

What's Coming Up:

Janet Macunovich answers your growing concerns
Issue 12, October 25, 2008

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Thinking twice before we light up the night

Regarding **night-lighting our gardens** described in the last issue, Jean has objections: "Some of us really like the natural dark and object to '**light pollution**' that prevents us from enjoying the moon and stars."

"Unless you are using solar lights, every light is adding to **global warming** gasses from the electric generating plant. Think about it!"



Displaying about a dozen pumpkins is all the night lighting I do in my own garden. Yet I can admire both darkness and light in others' landscapes.
Photo ©2008 Steven Nikkila

Your points are valid, Jean but I won't press them here. **I prefer the dark**, like seeing stars and know that some plants don't grow well when their night is broken by even a little light. However, I don't have the energy to take on the keepers of municipal lighting systems and the insurers of retail and commercial parking lots. I also lack ammunition to counter the arguments for light versus accidents and crime. Yet that seems the best route to take since the street lamps in one city block or corporate campus probably contribute more to light pollution and global warming than all the low-voltage fixtures in a whole city's worth of gardens.

I don't like to question dollars and materials we spend on our gardens, in most cases. That's because gardening as many of us pursue it is, at its core, an extravagance. When we spend our time and the world's resources to

cultivate ornamental plants rather than foodcrops, fruit, trees for lumber and herbs for medicine, everything we do is over the top. In a world short on water, fuel and space, we're questionable from the ground up. We're wasters of *everything*.

I can argue that flower gardens aren't frivolous, but worth some minimal allocation of resources since they stave off the desertification of urban areas. We might find a place in the supply line for these oases where children see things grow, people learn about natural processes and wildlife maintains a toehold.

My perspective is that **gardeners make a positive contribution**, even if they grow only flowers, even if they illuminate their plants, and that most of them are more involved in conservation than non-gardeners. When I teach, write, share letters like yours and speak to gardeners I ask them to make a difference by doing just what you recommend, to think before they act. What they say to me, write and what I see happening says they do that well in everything from weighing costs of a pesticide use against its benefit to deciding whether to buy pumpkins from a local farm market versus gourds from a chain store that trucks produce from afar.

Each of us has a unique set of expenses and benefits. I think **it's the sum total that matters**, not the parts. So someone may be **using pesticides** I would choose to avoid but does so with reasoned forethought and careful aim, then comes up "even" with me by **not using gas** as I do on silly road trips. A person who contributes to neighborhood noise and extra gasoline consumption by **using a leaf blower** may **ration water** so well that I become a water glutton by comparison. The guy with the flashy night lighting may use less electricity than I because I habitually doze over my keyboard. As one woman told me, when I questioned whether something we were planning was more wasteful than it should be, "Janet, I don't play golf, party or smoke any more. I garden. Permit me this indulgence."

So I enjoy well done night lights and even recommend them to thoughtful gardeners. I'll worry about them after the sodium vapor light installed by a neighbor that's left on all night, every night in defense of a backyard filled with a motor home, boat and trailered snow machines.

Horticulturist: A whole lot of culture growin' on!

Grow a bit of this and that? That's horticulture and you're a horticulturist.

Horticulture: Growing fruits, vegetables, flowers or ornamental plants

Specialists have titles, too, from agriculturist to forester and pomologist:

Agriculture: Cultivating soil, harvesting useful crops and raising livestock

Aquiculture: Cultivating natural produce of water; raising fish in ponds

Arboriculture: Cultivating trees/shrubs, especially for ornamental purposes

Floriculture: Culture and management of ornamental and flowering plants

Forestry: Developing and caring for forests; management of growing timber

Olericulture: Producing, storing, processing and marketing vegetables

Pomology: Science of cultivating fruit

Silviculture: Establishing, developing and caring for forest trees

Vermiculture: Cultivating worms especially for bait or composting

Viticulture: Cultivating vines, especially grapes

**There is no
one right
way to
garden.**

Janet Macunovich

Jack o' lantern better than electric lights?

I **carve pumpkins** because it's fun and neighborhood kids love the show. That I do this for a display that lasts only a week has always seemed a shame. Just recently I've realized that the situation is more sinister -- it **ought to be a crime** to use pumpkins so lavishly. Surprisingly, **electric lights may be more environmentally friendly** than candle-lit gourds!

