

## What's Coming Up:

Janet Macunovich and Steven Nikkila's

**Happy Holidays to you all!**

Issue #168, December 24, 2011

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Right: You told us gardeners do not, as imagined, sit idle in winter. On page 8, a New York City gardener's version of not-sitting.



## Plunge a pot to water but know how much it needs!

I have read your notes about **keeping rosemary indoors** during winter so I have tried to keep my plant sunnier, cooler and more evenly moist. But it seems like every time I feel it, it's dry which means I'd be **watering it every day**. Would that **be too much**? I usually water it by putting the pot into the sink and running water into it. - D.T. -

**It's possible** a plant can need water every day if it's in great light for long days, in warm, moving air, and it's a very large plant in a small pot. That plant would simply be using up all the soil moisture quickly, drawing it up into leaves that are photosynthesizing and releasing any excess as vapor through its leaf pores.

However, you **may be mis-reading the signs**. Do you figure it's dry if it's wilted? Wilt can mean too wet or too dry. Do you water because the soil surface is dry? It's possible for the surface to dry out while the region of most roots -- the interior and bottom of the pot -- is still moist.

**Another possibility** when a plant seems to need very frequent water is that at some point the root ball became **so dry it's now shrunken**. Overly dry peat based soilless mix can actually repel water. Pour water on the surface and before it can be absorbed **the liquid slips away** through cracks or gaps made when the soil mix pulled away from the sides of the pot. Then, the

gardener sees water coming out the drain, and figures the plant has enough -- even while the root zone is still dry. Immersion or much patience with slow drizzling can re-wet such a root ball.

**We like to water from a pitcher, slowly** so we know it's being absorbed. We keep it up **until water oozes out the drain holes.** Then we wait to see if that excess is absorbed. If any remains after 20 minutes, we empty it from the catch basin. If it's been re-absorbed we add a little more until we see it oozing once again, then stop and pour off that excess.

In this way **we learn how much water it takes** to thoroughly wet the root ball. We don't water again until it feels both dry and warm when we push a finger in a knuckle deep, or until we heft the pot and know it's light in comparison to the fully soaked pot. Then we expect the plant to take that amount our pitcher test said it can hold.

We **plunge a pot to re-wet a shrunken root ball.** We fill the sink or a bucket with enough water to just barely, gently come over the plant's soil surface when we set the pot into the basin. We hold the pot down until it stops trying to float and bubbles stop rising. Then it's time to lift it up, let it drain, and note its weight as we set it back on its catch basin.

Right: Fill a sink or basin deep enough that you will be able to submerge the pot to be watered. Set the pot in until water flows gently over the rim and covers the root ball. (Dunk too fast and the rushing water will dislodge potting mix.) Hold the pot down until bubbles stop rising from the root ball and the pot stays down of its own weight. Lift the pot and allow it to drain. Note its weight when you return it to its perch -- it's now a fully watered pot. More on watering potted plants in issues 49 and 125, along with a look at this rosemary one year ago -- a tiny cutting.



### When the grass is whiter in the other guy's yard

My helper and I were out doing a few last things in the yard this week, on a really nice day, probably 40 degrees, no snow on the ground.

At one point we both noticed the neighbor's grass, in the narrow strip between our two homes where there's no line except where we each stop mowing. It almost **looks like the lawn there has a bit of snow on it** or like someone sprayed over the top of it with paint, as some of the blades are white. Whatever is going on, it looks like it's moving into our yard. Is it something to be worried about?





It was great to be out doing things, like you said about going out and looking around even in winter. However, we wish we'd found little pansies like you did, not problems! - N. -

That may be **powdery mildew**. We, too have seen this fungus enjoying a mild fall. Mildew might cause trouble in a lawn but unless the lawn's weak for other reasons it **won't be a major problem**.

What you can do is **strengthen the lawn**, starting in spring. Shore up its overall vigor. Then, if it should lose some foliage each year when wet, cloudy, cool conditions favor fungus growth, it will be able to fill back in during drier, warmer, sunnier, periods. Probably you've seen tall phlox plants do this. The plants that were white-coated in late fall come back fresh and lovely in spring.

