

What's Coming Up:

Janet Macunovich answers
your growing concerns
Issue 72, December 19, 2009

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If you think that color in a garden comes only during the growing season, you're focusing too much attention on flowers. There are winter blooming plants even in zone 5 where I garden, such as spring witchhazel shrubs (*Hamamelis vernalis* and *H. mollis* hybrids, right) and the perennials called Christmas rose and lenten rose (*Helleborus* species; below, right). Yet it will be months before their color registers on the scene.

In the meanwhile, evergreens rule supreme, alone or in combinations like this gold juniper and concolor fir combination, below. In this issue are tips for telling one conifer from another, so you can identify what looks good now and know what to shop for next spring. Photos ©2009 Steven Nikkila



**Winter's palette is clear and spare,
restrictive enough to curb the excesses
of even the most daring gardeners.**

- Rosemary Verey, *The Garden in Winter* -



Plants in holiday lore

Choose a different holiday tree.

Oak, ash, fig, laurel, palm, fir, and various fruit trees have all had turns as the tree revered and decorated during the midwinter holidays. Evergreens, including citrus and bay trees, may have gotten special attention from early cultures because they remained green when all else seemed to die, and bore fruit during that barren time.

Channel your inner pagan as you decorate a tree.

Hanging spherical- and animal-form tree ornaments may hark back to times when offerings of fruit and animals were hung in a tree at midwinter, and the whole thing burned as a sacrifice meant to insure a bountiful new year.

Wassail a tree, to bear well in the coming year.

Pour hard cider or wine, and spread ashes from the Yule log under fruit trees. Make a great noise while doing this to frighten evil spirits away from the coming year.

Foretell true love with herbs in shoes at New Year.

Put one shoe on either side of your bed, thyme in one, rosemary in the other, then sleep and dream of your true love.

Choose your holly carefully, to rule the roost all year.

Which holly was brought into the house at Christmas indicated who would be master during the coming year. If the holly is smooth, the wife; if prickly, the husband.

Deck the bedroom with fir.

A fir branch on your bed insures good sleep

Bring home the Christmas... oak?!

Industrialization, with deforestation by logging to feed furnaces, may have given rise to the young evergreen as midwinter decoration in the Western world. Wood shortages were serious in Europe in the 1600's (one reason for the push to colonize the lushly forested New World). Before then, an oak branch was often both Yule log and the branch taken indoors to decorate. Oaks have been sacred to many people: as Thor's tree and symbol of immortality to the Norse; embodiment of spirits to the Druids, strong enough to draw lightning; as Jupiter's tree to the Romans and protector of Zeus' oracle to the Greeks.

Enjoy a crackling fire.

Fires at midwinter and re-lighting rituals exist in cultures as diverse as the Natchez people of North America, Bushmen of South Africa, and ancient Persians. A piece of the Yule log was saved to light the next year's fire and was sometimes used in between times, lit to protect the house from thunderstorms.

Sweep clean into the New Year.

Gather grasses and evergreen boughs from the garden on the eve of the solstice to make a broom. Leave it next to the door. The first person out the door on the winter solstice uses the broom to sweep outward from the door, sweeping the year's trouble away.

It is in midwinter that I sometimes glean from my pines... a curious transfusion of courage.

- Aldo Leopold, *a Sand County Almanac* -

What's Up #72, Page 2

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If it looks good in winter, it's a keeper!

Dear friends,
I like looking out my window all year, even during the holiday bustle. Conifers -- needled evergreens -- are starring in that show just now. They are also resonating within our minds at a more instinctual level, touching the same nerve which spurred ancient peoples all over the world to give them places of importance during the winter.

Here are some tips toward identifying the visually pleasing evergreens you see, so you can make an accurate list of "things to add to my garden next spring."

Conifers have so many forms and hues! In every group of evergreens, from arbs to yews, there are varieties with different and variegated foliage color. It can be bewildering to sort them out. So, when I see one I like, my first move is to determine which group it belongs to.



Can you name these groups? See page 4 for a key.

Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila

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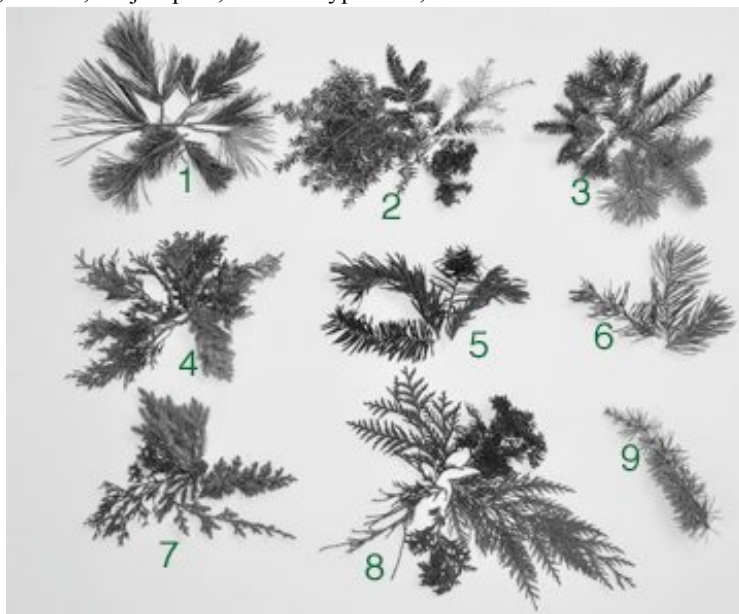
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1 - pines, 2 - hemlocks, 3 - spruces, 4- arborvitaes, 5 - yews, 6 - firs, 7 - junipers, 8 - falsecypresses, 9 - true cedar

Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila

***Gardens also teach us
to love more in the moment -
to listen,
to watch,
to touch,
and to dream***

- James vanSweden -



Telling pine from fir or spruce: Needles bunched or single?

If it looks like a Christmas tree, you're wise to check for a match among **pines**, spruces and firs. You can pick out a pine by looking for those with **needles arranged in bunches**.



Pine (*Pinus*) needles are attached to the stem in groups. Each packet has 2- to 5 needles, the number determined for each plant by its species' genes. On the left in this photo is a two-needle pine species and on the right, a 5-needle species. There are a few exceptional pines, species with single needles or needles in sixes. Deviations are to be expected in this large genus, which has 110 species, triple the number in *Picea* (spruce), the next biggest conifer group.

Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila

Distinguishing spruce from fir: Stalk remains after needle fall

If its **needles are singly-borne**, then it's probably not a pine but a **spruce** (*Picea*) or **fir** (*Abies*). Look at needle shape, plus how they are arranged on and attached to the branch.



If **cones are present in winter**, that's a giveaway that the plant is **not a true fir**. Fir cones are borne upright in summer, and shatter and fall before winter.

At top in this picture is a fir. Its needles are flat, while the spruce needles below it are four sided.

A fir's typical needle arrangement is like teeth of a double-sided comb. Compare that to the spruce, with its needles spirally arranged all 'round the twig.

Most telling of fir or spruce, each fir needle is attached to its branch within a circular depression. When the needle is shed, the entire needle drops away leaving the depression smooth. On the other hand, spruces have hard projections on the twig and one needle arises from each of these "pulvini." The needle I pulled from this twig has its honey-brown pulvinus attached. When a spruce needle is shed, its pulvinus remains. So a spruce twig which has lost its needles is covered in prickly nubs.

Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila

Sorting junipers from falsecypress and arborvitae



Junipers (*Juniperus*), falsecypresses (*Chamaecyparis*) and arborvitae (*Thuja*) **do not have needles.** They **have tiny leaves**, which sets them apart from pine, fir or spruce.

I've pulled away one segment from each of the twigs in this photo. Some people think these are individual needles but they are not. Each is a tiny twig covered with even tinier leaves.