The Water Footprint Network's efforts opened my eyes. In a move to encourage water conservation, it tells us about the amounts of water used to grow or produce various foods and basic goods. At www.waterfootprint.org I learned it takes 1,100 drops of water to produce one drop of coffee, 13 gallons to turn out one orange and 37 gallons to yield 2.2 pounds of potatoes. Pumpkins weren't listed but if they're midway between orange and potato I am ashamed to say the **315 pounds of pumpkin** carved here this year required nearly **4,000 gallons of water**. All for a light show and a bag full of roasted pumpkin seeds. (No, Aunt Chris, I'm sorry but I did not bake a single pie or loaf of pumpkin bread -- I "fed" only the compost.)

Gardener keeps adding but Crocuses subtract

"Bulbless in Sterling Heights, Michigan" sends us this mystery to ponder: You taught our class when and how to **plant Snow Crocus** (*Crocus minimus*) bulbs. I have been doing so in my front yard ever since. In fact I have been planting them at the grave sites of friends and family members, too. They look way cool in the spring when the grounds keepers remove the grave blankets and the plot is covered with flowers. I average about 75 bulbs a season in my front yard and at least 25-35 at each grave site. Not all come up in the spring and I understand there are several reasons why but, last fall I purposefully did not plant bulbs in the same spot as I always do in my front yard and **nothing came up this spring**. Should I not get at least 1 considering there must be **at least 450 bulbs planted** over the last eight years?

I dibble the hole as instructed, provide a mixture of dry peat moss, potting soil and a touch of Holly tone bulb fertilizer.

I do not have a vole or squirrel problem. I was thinking that in the spring after the first cutting I fertilize the lawn with the usual pre-emergent fertilizer. Could I be killing the bulbs with the **pre-emergent weed killer** in the lawn fertilizer?

Few plants are as cheery as snow crocus (*C. minimus*) which bloom in March in zone 5. They are capable of naturalizing -- multiplying and spreading -- in a bed or in a lawn. Rabbits and deer eat the foliage, while voles and squirrels love to dig and eat the corms -- all potential curbs to their population. This year a reader may prove whether weed-n-feed is also on the crocus' enemy list. Photo ©2008 Steven Nikkila



I love a mystery, bulbless. You gave us great information but maybe **a crucial clue is missing**: Do the bulbs prosper at the other places where you plant them? Is it only in your front lawn that they fail? If you answer "yes" to those questions, you can **solve the puzzle** for all of us: Plant more snow crocus in your lawn this fall. Then next spring when the time comes for you to **apply the weed-n-feed to your lawn, apply it on one of the other crocus plantings**, too.

Snow crocuses push up their flowers first, leaves later. The foliage spends all of April socking away starch to make a bulb-like stem base called a corm. Clip a flower, no big deal. Kill the foliage before its time or trick it into tainting the corm and the jig's up. If your bulbs are planted in the lawn and you're applying that herbicide in April, **the crocus foliage may be reacting to it.**

Pre-emergent weed killers formulated for use on lawn are supposed to kill seedlings as they germinate without affecting grass plants already in leaf, but those results are predictable only on standard lawns and weeds. Crocuses are **sensitive to at least one such herbicide** (s-ethyl dipropylthiocarbamate). They may be sensitive to others but that hasn't been documented because tests wouldn't routinely run on crocus-infested sod.

No need to wait a year for results. Apply herbicide next spring, **wait several weeks, then dig** in both a treated and untreated bed. **Look for new corms.**

You'll tell us how the story comes out, won't you?!

Any time is transplant time if plant's lot improves

Karen's dressed for fall and rarin' to garden! She asks, "When is a good time to **transplant my Knock Out rose?**"

"When is a **good time to split and transplant geranium** 'Rozanne'? Is it too late to do in October?"



If I have the time and inclination, "now" is always the best time to move it, even move plants at the very end of fall. For specifics of moves to winter interest, join me at Gardenviews next Saturday. See "Where to Catch Janet..." on page 7. Photo ©2008 Steven Nikkila



October is not too late to move a rose. If the soil it's going into is well drained and the spot is better for it than where it is now, I say go for it at any time of year. Otherwise just before budbreak -- sometime in April -- is probably "best."

