Living in Johnston County has many benefits. During the Holiday Seasons, we have weeks of gorgeous weather, making it a great time to trim bushes, cut back ornamental grasses and shape evergreens. During a nature walk, or even in your own yard, you may find pinecones, dead branches and intertwined twigs with or without pinecones. If you consider yourself crafty, here are some ideas how to get started using trimmings for Holiday Décor. Find pictures through an online search, in a catalog or from wherever you can. It is always a good idea to have a guide or idea of what you want to make before you begin, so you will be prepared with the tools and materials you will need to complete the fabrication.

**TOOLS TO HAVE HANDY:** pruning shears, garden scissors, green floral wire, wire cutters, lightweight staple gun, several rubber bands, thin fishing wire that easily holds knots, glue gun and sticks, oasis rectangles for delicate arrangements for indoors, which holds water for live plants to help keep them green or Styrofoam shapes of choice (cones for trees, cylinders for tall bases, balls to decorate to hang/or place on stick as in topiary, rings for wreaths, rectangles to place in vases or pots), accessory picks (faux fruit, berries, shiny balls, even pinecones attached to small sticks, if needed) ribbon from craft store, lights (electric or battery), colored spray paint if needed, and aerosol hairspray if you want to use ornamental grasses or plumes.

If you want to make a shape using a form, most likely, you will be pushing the stems or sticks into an oasis or Styrofoam form. If you intend to make a wreath from scratch, create a hard wire form in your desired diameter. Secondly, pruned long sprigs of evergreens
can be threaded onto wire, using floral wire, twisted to secure it. Then, decide if you will light it and attach by weaving through the branches. Next step would be to wire pre-made bow in its desired location. Lastly, use twisted wires or knotted fishing wire to hold picks, pinecones, pre-made bows, spray painted twigs or plumes. These decorations should be placed in a balanced arrangement. Hot glue can be used on items that no longer contain moisture. If you do use plumes, or delicate items, these should be used indoors or under cover from rain to keep them intact.

If you intend to make an arrangement, especially if it is top heavy, it is imperative to use floral glue to hold oasis down in the vase or container for support. If you want to keep water in the arrangement, another idea would be to surround the stems with glass balls or rocks in a glass container. If the flowers or foliage is tall and thin, using wire/rubber band to bunch the base of stems does help when using the glass weighted balls/rocks method. Once your container is ready to begin, decide if you would like it tall in center, wide and cascading, fanlike, against a wall, or double sided. Then begin putting in your main stems. Use the tall lightweight sprays, last and place usually in the center for height. If creating a definite shape, be sure to work that in first. Remember, lights are always after the main foliage. Then, add the bow or ribbon, and accessories. A garland or swag is done the same way, but your shape can be made just by wiring one cutting to another one with a small overlap and leaving some give to shape it around doorways or making any turn. I would suggest a green wire to attach because it will be easier to work with.

In a closing note, the more you work at this, the more confidence you will attain. Never give up. Everything can be learned with time, patience and practice. Get beautiful décor on a penny budget. Most of all, remember life is about learning and new adventures, so have fun trying your hand at home made decor!

**FEATURE PLANT**

_Weird and Wonderful - Huernia zebrina_

by Connie Schultz

In my article last month, I shared how my fascination with cactus and succulents began and how I came to be more interested in the thornless varieties. This was a good summer for weird blooms as one of my other “favorite” thornless cactus, Huernia zebrine or Lifesaver Flower, also bloomed.

Native to eastern and southern Africa, Ethiopia and Arabia, these succulents form a clump of low growing grey-green fleshy stems that are angular and softly toothed. These easy-to-care-for succulents bear a very interesting flower, sometimes called a Lifesaver Flower for the shiny almost plastic looking ring or “annulus” in the center. Like
the flower I shared last time, it is also a “carrion” flower, depending on a rotting smell to entice flies to pollinate it.

