

Dakota Gardener

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A newsletter for gardeners in North Dakota

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Container gardens are for everyone!



Do you love to garden but don't have any land? Don't worry—just get a container! Containers open up new opportunities for gardening everywhere: patios, decks, balconies, doorways, along sidewalks, and indoors.

The first step in container gardening—as you might expect—is to select the container. There are many different colors and shapes to choose from. Soft colors and simple shapes are generally best. Always remember that a pot should *accentuate* the beauty of the plant, not *overwhelm* it.

Plastic pots are colorful and lightweight. Clay pots have a natural look to them and are less likely to tip over. Since clay pots are porous, the soil within clay pots will dry out more quickly. This requires more frequent attention to watering (daily watering may be needed in sunny locations). Make sure that your container has a drainage hole.

As far as the size of the pot goes, most flowers and small vegetables (lettuce, beans, spinach) grow well in two-gallon pots. Multiple flower plantings and larger veg-

etables (tomatoes, peppers, tomatoes and bush cucumbers) do best in pots with at least five gallons of soil.

A good soil mix is two parts potting soil, one part peat moss (for moisture retention), and one part perlite (for drainage). Fertilize the plants regularly after they become established.

Water-soluble fertilizers, such as Miracle-Gro and Peters Houseplant Formula, are convenient since you can

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FEATURE STORIES

Fighting Creeping Charlie and his friends

Creeping Charlie has become one of the toughest weeds to control in our lawns. This weed is very aggressive and can take over a lawn quickly. Pulling Creeping Charlie out of the ground is difficult since he has a very extensive root system.

To identify Creeping Charlie, a.k.a. Ground Ivy, look for his delicately scalloped leaf edges and lavender flowers. But don't let his dainty appearance fool you. Charlie is as tough as nails. He just laughs at you when you use a traditional weed killer. He seems to eat the most popular herbicides for lunch.

Time to get out the big guns! Yes, that means using the most potent weapon ever developed to kill broad-leaf weeds in lawns: salt of dicamba.

Look for this chemical in the list of ingredients on the label of your broadleaf weed killer. Dicamba is one of three ingredients contained in Trimec formulations, which are available at most garden supply stores.

Unfortunately, Creeping Charlie won't give up without a fight. Some strains of the weed have become resistant to dicamba. In this case, the chemical triclopyr is recommended. It's often found in herbicides used for killing chickweed and clover.

The time of year you attack Charlie makes a difference. Now while he's blooming is a good time to get him. The best time of year to kill Charlie (and most other weeds) is in September.

Intensive "undercover" research has found a special weakness in Creeping Charlie. Yeah, we found his soft spot—he can't take boron. Iowa State University recommends mixing 15 ounces of 20 Mule Team Borax into 2.5 gallons of water. This will spray an area of 1000 square feet. If used at this recommended rate, no harm will come to the grass.

Here are some other notorious weeds that Creeping Charlie might hang out with.

Violet. This weed has heart-shaped leaves and spring-flowering purple blooms. The only reliable way to kill violets is with glyphosate. But be careful to only spray the violets—this herbicide will also kill lawn grass. Some gardeners use a paint brush to dab the herbicide onto the violets without harming the lawn.

White Clover. This shamrock plant has white globular flowers. Trimec or triclopyr formulations will kill it. Granular weed-and-feed herbicides are not very effective since the granules often fall off the weakly-stemmed leaves. Sprays are most effective.

Chickweed. This plant has small pointed leaves and tiny white flowers. The leaves of mouse-eared chickweed look like furry mouse ears. Control this weed like clover.

Thistle. Most lawn herbicides will do a good job on these thorny plants, especially during fall. Trimec formulations will certainly wipe it out.

Bentgrass. This low-growing, creeping grass has small (1 inch or less), pointed grass blades. It must be killed with glyphosate. Future problems can be prevented by cutting your turf tall, 2.5 to 3.0 inches. Bentgrass can only compete in low-growing lawns.