Taking the transplant down to **bare root is a good thing to do** any time there are big differences between the soil in the current and new locations.

The **best times to transplant woody plants in general** are just before they break bud in spring and in the last week of August or beginning of September.

Perennials such as geranium divide very well in **September, October and April**, but with attention to watering afterward will divide almost any time.

I rinsed soil off the edge of this bloody cranesbill (*Geranium sanguineum*) to show you one of the heavily rooted sections. It's begging to be split off and given its own place to grow. Plants with such thick, waxy roots are tough enough to survive bare root in the open for days. Photo ©2008 Steven Nikkila

It's said that we shouldn't move pines when they're candling -- extending their new growth. Yet I've been involved with a number of exceptions, like the weeping white pine at right. We had no option -- it was candling but our orders were 'move it now or cut it down.' We kept an eye on it after the move so it never went dry and it fared very well. You saw it on page 1, 13 years after this move.
Photo ©2008 Steven Nikkila

This week in Janet's garden

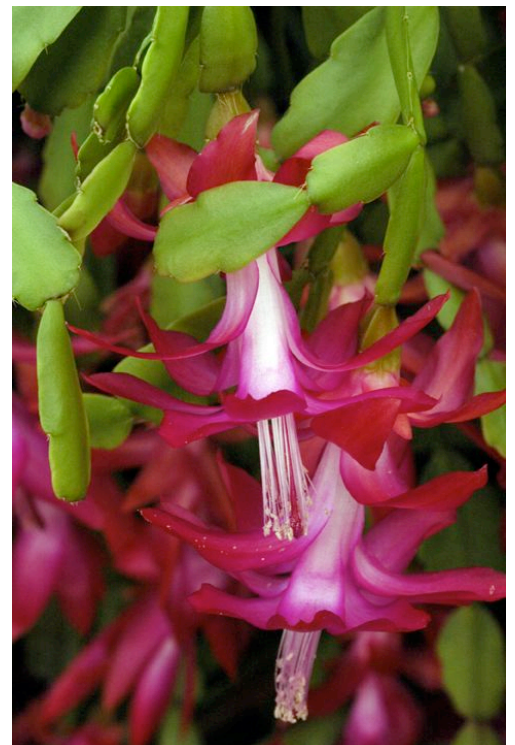
Grow with me! this week I will:

Concentrate on cutting lawn back from the edge and **weeding along the edge of beds**. In case the weather cuts the season short I want to have that zone under control since it's where all weeds start.

Set mouse traps to catch voles, where I see their pill-bottle-sized holes with furrowed gangways around the garden. These mouse-like rodents eat plant crowns and bulbs and can be so numerous in what the farmers call a "mouse year" to eat clear through the crown of a gardener-daunting ornamental grass.

Move the **Christmas cactus** into a cool, little-used room where the lights will stay off all evening and night. The plant needs 12+ hours of cool, uninterrupted darkness each calendar day -- no one running in and flipping the lights on. In about 8 weeks it'll set buds for Christmas or New Year's. It sits in an east window so it gets great light by day.

Give it unbroken dark nights now for a winter holiday bloom. Or let it bloom when it will, because a Christmas cactus in bloom is great at any season.
Photos ©2008 Steven Nikkila



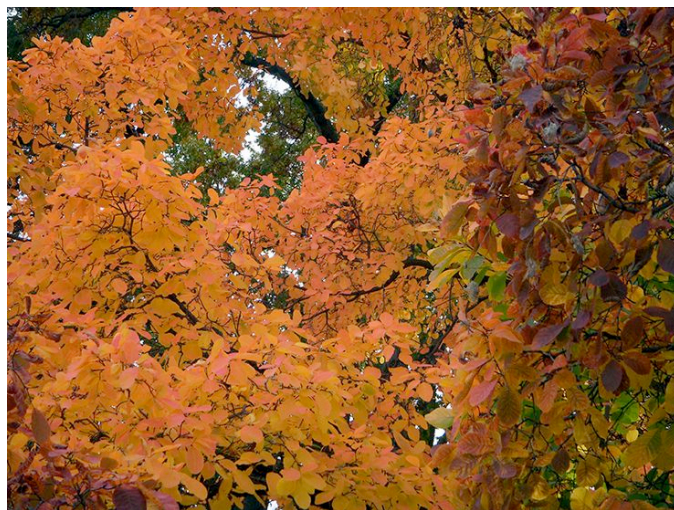


The 45mph garden

You can put a gardener behind the wheel but you can't take the flowers out of her eyes. Look at what's catching driver's eyes and raising questions this week.