On the left, the falsecypress' leaves are pointed -- awl-shaped. On the right, the twig is covered in scale-like leaves. Most arborvitae have only scale-like leaves on a plant, while junipers and falsecypresses may have

both types on one plant -- scale-shaped leaves on their blooming-age branches (mature wood) and awl-shaped on wood that's not ready to flower (juvenile). Photos ©2009 Steven Nikkila



Fruits will help you separate juniper from arb or falsecypress. **Junipers produce "berries."** **Arborvitae and falsecypresses bear cones.**

At left, a juniper species with smooth, dark blue fruits and another with lumpier, grayer fruits. Juniper berries do not ever take on the brown, scaly appearance most often associated with cones.

Compare these juniper "berries" to the arborvitae cones on page 7.

Below: Arborvitae, its cones still green. As they ripen they will become brown and separate at the seams.



You look like... a yew or hemlock

Fruits are the giveaway between yew and hemlock, as well.

Yew (*Taxus*) is on the left in the picture below, and hemlock (*Tsuga*) is on the right. Hemlocks have cones (left). Yew seeds form in red, berry-like structures. (More on page 8.)



Photos ©2009 Steven Nikkila

What's Up #72, Page 7

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Clueless because it's coneless?

Junipers and yews are **dioecious species**, which means that a given plant is able to produce **male flowers or female flowers**, but not both. So there are male yews and male junipers which produce pollen but never any cones.



The berry-bearing yew pictured here is a female. It is also a particularly desirable hedge plant, as are female hollies. In part, that's because of the attractive berries. Even more, it's because the female plant devotes energy to fruit production at the expense of other growth. They extend their branches a bit less each year than their male counterparts. So they remain in shape longer after a clipping!
Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila

Some varieties produce only juvenile wood so they rarely form cones. Juvenile wood is a plant part that is not ready to flower and fruit.

When we make clones of a plant we can take cuttings from some part of it that shows the desirable characteristics, then root or graft that cutting to make an identical copy. If we took our cutting from juvenile wood because the characteristics we liked occurred only there, the resulting plant may never produce mature wood or cones.

The popular, low, mounded blue juniper called 'Blue Star' and the slow growing, dense, pyramidal spruce known as 'Dwarf Alberta' are varieties which produce only juvenile wood.

***There is a time and a place to garden,
and a time and a place simply to let things be.***

- Ken Druse -

On beyond species: Words that are color commentary

Once you know which genus to look into toward identifying a conifer, scanning **species or variety names may give you more clues.**

For foliage that has **color(s)** other than green, you may see some of the following terms:

white: alba-, albo-

silver, shining:

argentea, lucidus

gold, yellow:

aureo-, citrinus, xantho-

blue: glauca, azureus, cyano-

red, purple:

rubra, purpurea, sanguineus

A leaf that is both green and another color is "variegated."
Some descriptors:

variegated: variegata, marginata,
bicolor, multicolorus

striped: zebrinus, lineatus

spotted: punctata,

oddly patterned: mosaicus

There are common phrases in variety names that may serve as identifiers, too. Examples:

'Baby Blue Eyes'

'Silver Tip'

'Green' n Gold.

Top, right, pines in an all-gold form, variegated gold and green types, and solid green.

Right, some evergreens' gold and white tissue takes on an amber or pink tinge during winter.

Photos ©2009 Steven Nikkila

Wonder of technology: Take a picture, ask an expert

If you see a plant you like but **can't identify it** using these tips, books and



the Internet, there is always this fall-back: **Take a picture and ask** at a garden center or on a network* such as *What's Coming Up*. (*Yup, it's a network! When I receive "mystery plant" photos I can't identify, I often know someone who can.)

Take at least one in-focus close-up of a branch to show leaf form and attachment. Also take a photo of the whole plant, to convey shape. If there are cones or fruit, snap those, too.

Winter is an excellent time to go look for pleasing conifers in botanical gardens and garden center display beds. Gardeners in southern Michigan, northern Indiana and northwestern Ohio can peruse the collections at Hidden Lake Gardens near Tipton.

For other public conifer collections, go to the American Conifer Society website - copy this URL to your browser www.conifersociety.org -- and select "Reference Gardens."



