoid it:**

- Water only when the top inch of soil is dry or the root ball loses weight.

- Pour measured water slowly onto the soil until some seeps out the drain holes. Stop. Wait 20 minutes. If the seepage has been reabsorbed, the amount you added is how much you should apply every time the plant begins to dry.

- Expect a plant to use water more quickly when the light is brighter. Expect the same plant to use water more slowly if it has fewer leaves or less light.

Gardener battles gnats but answer may be **correct watering of houseplants**

Janet, I have a problem with what I believe are fruit flies. I purchased a couple of small house trees -- a cane plant and a fig (*Ficus*) -- about 4 months ago. I repotted them. In my area many people I had talked to said they also were having **problems with fruit flies**.

My problem still exists and is **driving me crazy!** I ended up putting the *Ficus* in the garage -- dead. Now my cane leaves are turning brown and there are many, many fruit flies around it. I have tried apple cider vinegar, wine, dish soap bubbles and Ortho insect spray. I'm assuming the flies are laying eggs in the soil of this plant and that my next step is getting rid of all the soil and starting fresh? - B.K. -

I think the **real problem is water, not insects**, B.K. It's rare that a gnat infestation kills any plant bigger than a seedling.

Furthermore, in your letter you write **three things that point to overwatering:**

- One, plants can die relatively quickly from overwatering. Subjected to soggy soil, even a tree-size plant can keel over in a month or so.
- Two, it's all too easy to overwater plants that have been put into bigger pots during no-grow periods. That's because their roots are surrounded by sopping wet soil that can't be tapped by roots until the plant does resume growth.
- Three, soil-breeding insects often proliferate in constantly moist or overly wet potting soil.

So check your watering. Most plants do well if they periodically receive just enough water to **moisten the entire root zone** and then are left alone until most of the moisture in the top inch of the potting soil is gone. **Water only when you feel nothing but dry, warm soil in the top inch** - that plant's ready for water. The speed with which this happens depends on how many leaves and how much light the plant has. With more leaves and more light, the plant pulls water up into its roots more quickly.

If you overwater by treating plants in low light or subdued winter growth as if they are in summer growth and high light, the lowest part of **the plant's root ball will be constantly wet**. That's where most of a potted plant's root tips congregate. That space may be so full of water that there is no room for air. Without air, **roots die**.

Then, rot invades dead root tissue. Given that toehold, rot can also infect marginally healthy and damaged spots on the roots.

Next, upper parts of the plant die. Ironically, that leaf loss and branch death is caused by lack of water, since dead roots can't take up water. With fewer leaves the plant needs even less water but the gardener may water even more in response to the wilted foliage. The problem escalates.

Avoid getting into that trouble. Water more carefully. As a bonus, the gnats will disappear, too -- they thrive in wet soil!

Change a watering schedule seasonally

Since winter days are much shorter than in summer, **water less often in winter**. Make the change as soon as you shift a summered-out plant back to its dimmer, warmer winter home or when a dense leafy plant thins out in winter's low light. A rubber plant that needs water every few days when it's on the back porch in July may need water only every two weeks in near-dormancy by a window in winter. Regardless of season or foliage density, give each plant enough water to wet its whole root ball at every watering, but water less frequently in lower light months and sites **or when the plant has fewer leaves**.



Once it's filled with potting mix the four-cup orange pot will take 1 cup of water to be fully moist. The smaller pot requires just a half-shot. Photo ©2008 Steven Nikkila

A+ in Pot Watering

My friend Jane Suhail, with decades of experience as an indoor landscape technician, explains watering potted plants so well: "**How often you water** is determined by the number of leaves and amount of light. **How much water** you use is determined by the size of the pot."

Good, airy potting mix is 50% solid, 50% pore space. If half that pore space is filled with water clinging to the crumbs of solid matter, and the other half is just with air, it's perfect. Then, water fills 25% of the space around the roots. So **a one gallon pot may hold a quart of water**.

Water only when the root ball is dry or at least the top inch of soil is dry. How can you tell this? Lift the pot -- a dry plant **is lightweight** -- or press your finger into the potting mix.

Then, fill a big measuring cup and use it to water the plant, pouring it slowly onto the soil surface. **Stop when water begins to seep out the bottom** drainage holes into the overflow basin. Wait 20 minutes. If water remains in the overflow basin, that plant needs that much less than you poured in. If the plant's roots or pot has absorbed the overflow within 20 minutes, the plant needs just about what you poured in. Each time you water, give the plant that amount.

Repot only when the plant uses its water so quickly that you can't keep up with its schedule, **or it's tipsy** because its top has become so big it overbalances the root ball and pot.