In addition, **introduce fungus- resistant grass** varieties. Seed them in so they can fill in where the current crop hasn't coped.

**Aerating will strengthen it** if it's compacted there. Then, prevent compaction's return by establishing a path. Cover it with mulch to cushion each footfall or stepping stones to spread a body's weight like a snowshoe over the soil. As an alternative, you could install and plant a paving grid. (See *What is paving grid?* on page 5.)

Then, **overseed with shade tolerant grasses**, "improved" (disease resistant) species and varieties found in premium grass seed mixes. Read the seed package label. Those that have resistance brag on it and list grasses by name. Some of the mildew resistant types: hard fescue 'Biljart' or 'Scaldis,' chewing fescue 'Atlanta,' 'Victory' or 'Enjoy', and bluegrass 'A-34,' 'Bensun,' 'Dormie,' 'Nugget' and 'Sydspot.' (See below, URLs for Extension reports of grass variety resistance.)

The better-growing plants gradually replace the likes of 'Merion Blue,' moving in where it fails.

Finally, **avoid conventional lawn fertilizers** heavy in nitrogen, since high nitrogen levels favor mildew. Use slow release organic products, which don't invite fungi and do improve soil.

For more: [http://www.ccerensselaer.org/Libraries/Hort\\_Lawn\\_Fact\\_Sheets/Grass\\_Species.sflb](http://www.ccerensselaer.org/Libraries/Hort_Lawn_Fact_Sheets/Grass_Species.sflb)  
<http://www.uri.edu/ce/factsheets/sheets/turffungaldis.html> or [http://web.aces.uiuc.edu/vista/pdf\\_pubs/406.pdf](http://web.aces.uiuc.edu/vista/pdf_pubs/406.pdf)





On our CD collection *Asking About Asters* there's more about lawn powdery mildew. (If you don't have this collection on CD or in its original book form, consider ordering it, using our next issue's order form. That material will eventually be up on our website but because it's already been made available and we have a lot more to post that hasn't been "out there", the CD's components are last in line.)

Does white on the lawn catch your eye?  
Look closer.



### **Don't let your lawn strike out. Beef it up so it can make a hit.**

When disease appears on lawn, turf managers on golf courses, in parks and on sod farms don't reach first for fungicides, which are expensive and deliver uncertain results. Instead, they aim to eliminate the underlying "strikes" against the grass plants, to make them stronger.

Grass between homes is often shaded by the buildings most of the day. There may also be so much foot traffic that the soil becomes packed down and the plants languish because their roots don't get much air. **Low light and packed-down soil are two strikes against a lawn.**

Count **a third strike if the lawn includes mildew-prone bluegrass** cultivars 'Merion,' 'Baron,' 'Cheri,' 'Kenblue' and others.

How weakling grasses get into a lawn, and how a lawn's overall vigor can compensate for them, is summed up in **the tale of 'Merion' bluegrass**, a rave in the 1950's and 60's for its color, density, resistance to then-prevalent leaf spots, and tolerance for close-mowing. Although 'Merion' was largely abandoned by the best seed companies during the past thirty years as newer types with more disease resistance were developed, some still grow and sell it. It can live up to its old hype and does that in older lawns where the growing is good. That is, if the soil's aerated regularly, it's watered during drought and treated with organic slow release fertilizers that improve the soil as well as nurture the grass plants.



## How do I know if it's hard-packed soil making the grass weak?

Digging in tells the tale. If the top six inches of earth aren't loose and crumbly, if the lawn has shallow roots, if sod can be peeled away like carpet glued to concrete, that soil needs work so the grass can take hold and fend for itself. Sod laid on compacted soil may persist for a few years by virtue of its initial good health, but then declines rapidly.

## What is paving grid?

Also called permeable pavement, soil reinforcement grid, open celled paving grid, and porous paving matrix. Surfaces covered with these **materials can be planted and bear weight without compressing**. The grid is made of a material with regularly interspersed voids, where the voids are filled with permeable materials such as gravel, sand or soil and plants. Used in parking lots and heavy foot traffic areas in botanical gardens and public parks, for erosion control under paths over fragile soils, for green driveways and emergency vehicle access routes through natural areas.

