February 2014 Newsletter

From the Director...

Many gardeners are wondering if this winter’s weather will reduce pest populations in our gardens this year. That’s hard to say because so many factors are involved, such as the species (stink bugs, ticks, and Japanese beetles all operate differently), microclimates, and weather effects on the predators and parasites of insect pests. Just as we wiggle our way deeper under the covers on frigid mornings, some insects that spend the winter underground may move deeper into the soil as it freezes. The HGIC website has information on winter plant damage and ice melting.

Confused about storm water management fees and offsets? Check out the Watershed Resources page where you will find the new Stormwater Rebate and Reimbursement Programs fact sheet (FS-976) that includes fees and offsets for Howard Co., Montgomery Co., Prince George’s Co., and Baltimore City and County. UME’s Watershed Protection and Restoration Specialists are working on a series of fact sheets on all storm water best management practices, maintenance, and information on stormwater remediation fees and credits available for each county.

Did you know that we have 29 issues of this newsletter archived on the HGIC website with lists of contents and hot links? Take a look back to 2009 and download those tips and gems of information you’ve been trying to find. I am also happy to share the 2013 HGIC Annual Report. Stay warm and fire up those fluorescent lights!

- Jon Traunfeld
HGIC Center Director

FEATURED PLANTS

Prickly Pear Cactus
Practical, yet novel, prickly pear cactus is well suited for dry, sandy areas and rocky sites.

By Ria Malloy
Just for fun…a quiz to test your knowledge of plant facts and HGIC trivia. Answer 10 questions about Maryland plants and the Home and Garden Information Center and see how you did!

Click here to take the quiz

American Holly Shines in Extreme Cold
By Sara Tangren
Pothos or Devil’s Ivy ‘Neon’
Filtered sunlight, sufficient water when the soil feels dry, and an occasional application of liquid houseplant fertilizer is all the care required.

When the snow piles up and the mercury spirals down, American holly (*Ilex opaca*) takes center stage in the native landscape. The thick, green, spiny leaves, and the clustered red berries contrast beautifully with the soft, white snow. Some people prune the lower branches from older trees to expose the handsome, smooth, gray bark.

American holly isn’t just good looking, though. It provides essential ecosystem functions, including providing winter shelter for songbirds.

**Read on about American holly**

**Featured Video - Starting Seeds Indoors**

UME Master Gardener Kent Phillips goes through the guidelines for starting seeds indoors from planning your timeline, materials, planting, care of the seedlings, and transplanting in this series of videos on YouTube.

**Watch seed starting videos on YouTube**

**Common or interesting questions from last month. Ask your own question online here or call:**

**800-342-2507** in Maryland
**410-531-1757** outside Maryland.
March is the second best time to overseed your lawn to make it thicker or to cover bare areas. Read more

**Insects**

In late February termites start swarming. A swarm seen indoors could mean that a colony is directly under the house and feeding on its lumber. Read more

**Soil, Mulch, Composting**

This is a good time to have your soil tested. For more information on soil testing see HG110. Read more

Click here for more HGIC quick tips

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**Q** Some of my houseplants are producing a sticky substance from their leaves. The floor beneath them is also covered in a sticky layer of film. I also notice some yellow leaves. What could possibly be causing this and how do I stop it?  

**A** The sticky material you are noticing is called honeydew and is the result of the feeding of some type of sucking insect. The likely culprits on houseplants are aphids, mealybugs, or scale insects. Their feeding damage can also be the cause of the leaf yellowing, especially if the insects are scale or mealybug.

Aphids are small soft-bodied insects of various colors, which cluster on stems or leaves. Mealybugs (pictured) are covered with a powdery or cottony white wax and are typically found at the leaf axils (where a leaf meets the stem). Scale insects appear as small raised brown or black bumps on leaves, often along the leaf veins or stems, and can be scraped off.

Separate the infested plants from your healthy houseplants. Then, carefully inspect them to determine which insect is infesting the plants. A magnifying glass can make this process easier.

Aphids can be washed off with a gentle spray of water, mealybugs and scale can be gently removed with a Q-tip dipped in alcohol. For heavy infestations, spray the plants thoroughly with insecticidal soap or horticultural oil labeled for houseplants. Multiple applications, according to the label directions, may be necessary. Sometimes it is best to discard the plant and purchase a new one rather than treating with an insecticide because these types of insects, especially the mealybugs and scale, can be difficult to eradicate.