



## **Pest Corner**

December, 2005

### **Poisonous Christmas Plants**

Many people who receive holiday gift plants worry that the plants may be poisonous.

**Poinsettias** in particular, cause much concern. In spite of old tales, research indicates that Poinsettias are not poisonous. Like many members of the spurge family however, the Poinsettia does have a milky sap that can cause irritation to humans who are allergic to it.

Certain species of **holly** contain traces of toxic chemicals, but these same chemicals are also found in plant products such as coffee and tea. Keep the attractive red berries out of the reach of young children and curious pets.

**Christmas peppers** (*Capsicum annuum*) make an attractive house plant. The fruits are variously colored and edible, but they are a pepper. Wear gloves when handling the seeds.

The green fruit of **Jerusalem cherry** (*Solanum pseudocapsicum*) are somewhat toxic, a bit like green tomatoes, to which they are related. Once the fruit ripens, they may be less of a problem.

Generally, holiday plants are strictly decorative and, for their health and yours, shouldn't be handled. Take special care with young children. Toddlers may rub their eyes after handling plants or put plant parts in their mouths.

### **Container Plants in Winter**

Plants left outside in containers need to be protected from the cold because their roots are more susceptible to cold than other parts. One study showed that the stem of a flowering dogwood could tolerate  $-30^{\circ}$  F., while the roots were killed at  $+24^{\circ}$  F., a difference of 54 F degrees. Plant roots grown in containers have little insulation and are subjected to much colder temperatures than if planted in the ground where they are insulated by the earth.

You can protect the roots of container plants from freezing weather by bringing them indoors during cold weather, overwintering them in a greenhouse, or sinking the pots

into the ground for the winter. You can even try piling an organic mulch such as wood chips around the containers to provide more insulation, but this still may not be enough for extremely cold temperatures.

## **Roof Moss Control**

In our cool, moist coastal climate, moss can become a real problem around houses and other structures. Moss often causes problems not only on roofs but also patios, sidewalks, and steps which are infrequently used and remain wet for extended periods of time.

If not controlled, moss will shorten the lifespan of a roof. Control measures include removing over-hanging branches that shade the roof, physically removing as much of the moss as possible, applying zinc or copper flashing directly on the roof, or using a liquid spray or granular formulation of a moss killer.

Some chemicals are registered for moss control on structures (roofs, walks, decks, patios) and can be effective in killing moss and inhibiting its re-growth for a period of time. The length of time this residual action is effective will depend on the type of roof, amount of penetration, the amount of rainfall, and the type of chemical used.

The most effective chemicals for moss control on structures are soluble zinc or copper compounds such as zinc chloride (zinc and metallic), zinc sulfate, or copper naphthenate (copper metallic). These can be applied anytime when the moss is actively growing. Applications are made by sprinkling can, hose end, or tank sprayer. The moss must be thoroughly soaked, but avoid runoff. Where the possibility of runoff exists, cover plants with plastic sheeting to protect them. The application of these chemicals is most effective when moss is actively growing, and when it isn't expected to rain for several days.

The following cautions should be exercised when using zinc compounds: do not use them around copper, avoid contact with painted or metal surfaces as well as lawns and ornamental plantings, and avoid any entry into water because these products are quite toxic to fish. Two distinct disadvantages of copper compounds are that they may have an odor and also may cause damage to desirable plants. When using commercial moss control products always read and follow labeled directions.

Zinc galvanized or copper flashings and ridges will be effective for moss control when placed approximately 10 to 15 feet down from the ridge on most roofs. Bare copper wires, stretched about every 10 feet horizontally along the butt ends of shingles will provide some moss control through normal corrosion of the copper wire and subsequent run off.