Right: Permeable paving in Missouri Botanical Garden parking lot allows water to reach tree roots.

Imagine slicing the tops and bottoms off of soup cans, then slicing the cans to create two or three open cylinders from each can. Now arrange those cylinders on the ground, side by side like a honeycomb with cylindrical cells. Fasten the cells together. Fill in and between all the cans with loose soil. Plant grass seed or a foot-tolerant groundcover. Or fill with small stones and don't plant. Walk or drive there. The mat of cut soup cans takes the weight. The plants' growing space or the soil around tree roots below the grid remains loose.

It is **sold in rolled mats or flat modules** and may be made of concrete cells, rigid plastic cells or composites. In our area it's a known- but non-stocked item at landscape material supplies company. We ask, the supplier orders it in for us. Be prepared to describe the grid, as we have here - - take an illustration with you! -- because it's relatively new and goes by various names.

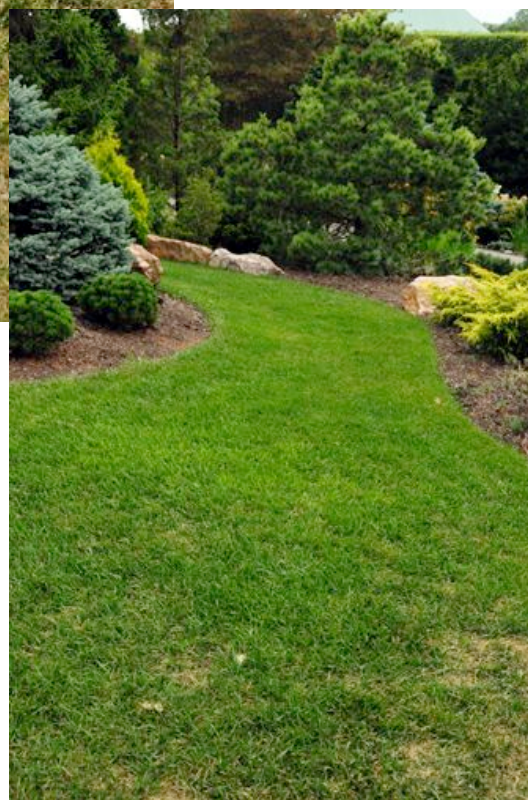




Performance results, University of Washington <http://water.washington.edu/research/Reports/permeableparking.pdf>  
For more about paving grids. (No endorsement is intended of these specific products.)  
<http://www.invisiblestructures.com/grasspave2.html> and video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wx-CNC7f5xY>  
<http://www.grass-reinforcement.com/index.php/products>  
<http://www.boddingtons-ltd.com/civil/bodpave-paving-grid.htm>  
<http://www.stabiligrid.com/>



We noticed permeable paving had been used on a recently renovated slope at Chicago Botanic Garden. (Note rings visible near Janet's foot.) Below: That slope four years later, grass healthy and the slope still attractively green despite heavy foot traffic.



### Why there is a mix of grasses in a seed mix

Few lawns consist solely of one grass type or species. Sod growers and seed companies generally mix types and species to **help the finished lawn hedge its bets.**

In many mixes, for instance, there is bluegrass as well as fescue since each has different strengths. Fescue can tolerate more shade while the bluegrass takes heavier foot traffic. Over time in a shady area the fescue will survive and predominate -- once you know how much thinner and lighter green the fescue leaf blades are you may realize the shady parts of a yard are all fescue!

Meanwhile, in a sunny place where feet trod regularly, bluegrass' wide blades may be the only thing keeping that tough spot green since it could put up with what the fescue could not.

### Dance of the sugarplums, prance of the fertilizer spreaders...

J.L. Asks: Would reindeer poop be the best fertilizer/compost yet or what???? Don't stay up too late on Christmas Eve trying to catch them in the act.

Thanks! We'll surely smile as we sleep to think of magical fertilizer falling from the winter sky.