One section of the extensive dwarf conifer collection at Michigan State University's Hidden Lake Gardens near Tipton, Michigan. Look, choose one you like, read the tag - simple plant ID! (In answer to deer-plagued, observant readers: Yes, that is an electric fence around the collection. It's the inner fence of two.) Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila

Scrabbling in the garden, word play

We gardeners earn admiring murmurs when we display our garden's produce in vases and on plates. Why don't we stir up a bit of that admiration by tossing a nifty horticultural term or two on the table during the next Scrabble game? For instance:

adpressed: adjective, an organ or part that lies flat and close to the stem to which it's attached. *The leaves of many arbovitae species are scale-like and adpressed on each branchlet.*

imbricate: adjective, closely overlapping like shingles. *The leaves of that falsecypress are imbricate -- the twig looks like it's covered in green fish scales.*

decussate: adjective, arranged in pairs, with adjacent pairs at right angles to each other. *The juniper had rigid, decussate, awl-like leaves in pairs. So each branch had sharp points facing out east west, then a pair facing out north-south, etc.*

pulvini: plural noun (pulvinus), a cushion of enlarged tissue which is part of a twig and to which a leaf stalk attaches. *The pulvini remain after cedar needles age and fall away, making the bare twig quite nubbly.*

Correction to a previous "Scrabbling" item

L.D. emailed to ask, "Okay, Janet, just how do I use leptodermatous in a Scrabble game?"

You're right, L.D., that word is no good for Scrabble. Even if an opponent placed the word "derma" into play, you still could not have enough letter tiles to convert it to this horticultural term for 'thin skinned.'" Sorry for that error.

This week in Janet's garden

Grow with me! This week I will:

Bathe the houseplants. I see some **shiny dots** on the tile floor below their branches. That's honeydew from insects that are sucking on the leaves. Perhaps it's some mealybug, still too small to be apparent.

I act now, **don't wait**, because the plants are now going into their lowest-energy time of year (least hours of light per day, and dimmest light). Their normal defenses are depressed. Even though the plant was capable of keeping the insect naturally at bay previously, it's weaker now, could lose ground quickly and be a miserable sight as it comes back.

So I give it help. For almost all indoor plant pests, this **cleaning at the onset of such a problem** works wonders:

- Cover the open part of the pot with plastic wrap (self-sticking Press n Seal is good for this),
- Put the plant into the bathtub,
- **Spray soapy water** on the whole plant
(use a soap based in oil or lemon, such as Murphy's oil or lemon scented dish soap),
- **Let it drip for 20 minutes**, during which time the oil or lemon suffocates the insects, then
- **Rinse it** under a forceful shower.

Make a grave blanket for Dad. Cut greens from Mom's yard -- *his* plants! -- take them to the cemetery and arrange them right on the site. No need for a Styrofoam base or wire.

Put up a wind screen where I am concerned a new planting of evergreens may dry out in extended sunny, windy snowless periods this winter.

I'm planning **a classic windbreak of three ranks:**

- Beginning with a low **twiggy** barrier furthest out.
- A few feet closer to my at-risk plants I'll place stakes and span them with **evergreen** boughs .
- Finally I'll erect a screen of **open weave cloth** on the windward side of the plants, but far enough away that it can't chafe them if it ruffles on a windy day.

The twiggy barrier -- in a farm windbreak it might be a hedge of old fashioned spirea bushes or hawthorn trees -- takes the edge off the wind and pushes it upward. The evergreen boughs and the final cloth screen -- rows of arbs, pine, juniper or spruce trees on a farm -- slow and divert the wind even more. Yet they are porous enough to let air through. That prevents the creation of a big pressure differential between windward and leeward side of the screen that can create to swirling, buffeting currents.

Wrap-up with Grins and Grow-ans that turn our green thumbs up or down

Grins: To the irony of human physical conditioning. Ending a report on what he's been up to so far in his winter garden, a friend wrote, "Not sure how long these old bones can be doing that." Yet he and I know very well that bone strength and continuing physical ability depend in large part on keeping a load on our bones -- doing physical work. So the key is to never stop. We remain able to do whatever it is we just keep on doing!