I plant these succulents with other cactus in pots that may have 3 or more plants each as they make a good low growing accent for a taller cactus. They are easy to propagate by breaking off one of the stems and letting it dry or “callus” for a week before planting in a commercial cactus potting soil. Clay pots are also beneficial as they help the plants to dry out between watering. Overwatering can cause rotting, so benign neglect can be helpful – especially during the winter - but they like more water and a light fertilizer during really hot weather when they bloom. The only bugs they are really bothered by are mealy bugs. They are tender perennials so bring them inside when frosts begin. Ironically, even though they’re a cactus, they need some protection from full or direct sun during the summer as they can burn, so semi-sun is best. I keep mine on a covered porch outside during the summer. It’s always a thrill for me when one of these strange, exotic cacti blooms, so otherworldly! I hope you enjoy this weird and wonderful plant!

UPCOMING EVENTS

-Fruit Tree Training & Pruning Demonstration - January 28, 2012 - 10am - 12pm @ Central Crops Research Station in Clayton, NC. Dr Mike Parker, Tree Fruit Specialist at NC State University, will teach us how to train fruit trees to get the best production from them. To register call 919 989-5380.

-Blueberry Production & Pruning Demonstration - February 11, 2012 - 10am - 12pm @ JC Ag Bldg in Smithfield, NC. Dr. Bill Cline, Blueberry Specialist at NC State University, will share information on growing blueberries in eastern North Carolina. We will then travel a short distance to a blueberry patch and learn how to prune blueberry bushes to promote the best production. To register call 919 989-5380.

-Grape Production & Pruning Demonstration - February 25, 2012 - 10am - 12pm, Location: TBA

YARD VILLIAN

Deer in the Home Landscape

by Joanne King

Deer are browsers. Fertilizers and watering in the landscape creates the flower buds and sugars beneficial to their diet. Deer are ruminant. They consume in the browsing area
and retreat to a safe area where the food is processed by chewing their cud. Our landscape consists of lush lawns and plants for their food. The greenway buffer of our subdivisions provides the safe habitat or “edge” where their food can be processed.

Deer prefer leaves and tender shoots at ground level and up to five feet high. Their food consumption increases in the fall, as they prepare for the minimal food availability of winter. They depend on acorns, or mast, to fatten up. During periods of drought, when fewer acorns are produced, you might expect to see “extra” damage in late winter or early spring as the deer seek other food sources.

So what can a homeowner do?

**Plant selection and design:** When deer are hungry they will eat what is available. Don’t give them good choices in the first place. Deer seem to dislike plants with aromatic properties. They seem to stay away from ornamental grasses and bulbs.

**Use fences and barriers:** This option may be limited for some homeowners but useful in certain situations, especially vegetable gardens. A fence has to be high enough so the deer can’t jump it.

**Use repellants:** Repellants are applied directly to the plant and repel by taste or odor. They should be applied and reapplied in periods of expected deer browsing or when the plant is sending off tender new growth.

**Scare tactics:** The use of loud noises, rustling of plastic bags, an old unwashed flannel shirt (human odor), security lights, motion detectors and dogs have been effective.

The bottom line is if you live in an area with deer, try thinking like a deer. Be mindful of when the deer are likely to be hungry. Protect what you have when the deer are most likely to be browsing or the plant is most desirable. And don’t get hooked on one method of control. Above all, keep the most desirable deer food off the menu because if you feed them, they will come!

For more information, check out these websites.

- [http://njaes.rutgers.edu/deerresistance/](http://njaes.rutgers.edu/deerresistance/)
- [http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/nreos/wild/wildlife/animals/mammals/deer.htm](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/nreos/wild/wildlife/animals/mammals/deer.htm)

**WHAT’S IN SEASON**

**Peanut**

*Arachis hypogaea*

The peanut is a legume and a member of the Fabaceae family. It is also known by several other names including earth nut, goober pea, groundnut, and monkey nut. As if having several different common names wasn’t enough there are also four different varieties of peanut grown in the United States. Runner peanuts make up the majority of nuts grown and sold in the U.S. Virginia peanuts are the ones with the largest kernels and are grown mostly in Virginia and North Carolina.
Spanish peanuts have a smaller kernel making them perfect for snack nuts, peanut butter and candies. Valencia peanuts often have three or more kernels in each shell and are good for roasting and boiling.