Gardeners don't need sugarplums to dance in their heads on high holiday nights. Visions are always there of all we grew and plan to grow. Snow crocus (*C. minimus*), New England aster (*A. novae-angliae*) and *Stewartia* tree (*S. pseudocamellia*).



### Alone in the Garden? Never! Our mentors will always be with us:

Most of us had a **parent, neighbor or other veteran gardener** to guide us through our first attempts to grow. Here's some of the **gardening advice given to us** that has served us well, again and again.

If you want to beat them, try to imagine being them. That's how I know where they are and which way they jump when I go to catch 'em!

- Irene Grossman, masterful flower gardener who succeeded even on the cut-through corner lot in a neighborhood teeming with kids -



In honor of Irene, today we give you **a bug's eye view**.

Do you recognize these common garden objects when viewed from the angle of tiny creatures who dwell in nether regions? As you take the pest's angle, do any helpful insights occur?

We share our thoughts on page 13, with the answers. We'd also love to hear what the bug's view reveals to you!

A. (Above) Clue: Tough to get a grip.

B. (Left) Clue: Accurate to say the pest would see this with furrowed brow.



C. (Far left) Clue: Half the care, twice the damage!

D. (Left) Clue: Cool place to hole up.

And, as always: Is there pass-along gardening wisdom in your hands now? Want to pay homage to generations of experience gone by? Send it to us. We'll also pass along all we can.

## Gardener Afield: Reports from a New York City sky-high garden

The world is full of great gardens and gardeners and even the widest ranging traveler hasn't seen or met them all. Last week we heard from you-all that gardeners do *not* get a respite in December, and about all the things you do in winter. We thought you'd relate to how this energetic gardener uses his off-season energy.



Photo ©2011 Thomas Cathey



Photo ©2011 Thomas Cathey

Dear Janet & Steven,

Lobby party! We did it last night. Only about 100 showed up! Usually more.

Tom Cathey



**Thomas Cathey is an artist who gardens** in New York City. When he's not throwing holiday parties for a whole tower-full of people, he keeps Steven and Janet grounded in what it takes to garden 22 stories above



Photo ©2011 Thomas Cathey

ground. Recently his emails and his Tom's Eye blog (<http://tomseyview.wordpress.com/category/gardens/>) have had insights on garden weddings, gardening in a hurricane, the beauty of wax scale, crape myrtle envy and more.

Above, left: On this part of Tom's terrace, we've been entertained by hummingbirds making forays there from Central Park. We also stopped counting at 17 patios and rooftops that are his next-door neighbor gardeners. With so much experience to draw on -- and peek into! -- we'd expect him to succeed but what he's created and captured in container gardens goes far beyond simple success. Be sure to check out his own garden on his blog, in the article *Teatime on the Terrace*. (<http://tomseyview.wordpress.com/category/gardens/>)

## This week in our garden

### Grow with us! This week:

We did some **just-in-time pruning** to clip a crabapple down from 25 feet to 18.

To keep a plant small that wishes to be big, start pruning when it first reaches the desired size. Then, you can maintain it at that size with a 30 to 60 minute pruning session every two years. However, this tree had gone three or four years too far so we pleased to be able to bring it back down gracefully.



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**Keep pruning.** I have one more Japanese maple to work on. (To prune with me, see "February tree pruning" and "Pruning trees and shrubs" on page 9.)

The Japanese maple we pruned last week (below) took its cut-back gracefully. We operate on this one every two years to keep it small, since the space it occupies won't accept its 25-foot potential. Photos ©2009 Steven Nikkila

spend 30-60 days in moist paper in a refrigerator (where it's about 40°F inside).

- Temperatures below 60°F convince a tropical plant that it's the off season and dormancy is the way to go.
- Plants that flower best in cool weather begin to stop forming flower buds when it's over 70°F.