Grow-ans: To meeting your own worst enemy as you talk yourself out of clipping greens for your holiday decorations from mall and corporate parking lot plantings. It's an internal dialogue that can run along these lines:

"Oooo, nice junipers. Look at all the berries. Wouldn't those look nice in a wreath?"

"Yeah, they would. Hey, they're really in need of pruning..."

Who's Janet?

A gardener who got carried away. Janet Macunovich has been known to two generations of neighborhood children as "the lady at the flower house, the one with no lawn." Her lifelong interest in plants grew to a passion after she spent the summer of 1973 working in England, where she had the privilege of apprenticing to tenth-generation gardeners in a 300 year old garden. By 1981 the last of the lawn disappeared from her yard just as her hobby -- helping others in their gardens -- grew beyond its bounds into a gardening business. Eventually her talent as a writer and speaker crossed with her experience in the garden and grew on as books (such as "Designing Your Gardens and Landscape" and "Caring for Perennials"), a weekly newspaper column now available by email at JMaxGarden@aol.com, a radio talk show and a gardening school. Email questions to her at JMaxGarden@aol.com.

Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila



Where to catch Janet and friends* in-person:

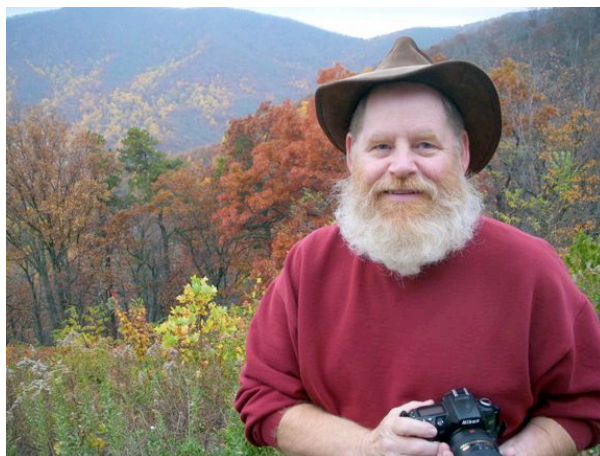
*See "By seeing Santa?!", January 30 and "Invite Janet or Steven" on page 14.

By seeing Santa?! Many dates and places around Southeast Michigan. That's right folks, the resemblance is no accident. **Steven Nikkila is a Santa's Helper.** He's pretty sure that Santa is one of his Finnish kin, so he does his best to assist that jolly old elf by collecting wish lists from kids and gardeners each holiday season. Look for him at the Village of Rochester shopping mall in Rochester, Michigan, and other locations. You can send him



your gardening wish list -- we'll publish them here

before the holiday. Then you can leave a print-out of this newsletter where your special someone can find it as a hint! Or to invite Santa Steve to your holiday gathering, contact him at horthphoto@gmail.com or 248-681-7850.



Some of you have noticed the resemblance, especially during the second half of each year when Steven lets his beard grow long for his off-season job...

Stay tuned here for:

January and February. Garden and landscape design classes, in and around the Detroit area. Multi-session, hands-on workshops -- Janet's long-time specialty.

Tuesday, January 12, 2010. "What's Coming Up for professional gardeners." Join Janet at the **Association of Professional Gardeners meeting.** Details will be available here and at www.associationofprofessionalgardeners.org

Thursday, January 14, 7:00 p.m. "Saving Time and Money in the Garden." Economize with Janet at **Cromaine District Library, Hartland, Michigan.**

Saturdays, January 23, January 30 and February 6, 9:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. "Garden Design, New Plants, and Janet & Steve's 50 Favorite Before-Afters." These sessions featuring Janet Macunovich, Cheryl Bennerup and Steven Nikkila are sponsored by The Detroit Garden Center as part of its 19th annual winter seminar series. They'll be held at Historic Trinity Church auditorium, 1345 Gratiot near Easter Market in Detroit. Registration information will be available here and through The Detroit Garden Center at 313-259-6363, detroitgardenctr@yahoo.com or www.detroitgardencentre.org.