It's really too bad that **sassafras** (*S. albidum*) is tough to transplant and doesn't fare well as a nursery crop. If it was easier to grow commercially this native plant would probably grace a lot more front yards. The bark is furrowed gray and the foliage is reliably luminous even in years when other fall favorites are a bit muddy in tone. A single tree often displays red, orange and yellow leaves all at the same time.

A sassafras tree is useful as well as beautiful. The leaves can be ground for file powder, a thickener in Cajun recipes. The shoots are the original flavoring in root beer. The wood yields a good yellow dye. Photo ©2008 Steven Nikkila



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

Grins: To people who say in fall, "Oh don't **look at my garden, it's so shaggy**." That's just fall -- overblown and a bit frumpy. Enjoy it -- these are the same plants you said "will probably never grow for me" just last spring!

Grow-ans: To **transplanting bad with good** when you divide or move plants around. If a plant is coming out of a bed with a weed problem, better to rinse its roots and divide it even to tiny pieces -- whatever it takes! -- to **be sure you don't carry along even one root piece** of the likes of bishop's weed (snow on the mountain, *Aegopodium podagraria*), horsetail (scouring rush, *Equisetum arvense*) or thistle.

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.

Where to catch Janet in-person:

Saturday, November 1, 10:00 - 11:30 a.m., "An Enchanting Winter Garden," to help you identify your garden's off-season strengths, plan changes and select additional plants and features so it's a joy to see from November to April. This presentation is sponsored by Gardenviews store, 202 W. Main in Northville. There's no fee but you should call to reserve a seat (248-380-8881) -- we meet across the street from the store, in the Rec Center and it certainly is nice to know how many places to set!

And later that same day, November 1, across town: 1:00 - 3:00 p.m., "Redesigning the garden's bones." I'm taking a look at how to improve the structure of a garden in Troy, Michigan. You can come see how this kind of design work is done during the very best season to see, evaluate and plan changes to the "bones." Free to my newsletter readers. Email or call Janet (JMaxGarden@aol.com or 248-681-7850) for details and to reserve a spot in this limited-space workshop.

Thursday November 6, 10 a.m. to noon, "Garden by Janet - Bring your gloves and tools!" At a Beverly Hills, Michigan garden, we're **testing the drainage, interpreting soil test results** and seeing the results of plants growing in soil of differing drainage and nutrient levels. Learn how to do all this for your own garden. Email or call Janet (JMaxGarden@aol.com or 248-681-7850) for details and to reserve a spot in this limited-space workshop.

Saturday mornings during the depths of winter. In late January I'll host and teach in the Detroit Garden Center's 18th Annual Winter Gardening Seminar. Design and native plants lead the list of topics. Watch for more news of that here or check in as the snow flies for more information from the Detroit Garden Center (313-259-6363).

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:** I've worked for many years with some of my clients, who understand my enthusiasm for teaching. They 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 and the situation allows on-lookers or apprentices, I invite you in.

I've volunteered in the **Detroit Zoo Adopt-A-Garden** program for 20 years. During that time more than 100 people have worked with me, some for a day and others for years. We have fun, we learn, we accomplish much. The program requires that regular garden volunteers complete an interview and orientation process but you can try it for a time or two on a temporary pass as my student. **If you'd like to join me at the Detroit Zoo,** email mstgarden@yahoo.com. Make the subject line of your email "I'll help at the zoo with Janet." That email will put you in touch with my good friend Deb Tosch who keeps my group's schedule straight while I plan and lead the work. You'll receive upcoming work dates and instructions for finding us at the zoo.

Watch this space to join me in other non-profit gardening events and in gardens I design and tend.