What's Up 29, Page 7  
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It was a gorgeous day for winter pruning but a rotten day for photos so you'll have to imagine this project as being like our other winter prune-downs... because it was! (Above: See Issue #29)



How wonderful to be part of a community of people who go outdoors on 40 degree days with several layers of clothes on and a scarf wrapped twice around the neck, spread their arms and proclaim, "Isn't it just glorious to be out!" (Below: Fellow volunteers in the Detroit Zoo Adopt-a-Garden program worked in rain and cold, and laughed!) We want to continue with you-all forever!

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**Check on *Sedum* cuttings** made in late October. It is always such a thrill to see small things growing!

The story: A new planting called for 12 of the *Sedum caudicicola* hybrid 'Vera Jameson.' Only two plants could be found for sale. "No problem," we said to K.T., "they grow! After a year or so you can split them to fill the area."

"Any way to make that happen faster?" K.T. asked.

"We can stick cuttings. You can keep them growing all winter if you have a cool place under a fluorescent light."



"What about on a windowsill?"

"Not ideal. Never as much light... but no harm trying!"

So we clipped all the stems off the two plants we had, and cut those into 12



segments with stem-plus leaf. For each tiny clipping we made a terrarium: a disposable coffee cup punched with drain holes, filled with soilless potting mix into which we stuck a cutting's stem base, the whole covered with clear plastic held tight with a rubber band.

Look! Eight weeks later, 10 of the 12 are growing.



Left: The new leaves are still tiny compared to what they will be, but we applaud them -- to have regrouped and resumed growth in just a few hours light per day! (The windowsill they sit on is in a cool basement. That's good, as it's a big challenge to keep even a well rooted sun-loving plant alive where it's warm but in low light.) Kudos go to the gardener, K.T., who's careful to add a bit of water only when the cups feel light.

(We'd hoped for condensation under the plastic as a cue to the soil moisture. Simpler to read than weight. These cups are too cool for that. If they were warmer -- and that would mean lighting them better -- lack of condensation would mean "water me".)

By spring our clones will be well rooted chunky plants.





Left: WE might chance a tiny bit of weak fertilizer. The original leaf provided the energy to start new growth and is yellowing now as it sacrifices its nitrogen to supply the newer shoots.

Below: The two *Sedums* already planted might approach this size in their second or third year, dusky blue-purple foliage on stems spreading eighteen inches wide and ten tall. They'll produce rosy flowers in fall. The little ones will probably be a year behind.



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**Conduct our traditional Christmas Eve** decorating, in our new style. It's year three of putting up a holiday branch instead of a holiday tree. This year we have a 12' yew branch, selected during a *Garden By Janet & Steven* pruning session in early December. We'll drag that in, hang it high, adorn it and let you know how it measures up to last year's oak limb and 2009's white pine branch.

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**Dream for one last day** this year that there is a Santa whose elves are now putting the finishing touches on garden furniture for us!

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**Assure others** we've met who were also out working, and wondered:

It's **not too late to protect a plant** for winter. Others have a rose or *Rhododendron* that needs help. We protected the trunk base of a Japanese maple from the cold to come because the tree's in the wide open. We heaped evergreen boughs to shade and muffle the lowest portion of the tree's trunk, so prone to freezing on the part facing south or west.



**Ginkgo trees are not slow growing.** When young -- before beginning to flower -- a ginkgo may add 18 inches per year. This is important to know because if a tree is growing slowly that has the potential to do more, something is wrong and it should be corrected.

**Wooden posts should not be set in concrete** but in gravel. Set in concrete even pressure lumber will rot at the top of the concrete, affected by the water that pools there.



**Green thumbs up** to **the staying power of maiden grass**, a.k.a. Chinese silver grass (*Miscanthus sinensis*) in the winter landscape. Even after it's flattened by snow and ice it comes back upright after a thaw. This strength and rot resistance makes it a good material for thatched roofs.

**Green thumbs down** to **too much staying power**. If you compost your ornamental grasses, chop the *Miscanthus* unless you want to keep looking at whole stems for years. Decomposing microorganisms will find more places to work if there are more cut surfaces, and in the meanwhile the shorter pieces blend better with the mulch.



