

Croton Houseplants

The croton is native to Indonesia. In their native habitat, they grow into upright shrubs. As a houseplant, they are known for their variegated foliage of green spotted with scarlet, orange or yellow.

Crotons originated in the tropics and perform well in typical household temperatures in Nebraska. They prefer a room temperature of 70° F during the day and 55 to 60° F at night. These plants tolerate the highest temperatures and light extremes experienced in growing houseplants, but need 40 to 80 percent humidity. Crotons perform well in a sunny location and with a potting mix kept evenly moist. Bright light increases color variegation, while low light diminishes it. Fertilize crotons every month with a half-strength solution of an all-purpose soluble fertilizer. Use a potting mix with good drainage.

New plants may be started with four to six inch long stem cuttings. Remove the bottom leaves and place the stem cutting directly into a container with moist potting mix. Crotons occasionally attract pests such as mealybugs, spider mites and scale. (MJF)



Croton

Plants that Add Interest or Color to Winter Landscapes

Landscapes tend to be dark and gray this time of year, but careful planning can result in subsequent winter gardens being more colorful and interesting. The key is selection of plant material and use of good design. Choose the vantage point from which the garden will be most commonly enjoyed. Select planting sites that are easily seen from this area.

Green is the easiest color to add to a winter landscape with the use of evergreens like white spruce, Douglas-fir or Japanese yew. Of course, parts of the plants other than foliage can be colorful or interesting. Even trees with horizontal branching patterns are interesting if there is snow adding white to the bark color.

Some plants that should be considered for winter landscapes include:



Winged Euonymus

Red Osier Dogwood

Red Osier Dogwood (Cornus stolonifera) — the young stems of this plant are bright red during the winter months and become more intensely colored toward spring. Older stems are often pruned out during the spring to encourage more of the young, more brightly colored twigs.

Yellow Twig Dogwood (Cornus stolonifera 'Flaviramea') — this shrub looks much like Red Osier Dogwood except the twigs are bright yellow rather than red.

Winged Euonymus or Burning Bush



Yellow Twig Dogwood

(Euonymus alatus) — this shrub attracts so much attention in the fall because of the flaming red coloration of the fall foliage. However, the stems are also ornamental in the winter due to their winged characteristics which tend to catch and hold snow.

River Birch (Betula nigra) — this tree has very interesting bark. The flaky bark is reddish-brown to peach colored and contrasts nicely with snow. (MJF)



River Birch

Garden Guide

Things to do this month

Check young trees and shrubs for rodent or rabbit damage. Prevent injury with fencing or protective collars.

Use sand instead of salt for icy spots on the sidewalk.

Brush snow from evergreens as soon as possible after a storm. Use a broom in an upward, sweeping motion. Serious damage may be caused by heavy snow or ice accumulating on the branches.

Avoid heavy traffic on the frozen, dormant lawn. The crown of the plant may be severely damaged or killed.

Review your vegetable garden plans. Perhaps a smaller garden with fewer weeds and insects will give you more produce.

When reviewing your garden catalogs for new vegetable varieties to try, an important consideration is improved insect and/or disease resistance. Watch also for drought-tolerant types.

Analyze last year's planting, fertilizing and spraying records. Make notes to reorder successful varieties as well as those you wish to try again.

Check stored fruits and vegetables such as potatoes and apples for bad spots which may lead to decay. Remove and use those which show signs of spoiling. Separate others into slotted trays or bins to increase air circulation and reduce decay possibilities.

To prolong bloom, protect poinsettias from drafts and keep them moderately moist.

Turn and prune houseplants regularly to keep them shapely. Pinch back new growth to promote bushy plants.

Check all houseplants closely for insect infestations. Quarantine gift plants until you determine that they are not harboring any pests.

Houseplants and holiday gift plants should not be placed on top of the television. This location is too warm and in most homes too far from windows to provide adequate light.

During the winter most houses are too dry for houseplants. Humidity may be increased by placing plants on trays lined with pebbles and filled with water to within one-half inch of the base of the pot.