Quackgrass. Clumps of this coarse-bladed grass must be controlled with glyphosate.

One last comment. Try to tolerate a few weeds in your yard. A perfectly weed-free lawn is not natural. Use toxic chemicals only when necessary.



Feeding corn to your lawn

Corn gluten meal is a natural way to control weeds in the landscape. Best of all, it is completely safe. You can even eat it!

The use of corn gluten meal as an herbicide was discovered during turfgrass research conducted at Iowa State University. This by-product of corn milling was observed to prevent turfgrass seeds from sprouting. Further research has shown that it also effectively prevents other seeds from sprouting, including seeds from weeds such as crabgrass, chickweed, and dandelions.

Corn gluten meal will only kill seeds that are trying to germinate. It will not kill weed plants that are already established.

Corn gluten meal will kill seeds of both annual and perennial weeds. As for annuals (for example, crabgrass and foxtail), which naturally die from frost, corn gluten meal prevents their seeds from germinating in the future. As for perennials (for example, dandelions and creeping charlie), corn gluten meal won't be able to kill the plants already established in the lawn. But it will kill the seeds they

shed each summer, so the population of these particular weeds won't increase. In fact, because weeds will die of "natural" causes, their numbers should actually decrease after several years of consistent use of corn gluten meal.

How to apply to lawns

Corn gluten meal is available in powdered and pelletized forms, both of which work equally well. The pelletized form is easier to use, though.

Apply corn gluten meal first in early May, then a second time around mid-August. Spread the product evenly, at a rate of 20 pounds per 1,000 square feet of lawn. Water it lightly into the soil in order to activate it. Corn gluten meal should remain effective for five to six weeks each time you apply it.

Don't expect to see instant results from using corn gluten meal. Every consecutive year you apply corn gluten meal should give you better results than the year before. By the fourth year, weed control should be very good.

Minimizing pesticide use in lawns

Nobody likes using pesticides. They're poisonous! So how we can grow a good lawn, yet also minimize the risk of exposing our families and pets to these poisons?

First, rethink your idea of what is a healthy lawn. Tolerate a few weeds. Weeds are nothing to be embarrassed about. It's completely natural to have a few "wildflowers" like dandelions and clover mixed in with the grass.

Second, if you want to kill weeds, do it in the fall. That's when weeds are most vulnerable. Once a year is usually more than enough.

Lastly, use your common sense when using pesticides. Follow the instructions on the label. Spray at the recommended rate. Wear protective clothing. Spray under calm conditions to avoid drift. Stay off the lawn for 24 hours after applying a herbicide. Store pesticides safely and out of the reach of children.



Corn gluten meal contains 10% nitrogen. When you use it you are also fertilizing the lawn, which encourages it to grow thicker and help exclude weeds. Applying corn gluten meal at the recommended rate of 20 pounds per 1,000 square feet, twice a year, gives your lawn a total of 4 pounds of nitrogen annually—more than enough to meet its needs. Corn gluten meal does not supply phosphorus or potassium, but most soils in North Dakota already have sufficient amounts of these nutrients.

Garden applications

Corn gluten meal may be used safely in gardens around established perennial plants (such as shrubs, perennial flowers and asparagus) to keep weed seeds from sprouting. It can also be used after vegetable and flower transplants have been in the soil long enough to have "taken hold." Follow label recommendations.

If you are sowing seeds in your garden, wait until seedlings are up and growing well before applying corn gluten meal. Otherwise, the corn gluten meal will kill your garden seeds.

The downside

Corn gluten meal is much more expensive compared to most synthetic herbicides. It can also be hard to find. Check places that sell garden supplies, farm stores or county co-ops that sell seed and grain for hobby farms, and some stores that specialize in selling food for wild birds.