### Who's Janet? Who's Steven?

**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.



**Horticultural photographer** Steven Nikkila was a hobbyist with a great eye who went back to college for a photography degree once he ushered his own children into grade school. Needing an elective one semester and thinking to bring home good information for his wife's gardening business, he took a class in ornamental horticulture and found himself hooked. Soon the leaps and bounds he'd been recording as his children grew had rivals in files of leaf and ground. He went on to earn a degree in horticulture, while illustrating his wife's books and lending a hand digging gardens. He calls it, "A great combination," and says, "I love this job almost as much as the best one I ever had -- raising my kids."

Email questions to Janet or Steven at [JMaxGarden@aol.com](mailto:JMaxGarden@aol.com) or call 248-681-7850.



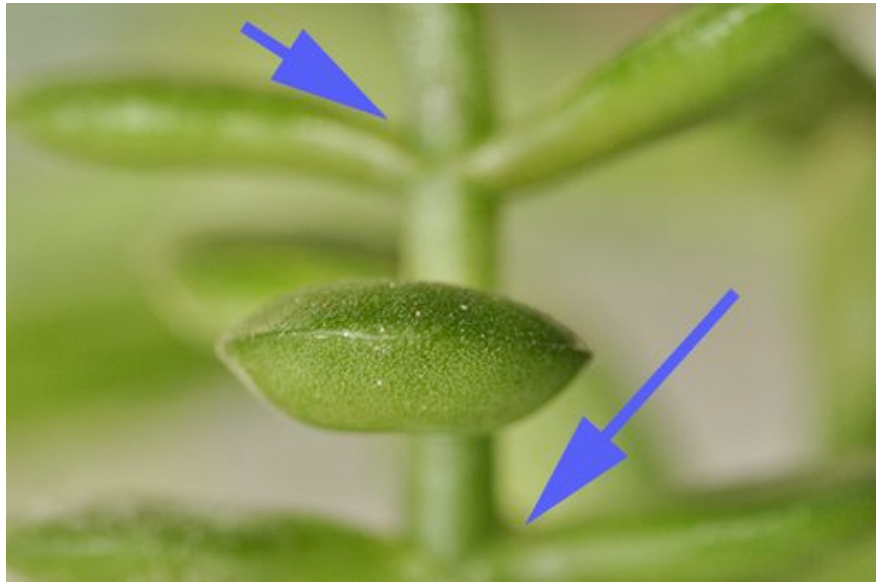
Where to catch us in person and how to buy our books, photos and CDs:  
We've given these features a winter break. They will rejoin us next issue!

### Bug's eye view: Answers

**A. Clue:** Tough to get a grip.

**Answer:** **The turgid surfaces of a jade leaf**, which doesn't offer much shelter to tiny pests.

**Right:** If the soft scale known as mealybugs take hold on a jade it will be in crevices where leaf meets stem. When you inspect a jade for pests, it's not the leaf surface you should check but those crannies. When you wash or shower a jade, don't stop when the dust is off the leaves. Aim a forceful spray into the branch folds and leaf axils, too.



**B. Clue:** Accurate to say the pest would see this with furrowed brow!

**Answer:** **The tines of a "bow" garden rake.**

**Right:** Drag it lightly through a garden in late fall to make furrows that expose the eggs and larvae of overwintering pests to foraging birds. No need to cut deeply into the soil -- such deep disturbance might even turn up and kill toads, a pest-seeking ally you don't want to lose.



**C. Clue:** Half the care, twice the damage!

**Answer:** **Torn cambium from hurried pruning.** Clip a branch carelessly, letting it fall, and it will almost always tear down into the stub. Perhaps you see only an "oops" but opportunistic fungi see gateway to twice as much wounded, starch rich cambium (green layer just under the bark). That's where fungi and insects can move in.

Cut clean or clean up after your cuts so the tree uses just half the energy and time to seal them against infection.



**D. Clue:** Cool place to hole up.

**Answer:** **The drain hole in a pot.**

**Right:** To a slug or a sow bug, that hole is a roomy, sheltered cave. Add moisture, by continually overwatering or letting excess water remain in the catch tray, and conditions become even better there for the greeblies.