Houseplants with large leaves and smooth foliage, such as philodendrons, dracaena and rubber plant benefit if their leaves are washed at intervals to remove dust and grime, helping keep the leaf pores open.

If you have some time this winter, paint the handles of garden tools red or orange. This will preserve the wood and make the tools easier to locate next summer when you lay them down in the garden or on the lawn.

Move garden ornaments such as urns or jars into the garage or basement to prevent damage during the cold winter season. If containers are too large to move, cover them to prevent water collecting in them or turn them upside down during the winter so water will not collect and freeze in them causing breakage.

Add garden record keeping to the list of New Year's resolutions. Make a note of which varieties of flowers and vegetables do best and which do poorly in your garden.

Feed the birds regularly and see they have water. Birds like suet, fruit, nuts and bread crumbs as well as bird seed.

Do not wait until late in the winter to order seeds. Many varieties sell out early. (MJF)

Watch for Black Knot on Plums

Black knot is a widespread fungal disease that affects plum and cherry, and occasionally infects apricots, peaches and other plants in the Prunus genus, like chokecherry. Black knot is common throughout Nebraska in wild plum thickets. The disease is characterized by rough, hard, elongated, black swellings that persist on infected plants.

The knot fungus infects fruiting spurs, stems and branches of susceptible plants, and occasionally the main trunk is affected. Infection occurs through splashing or wind blown spores when new growth is about 1 inch long. Fungal spores are discharged in moderate to heavy amounts during the pink blossom stage of cherry or plum and ends about the time elongation of the new growth stops.

On infected plant parts, abnormal growth of bark and wood tissues produce small, light-brown swellings that eventually rupture as they enlarge. In late spring, the rapidly growing young knots have a soft texture and become covered with a velvety, olive-green growth of the fungus. During summer, the young knots turn darker and elongate. By fall, they become hard, brittle, rough and black. The following

growing season the knots enlarge and gradually encircle the twig or branch. The cylindrical or spindle-shaped knots may vary from one-half inch to 7 or more in length and up to 2 inches in diameter. Small knots may emerge from larger knots forming extensive galls. After the second year, the black knot fungus usually dies and the gall

is invaded by secondary fungi that give old knots a white or pinkish color during the summer.

Smaller twigs usually die within a year after being infected. Larger branches may live for several years before being girdled and killed by the fungus.

The entire tree may gradually weaken and die if the severity of the disease increases and effective control measures are not taken.

The two major plum varieties grown in Nebraska Stanley and Damson, are susceptible to this disease as well as 'Bluefire' and 'Shropshire'; 'Methley,' 'Milton,' 'Early Italian,' 'Brodshaw' and 'Fellenburg' are moderately susceptible; and 'Shiro,' 'Santa Rosa,' and 'Formosa' are only slightly susceptible. 'President' is apparently resistant to black knot. Japanese varieties of plums are generally less susceptible

than most American varieties.

When planting new plum or prune trees, avoid planting trees next to or downwind from an old or abandoned orchard with a significant black knot problem. Similarly, remove all wild plum and cherry trees, which are a potential disease reservoir, from fence rows or woodlands within 600 feet of the orchard site.

Established orchards or backyard trees should be scouted or examined each year for the presence of black knot and infected twigs should be pruned out and destroyed or removed before bud break. It is important to prune at least 3 to 4 inches below each knot because the fungus grows beyond the edge of the knot itself. If pruning is not possible because knots are present on major scaffold limbs or the trunk, they can be removed by cutting away the diseased tissue down to healthy wood and out at least one inch beyond the edge of the knot. Burn or bury the pruned branches before April 1.

Fungicides can offer significant protection against black knot, but are unlikely to be effective if pruning and sanitation are ignored. Fungicides are necessary and will provide the greatest benefit if applied before rainy periods, particularly when temperatures are greater than 55° F. In evaluating control programs, remember knots often do not become apparent until the year following infection. (MJF)

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