Source: University of Minnesota

GARDENING TIPS FOR MAY



Trees and shrubs

- ☞ Viburnums are special shrubs. They provide the landscape with year-round color, starting with pure white flowers in spring, colorful fruits in summer, and vibrant foliage in autumn. The fruits of some viburnum, such as those of the American cranberrybush viburnum (shown) remain on the shrub through the winter.
- ☞ When mulching around a young tree, place a ring of about three inches deep, and reach out at least 12 inches away from the trunk. Gradually *reduce* the depth of the mulching as it approaches the trunk (don't create "volcano mulch piles", as shown below). There should only one inch of mulch near the trunk itself.



Lawns

- ☞ When buying a lawn fertilizer, look carefully to see how much *slow-release* nitrogen is in it. Cheaper, fast-release lawn and garden fertilizers (such as 10-10-10 or urea) give us a sense of pride when we see the grass quickly green up and start aggressively growing in spring. But this aggressive growth only means that you have to mow more often. A quick spurt of grass growth provides minimal long-term benefit to the lawn. Slow-release fertilizers will gradually feed the lawn and support good healthy growth.
- ☞ Lawn fertilizers that do not contain herbicides do not pose a significant threat to our children or pets. These fertilizers simply contain nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, all nutrients that are naturally found in our soil. The nitrogen granules might burn a pet if it is very, very sensitive. To minimize risk, simply water the lawn to wash the granules off the grass blades and into the soil before walking on the lawn.
- ☞ Mid to late May is a good time to fertilize the lawn, if you have not done so already.



Flowers

- ☞ Plant gladiolus every two weeks from mid-May to June. By spacing out the time of your planting, you can space out the flowering period, too.
- ☞ After tulip and daffodil blooms begin to fade, clip off the flower stalks. Don't disturb the leaves—they are needed to replenish the bulb for next year's blooms. The leaves will naturally turn yellow once the bulb has refilled itself for next spring. An application of a balanced fertilizer, like 10-10-10 or something similar, at a rate of 2 pounds per 100 square feet, will support bulb development.
- ☞ Pansies (shown) are among the most frost-tolerant annuals. Other frost-tolerant annuals include dianthus, petunia, snapdragon, and viola.
- ☞ Remove the old debris from lily and iris plantings to reduce borer problems.



Vegetables

- ☞ Some plants like it hot. You will have a better crop of cucumbers, pepper, eggplant, okra and lima beans if you wait until June to plant them.
- ☞ Don't plant tomatoes, potatoes, peppers or eggplants within 60 feet of a black walnut tree. Otherwise the chemicals in the tree's roots will kill these plants in midsummer. You'll see a shocking, sudden wilt.
- ☞ The proper way to transplant a tomato is to "trench-plant" it. Dig a shallow trench about two inches deep. Pick off the leaves from all but the top eight inches of the plant. Lay the plant in the trench and curl the top eight inches of the plant so that it's above the surface. Bury the rest with soil. The stem buried underground will generate roots and your plants will get off to a quicker start. Trench-planting works especially well for spindly plants. But don't make the trench too deep, since the soil is still cold beneath the surface.
- ☞ When purchasing onion sets or transplants, look for healthy bulbs that are small or moderate in size. Large bulbs are more likely to go to flower this summer.
- ☞ Plant your sweet corn early to minimize problems with earworms.
- ☞ The best gardeners add a couple inches of aged manure (or compost) to their garden every year.



Fruits

- ☞ Now is a good time to thin out a raspberry planting. If planted in a hedgerow, cultivate the edges so that the hedge is only about 18 inches wide at the base. Thin the canes to stand three inches apart down the row.
- ☞ Remove flowers from a new planting of Junebearing strawberries during their first year; otherwise, the plants will focus their energy on forming fruits, rather than forming roots and becoming a strong plant. Remove flowers from new plantings of everbearing types for six to eight weeks.
- ☞ Don't spray apples with insecticides when they are blooming; otherwise, you'll kill honeybees. This includes home orchard sprays that contain both fungicides and insecticides.