About attending Gardens by Janet sessions:

We gardeners are let-me-see, hands-on people and that's how we learn best. In these sessions, I offer you that kind of chance to grow. You can visit me where I'm working and you can either

watch or work with me side by side. I hope you'll bring your gloves and join in so you realize the most value for the time.

At the **gardens I tend through my business, Perennial Favorites**: My clients understand my enthusiasm for teaching. Some open their gardens to small groups who want to see and practice "how to." When the work I'm scheduled to do may be of interest to you, I invite you in.

In the **Detroit Zoo Adopt-A-Garden** program: I'm a 21-year veteran of this great program. Many people have worked with me there, some for a day and others for years. We have fun, we learn, we accomplish much. **To join me at the Zoo** for a Garden By Janet, email mstgarden@yahoo.com. Make the subject line of your email "I'll help at the zoo with Janet." That will connect you to my friend Deb Tosch who'll send you upcoming work dates, directions for meeting up with my group at the zoo as a temporary helper, plus all you need to sign up officially if you decide to stay on.

Invite Janet or Steven or their expert friends to your club or community.

We go where we're invited! That's taken us all over the country and then some over the past 20 years. We address many topics, drawing from our list of **100+ talks**. We also continue **to meet groups' needs** and expand our horizons by developing new material or "hybridizing" from what we already have.

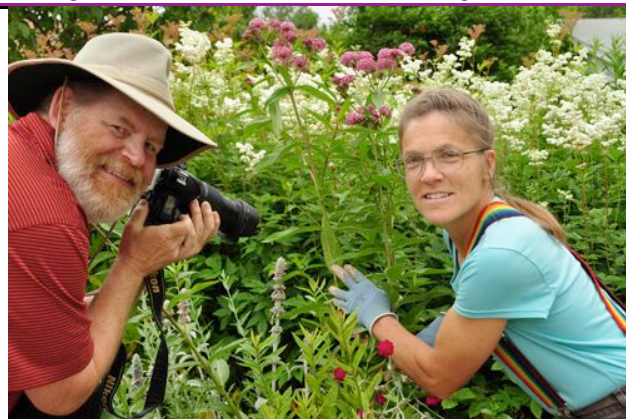
So, whether it's...

- a **how-to lesson for a garden club** meeting,
 - a **hands-on workshop** at a site of your choosing or
 - a **multi-part class** for a small group,
- ...we're game!

We can also connect you to one or a whole line-up of other experts who know how to explain how-to. So give us a **call or send an email** to make a date, request our list of classes and talks or get a referral. **JMaxGarden@aol.com or 248-681-7850**. Our calendars fill about a year in advance for spring weekends, and six months ahead for most other weekends and evenings. So give us some lead time. Then we can meet you in *your* garden.

Steven Nikkila and Janet Macunovich (top) have been digging, shooting and teaching how-to for 22 years. They began producing conferences in the early '90s and then ran a gardening school for 12 years, featuring instructors who knew their stuff in the garden as well as knowing how to get their messages across in front of a group. That line-up includes people like Cheryl Bennerup (right). Cheryl and Janet began their relationship 20 years ago when Cheryl grew perennials for Janet at her Milford, Michigan greenhouse and continues today as Janet taps into Cheryl's know-how as chief of propagation and troubleshooting at one of the country's largest perennial growers, Sunny Border Nursery in Connecticut. Janet and Steve are glad to help you themselves or refer you to others to meet your group's need. Contact them at JMaxGarden@aol.com or 248-681-7850 when you want to set up a talk, workshop or class.

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A complete library of Janet's gardening how-to on one CD... just \$24.

Is this *What's Coming Up* newsletter useful to you? Imagine how a whole year of these weekly newsletters could help your garden grow.

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To get a copy of my CD, send a check payable to Janet Macunovich, to 120 Lorberta, Waterford, MI 48328-3041. Include your name and full mailing address.

My CD has everything from six of my books: How to prep soil, design, choose and de-bug plants, plus one A-Z index!

Jam packed with information that's easy to access. Type any key word into the index's "Search" field to receive a click-thru list of every place those "hydrangea" facts, winter interest tips, acidity explanations, etc. appear in this CD's 6 books.