Raw peanuts are planted directly in the ground after the soil temperature has reached 65 to 75 degrees. With enough water the seeds will be up and growing in about 2 weeks. In about 30 days the plant blooms. The flowers are above the ground where they can be seen and pollinated. After the flower has been pollinated the flower stem bends down to the ground. A peg (the developing ovary) is formed at the end of the flower stalk and grows down below the surface where the nut is formed. It takes about 120 to 160 frost-free days from planting to harvest to produce a good crop.

Peanuts grow best in a sandy soil that has plenty of calcium. It might be fun to grow one or two plants in a container. The plants will get to be about 18 inches tall so a large container would be needed.

There are people who will eat peanuts raw or boiled, but I like mine roasted. Here’s a quick way to get them roasted.

**Recipe:** Roasted peanuts

1. Place peanuts, in the shell, in a single layer on a cookie sheet
2. Place the cookie sheet in an oven at 350 degrees for about 25 – 30 minutes
3. Remove from the oven and allow them to cool somewhat before eating.

Note: nuts out of the shell can be roasted this way also but reduce cooking time to 15 – 20 minutes.

Reference:

Good Earth Peanuts Website: [http://www.goodearthpeanuts.com/aboutpeanuts.htm](http://www.goodearthpeanuts.com/aboutpeanuts.htm)

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**DECEMBER GARDEN TASKS**

**GENERAL UPKEEP**

- Learn exactly what your soil needs by taking a soil sample and having it tested. Most plant health problems start in the soil. A healthy soil will mean less pest and disease problems.

**LAWN CARE**

- If it hasn't been done already fertilize cool-season lawns such as fescue. Roots of cool-season grasses continue to grow whenever the ground is not frozen.
- Cool-season weeds in established cool-season or dormant Zoysia or Bermudagrass lawns may be treated with broadleaf herbicides

**TREES, SHRUBS & ORNAMENTALS**

- Prune evergreens to use for winter decorations in the house by cutting out unwanted limbs that would be pruned in February anyway. (Save major pruning for late winter.) Holly, Magnolia, Cedar, and Nandina foliage will last a long time.
- Many landscape shrubs can be propagated from hardwood cuttings including American holly and junipers Juniper.
- Prevent winter damage to plants from dessication (drying), freezing and thawing, and breakage from ice and snow loads. Keep plants watered during dry periods. Read 'How to Protect Plants from Cold Damage' at [http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-604.html](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-604.html).
- This is an excellent time to mulch shrubs, trees, perennials, and herbs for winter protection. Apply a layer 3" deep since most
perennials are dormant and it's easy to get a wheelbarrow into the garden. Mulch comparisons and general info: [http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-608.html](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-608.html)

➢ Weed out "weed" trees and shrubs. Prolifically-seeding plants like oak, elm, mimosa Mimosa Tree, hackberry, plum, and ligustrum (privet) produce numerous offspring which compete with other landscape plants for light, water and nutrients. Weedy woody seedlings are easier to remove while still young.

➢ Need help selecting and caring for your holiday tree? Checkout [Holiday Tree Selection and Care](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-608.html)

➢ Put your cut Holiday tree to use! Cut the branches and lay them over perennials to protect them from the cold. Shred small branches to make mulch.

### EDIBLES

➢ Do NOT prune fruit trees now. Fruit trees are best pruned late winter just before they start to grow in spring.

➢ Asparagus crowns can be planted now through March.

### LANDSCAPE IDEAS

➢ Giving gifts? Consider giving a good gardening book or accessory! Gardening is a gift all year round.

➢ Build raised beds now for plant next spring. Find out why and how at: [http://chambers-tx.tamu.edu/publications/B6102.pdf](http://chambers-tx.tamu.edu/publications/B6102.pdf)

### WILDLIFE

➢ Clean bird feeders monthly with hot sudsy water and diluted bleach to prevent the spread of wild bird diseases. Keep seed hulls from accumulating underneath the feeder to discourage rodents.

### HOUSEPLANTS

➢ Check holiday and gift plants for insects before locating them near other plants.