Mouthwatering tomatoes from seeds saved last summer

Hi Janet,

I grew the best-ever beef steak tomato last year, Crimson Red. I saved seed from it. **Will it come true** if I plant this seed this year? - B.S. -



If you plan to collect seeds from your garden this year to grow more plants next year, read the label, seed package or catalog description when you buy the original seeds or plants. What kind of plants you can expect to have in future years depends on the terms "F1 hybrid" and "open pollinated" in those plants' descriptions. For instance, there are many kinds of tomatoes grown for making paste, such as the luscious fruit shown here. Among them are F1 hybrids such as 'Franchi' and open-pollinated 'Roma.' While F1 'Franchi' fruits yield seeds that may not grow up to produce paste-type tomatoes, open-pollinated 'Roma' seeds will reliably produce 'Roma' bearing plants. Photos ©2008 Steven Nikkila



Dear B.S.,

"Come true" is a term gardeners use with the fervor of fairy tale princesses wishing for their one true love. It means that the **seed from a plant will produce plants just like the parent.**

The **parent plant's parentage is the key** to whether a given seed will come true. We predict it based on whether the parent -- in this case, your 'Crimson Red' tomato -- is an F1 hybrid or an open-pollinated variety.

A flower or vegetable is called an **F1 hybrid** if it was grown from seed made by crossing specific, different parent plants. It might be that a grower learns that crossing a particular sweet-fruited but puny tomato with one that has large fruit and great vigor will yield seeds which can be depended upon to produce uniform, vigorous plants with large, sweet fruit. So the grower keeps the two parent lines growing even though neither is particularly desirable in its own right, in order to sell the seed that comes from crossing them.

The seeds those F1 hybrids produce may grow into plants with characteristics of the parent but may also look, taste and grow more like one or another grandparent. In other words, saving and

growing **seed of most F1 hybrids is a gamble**. Let's say you grew a short, red F1 hybrid snapdragon that came from crossing a tall red, small-flowered type with a short type bearing large pink flower. If you collected and sowed its seed, what you get may be pretty uniform or it could be a mixed bag of snapdragons -- some short, some tall, some with large blooms, others smaller. There may be pink, red, and even some white or bicolored bloomers in the bunch. Some may differ in traits that don't stand out at first inspection, such as disease resistance and sturdiness of stem.

Grow an F1 hybrid near a different F1 of the same species -- short yellow snaps near those short reds, for instance -- and the two may cross. The variability in their offspring increases.

On the other hand, **open-pollinated varieties** are plants that might be considered predictable mongrels. They've crossed at random for long enough that genes with dominance have come to the fore and stay there so **seedlings have dependable attributes**, generation after generation. They'll resemble their parent in most if not all important ways.

There are open-pollinated and F1 hybrid types of almost everything -- tomatoes, beans, marigolds, petunias. It's all the same in terms of what can be expected from their seedlings.

I am not familiar with and can't find information about a '**Crimson Red**' tomato to say whether it's an F1 hybrid or an open pollinated variety. Now that you know what to ask perhaps you can **check with your seed source** to determine which it is. Catalogs list F1 designations. Some include "open pollinated" in the description. If it was listed in a catalog as an "heirloom" variety or is a passed along tomato from someone who's collected and sown the same tomato's seed for more that 3 or 4 years, it's almost certainly open pollinated.

If your 'Crimson Red' was an heirloom or passed along, the seed you collected should yield plants with beefsteak tomatoes as tasty and big as last year's.

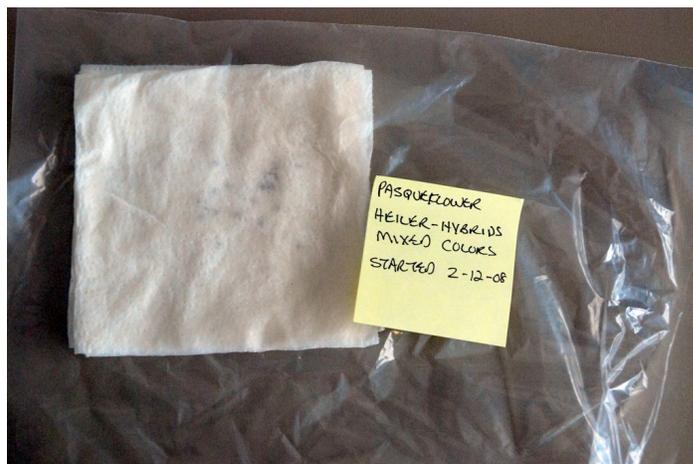
If it turns out that your tomato is an F1 hybrid, from any dozen of its seeds you might get one or a few just like the parent. Others in the batch may have smaller -- even cherry-size -- fruit, be firmer or more oval, bear fruit later in the season or be more prone to wilt disease. If it's an F1 hybrid, unless you enjoy the game of genetic roulette and have plenty of room and patience, you should buy new seed.

