

HOME-GARDEN

Ask a Horticulturist: Your Questions Answered

Mark Richardson Special to the Telegram & Gazette

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As director of horticulture at New England Botanic Garden, my team and I answer a lot of questions about plants and gardening. Did you know you can submit yours to plants@neb.org? Here are answers to a few good gardening questions we received recently.

I have a hydrangea that got somewhat killed during the spring freezing temperatures and it came back in the summer with green leaves. With the fall frost the leaves have died. This is my first hydrangea, so I don't know much about winter care for them. I also haven't had any flowers yet. What would you recommend?

We get a lot of questions about hydrangeas. Several species are popular in our area, including oakleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*), smooth hydrangea (*Hydrangea arborescens*), and bigleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla*). People normally have questions about bigleaf hydrangea, which flowers pink to blue, depending on soil pH, in mid-summer. This popular hydrangea often suffers from poor flowering due to cold winters or improper pruning. Most bigleaf hydrangeas flower on “old wood,” meaning their flower buds develop the previous season. That old wood isn't always very attractive in winter once leaves have fallen, leading a lot of unknowing gardeners to cut them back, invariably cutting off next year's flower buds. Because bigleaf hydrangea is marginally hardy (to zone 6), cold winters or late frosts can also cause damage to flower buds. It sounds like your flower buds could have been killed before opening. Planting hydrangeas in an area that offers protection from cold winter winds and maintaining a consistent mulch layer can help. For those looking to plant hydrangeas, our native hydrangeas (oakleaf and smooth hydrangea) offer more tolerance of our climate.

I have a garden with a mix of perennials, native plants, and some flowering shrubs. I would like to provide more habitat for pollinators. What is the best

way to increase insect/pollinator activity without redesigning the whole garden?

The simplest answer is, add more plants! The best way to support pollinators and beneficial insects is to grow a biologically diverse garden that offers a mix of resources. If there is a particular insect you're trying to support (monarch butterflies come to mind), use the plant species they depend on to complete their life cycles. Generally, insects spend most of their lives as juveniles and very little time as adults, making it important to plant not just pollen and nectar sources, but also host plants for larval stages of insects to feed and/or overwinter on. In the case of monarch butterflies, their caterpillars can only feed on milkweed, so plant milkweed. A few other great pollinator plants are mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum* spp.) and shrubby willows (*Salix* spp.).

This summer I noticed an abundance of worm poop all over the top of the soil of my perennial gardens. I was feeling quite fortunate until I found out about invasive jumping worms and how they can desiccate gardens. I am pretty confident that I am infested with these worms. What can I do to save my gardens?

Jumping worm (*Amyntas* spp.) populations really spiked in our area this summer with all the rain. Unfortunately, once jumping worms are established, they are nearly impossible to remove. UMass Extension has some great resources on jumping worms, including the best way to differentiate them from other earthworms that pose less of a threat to gardens or forest soils. The best way to avoid a jumping worm problem is to not introduce them in the first place. Avoid sharing plants with other gardeners, opt for purchasing plants grown in soilless media rather than balled-and-burlapped plants grown in-ground, and buy compost and mulch only from reputable sources.

What are shade tolerant native shrubs that reliably grow in this area?

We're fortunate to have lots of shade tolerant shrubs native to New England, including broadleaved evergreens like great rosebay (*Rhododendron maximum*) and mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) and deciduous flowering shrubs like smooth hydrangea (*Hydrangea arborescens*) and witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*). My favorite shade tolerant native shrub is pinxterbloom azalea (*Rhododendron periclymenoides*), which has brilliant fragrant pink flowers in early spring. Pinxterbloom azalea is deciduous and does best in moist garden soils with lots of organic matter.

Gardening Central Mass. is written by New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill CEO Grace Elton and Director of Horticulture Mark Richardson. Located on 171 acres in Boylston. New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at www.nebg.org. The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.