Pruning lilacs

It's important to prune your lilacs regularly to keep them healthy and full of blooms. For now, enjoy the beauty and fragrance of the flowers. Later, remove these blooms when they fade. If you don't remove the faded blooms, the lilac bush will focus its energy on producing seeds. This will reduce its production of flower buds for next spring's bloom.

After removing the faded flowers, remove up to one-fourth of the oldest canes every year. A good rule of thumb is to remove one big cane each year. Make the cuts near ground level. This will stimulate new canes to develop from the ground, giving you a fuller bush. The new canes that emerge will grow vigorously and produce plenty of blooms in future years.



Crabapple: a tree for all seasons

The crabapple is one of the most popular trees in North Dakota. These trees have bright blossoms in spring and colorful fruits that attract wildlife during winter.

When selecting a crabapple, begin by looking for varieties that resist scab disease, which may cause defoliation in summer.

Then consider color. Besides the color of *flowers*, which stay on the tree for a few *weeks*, also consider the color of *fruits*, which may brighten the winter landscape for *months*.

Recommended pink-flowered varieties include Adams, Indian Majic, Indian Summer, Prairifire, Profusion, Red Baron, Red Splendor, Selkirk, and Thunderchild. These all have bright red fruits that will adorn your tree through much of the winter.

If you prefer white flowers, Red Jewel, Donald Wyman, Beverly, Glen

Mills, and Winter Gem have brilliant red fruits. White Cascade, Professor Sprenger and Bob White have interesting orange-gold fruits.

If you are looking for a special plant to highlight your landscape, consider a crabapple with a weeping habit. Louisa (pink flowers/yellow fruits) and Red Jade (white flowers/red fruits) are good choices.

Some people hate the mess that crabapple fruits create. These gardeners often select the fruitless variety Spring Snow.

Personally, I think these people are missing out on a wonderful display of color in winter, which is naturally a drab time in our landscapes. The varieties listed above have small fruit that do not create a mess. Furthermore, the fruits attract colorful



songbirds to our landscape during winter and early spring.

If you have an old crabapple that is messy, you can abort the fruits by applying two half-strength applications of Sevin (carbaryl) within three weeks of petal fall.

Containers

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fertilize and water at the same time. A fertilization every other week is generally sufficient.

Your choices among plants are tremendous. For sunny conditions, try growing geraniums, marigolds, petunias (the Wave series of petunia is unsurpassed for sheer number of blooms), zinnia, celosia, ageratum, or salvia. My favorite is the 'Purple Wave' petunia (shown on the front page), which has an amazing amount of blooms!

You can also grow herbs, including basil, chives, parsley, mint, rosemary, or sage. These plants will provide you with wonderful tastes, colors and textures. Vegetables, of course, will do nicely under sunny conditions.

In shady locations, you can grow impatiens, begonias, coleus, and fuchsia. Leafy and root vegetables and most herbs will tolerate light shade.

Frosted rhubarb can become toxic

An Illinois woman reported that her grandmother fell ill after eating cake made with rhubarb stalks that had been exposed to frost. Her grandmother was taken to the hospital and diagnosed by a local doctor as having rhubarb poisoning. She recovered.

Rhubarb leaves are toxic, but less is known regarding the toxicity of rhubarb stalks exposed to frost. Rhubarb emerges early in the spring and frost damage is a common occurrence. Gardeners can take steps to protect plants by covering them.

Tony Bratsch, Extension horticulturist for the University of Illinois, re-

ported that the toxic oxalic acid in the leaves will move to the stalk under freezing temperatures. Once frozen, the leaf tissue will initially appear 'water soaked' and then wilt, and eventually blacken along the edges or where tissue was damaged. Once the plant experiences a damaging freeze, the stalks should not be eaten, and should be removed from the plant.

"Eventually a new set of leaves will emerge, and no permanent damage is done to the plant. A mature plant should yield another crop of stalks within four to six weeks," Bratsch explains.