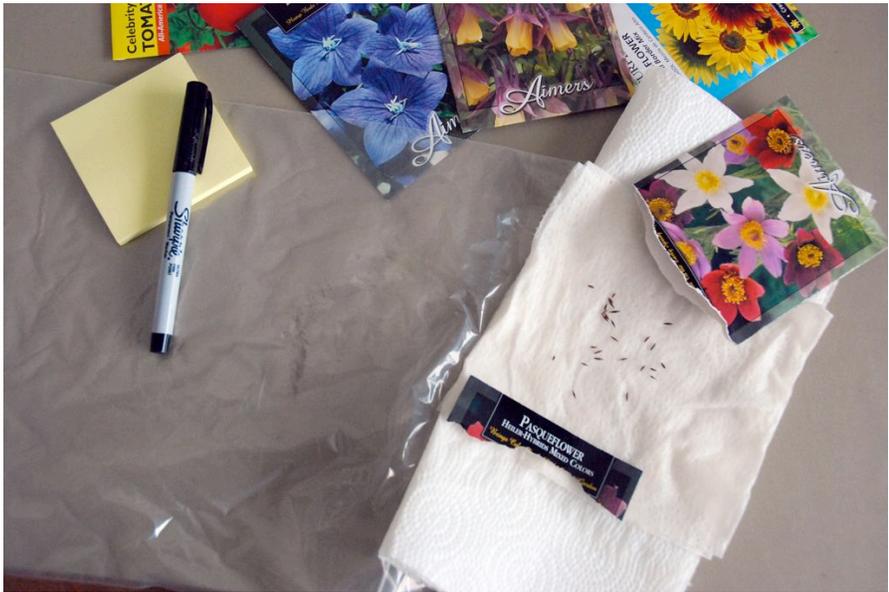
This week in Janet's garden

Grow with me! This week I:

Spread **certain seeds** I want to grow in batches on moist paper towels, fold the towel and encase it in a small plastic bag. Then I'll label each flat package with the seed name and date sown and set it in the fridge where it can have the stratification -- **60 days of moist chill -- needed** before it's able to sprout.

Spread seeds that need stratification (a moist chilling period) on moist paper towels, fold the towel, slide it into a plastic bag, label the package and hold it in a refrigerator for a couple of months. The seeds will sprout more quickly and evenly when sown in a garden or pots in spring. Photo ©2008 Steven Nikkila





Some perennial seeds that need stratification in order to germinate are beardtongue (*Penstemon*), clematis, columbine (*Aquilegia*), globeflower (*Trollius*), tall phlox, and pasqueflower (*Pulsatilla*). Photo ©2008 Steven Nikkila

Watching something grow is good for morale. It helps us believe in life. - Myron S. Kaufmann

Cut down ornamental grasses where they aren't attractive anymore. I can use what I cut wherever I need fluffy mulch to cover bare ground.

Call friends to find out who's ordering plants from where and may want to **combine orders** with me so we can save shipping costs. I may be able to add my single plant **from catalog A** onto someone else's order, and include their lone item from garden shop B with my order.

Sound like too much hassle for the ten or 20 dollars it may save? Perhaps we'll decide it is. Yet even if we opt to leave our orders as is, we've had the fun of talking new plants together

There is no better way to make time fly by than to talk new plants with friends. I spent such a day last summer with plant breeding specialist Kevin Hurd of Walters Gardens in Zeeland, Michigan. Among other wonders he showed me are new plum-flowered, dark leaf and pest resistant hardy hibiscus varieties I can't wait to buy. Since Walters Garden is a wholesale supplier it may be a year before its releases appear in retail catalogs. I'm watching retail outlets for these new introductions and will use this space and presentations I make to garden groups to share them with you as they become available.

Photo ©2008 Steven Nikkila



Wrap-up... and down

Green thumbs up: To having an insulating layer of snow on the ground as winter's most bitter cold moves in. Tree, shrub and perennial roots are likely to die in that cold -- they are so much less hardy than leaf buds, limbs and the upper parts of trunks! It's too bad, C.B. in Connecticut, that your garden was snowless when February's cold dropped in but do be glad your fluffy, four-inch layer of fall leaves will serve almost as well.

Green thumbs down: To thinking there's nothing to be done to protect plants' roots once the mercury dips drastically and bare soil's begun to freeze. It may take hours or days for the cold to be conducted far enough into a root zone to do permanent damage. There is always heat rising from deep in the ground where it remains 50 degrees. Even now an airy mulch thrown over the soil can hold some of that warmer air around the root zone.

Who's Janet?

A professional gardener and educator since 1984, Janet Macunovich designs, plants and tends gardens through her business, Perennial Favorites. She teaches and writes about gardening at schools, conferences, in her books, this weekly column, the monthly Michigan Gardener and other publications. Email questions to her at JMaxGarden@aol.com.