January 2025

Bottoms Up! Teaching Paperwhites To Drink

When I walked through the door it hit me, that old familiar smell. It wasn't lunch cooking, but something sweet, distinctly floral, and almost too powerful. There were paperwhites somewhere in this house. Like marigolds or mums, the odor of paperwhites is so unique and so strong that some folks open a window while others can't get enough.

My first encounter with paperwhites was an early one, perhaps dating back to age five or so. I was taken along to hear a gentlemen discuss indoor gardening at a dark, unattractive Cooperative Extension office. After sitting on a harsh folding chair for an eternity, we were given three brown, peeling bulbs. We took them home and followed the planting instructions. Seemingly overnight, narrow green leaves shot up, followed by an abundance of very fragrant white flowers. The simplicity of cultivation and high rate of success makes growing paperwhites an excellent project for beginner gardeners. Instead of drinking the Kool-Aid, I smelled *Narcissus tazetta*, and I was hooked.

If you want to give paperwhites a try, start by procuring them from a local garden center or nursery supplier. Next, secure a decorative bowl or dish (or a piece of your mother's cookware) which lacks a drainage hole and that is at least two to three inches deep. Fill this vessel with enough pebbles, pea gravel, or coarse sand to reach about one inch below the top. Add water until it is barely below the surface of the gravel. Set the bulbs on top and hold them in place with enough gravel to cover the bottom quarter to half of each bulb. You can crowd in the bulbs; they can be an inch or so apart. Carefully maintain that water level, as too much water may cause the bulbs to rot. Paperwhites are best kept in a cool location (50 to 60 °F) in low light until they are well-rooted and the shoots appear, usually in about two to three weeks. They can then be moved to a spot with more sunlight and warmer temperatures.

The effect of alcohol on growth of 'Ziva' paperwhite narcissus. Left: Untreated plant, growing in pebbles with water. Right: Plant in pebbles, grown with 5% alcohol instead of water.

This process of persuading bulbs to bloom indoors, called forcing, is easy with paperwhites, since they don't require the cold treatment demanded by other bulbs. One pitfall, however, is that paperwhites tend to become too tall and heavy for their own good, leading them to topple. While various staking regimes can be devised, Cornell researcher Dr. Bill Miller promotes a novel solution: alcohol. He suggests planting your paperwhites as described above, and letting them produce green shoots of about two inches. Then, drain the water and replace it with a solution of four to six percent alcohol -- hard liquor or rubbing alcohol.

To get a five percent solution from 80-proof liquor, which is 40 percent alcohol (such as gin, vodka, whiskey, rum or tequila), add one part liquor to seven parts water. To use rubbing alcohol (isopropyl alcohol), which is 70 percent alcohol, dilute one part with ten to eleven parts water. This will reduce the height of the paperwhites by 30 to 50% but flower size and number will remain normal (see photo above). Cheers!

Click here to read more about height control in paperwhites

Text and photos #2 and 3 by David Chinery

The Fairy Tree: Hawthorne

“Hawthorns comprise a large group of small-sized trees common in New York State with more than a score of varieties” according to Cornell University. “They are generally about 20 feet in height and have no commercial value.” While that many be the official word, there is much of of interest surrounding the hawthorn.

There is a gnarly old hawthorn in my backyard at least 50years old. It looked old 50 years ago when we moved to the property. It has small white flowers in late spring similar to apple blossoms. Red fruit follows in Fall. The most notable feature of the hawthorn is the 1 to 1.5” very sharp thorns along branches, twigs and trunk. A local farmer complained about the thorns causing flat tires on farm equipment. I haven’t had that experience with lawn equipment. A planting of hosta around the tree helps prevent accidental contact with the thorns while mowing.

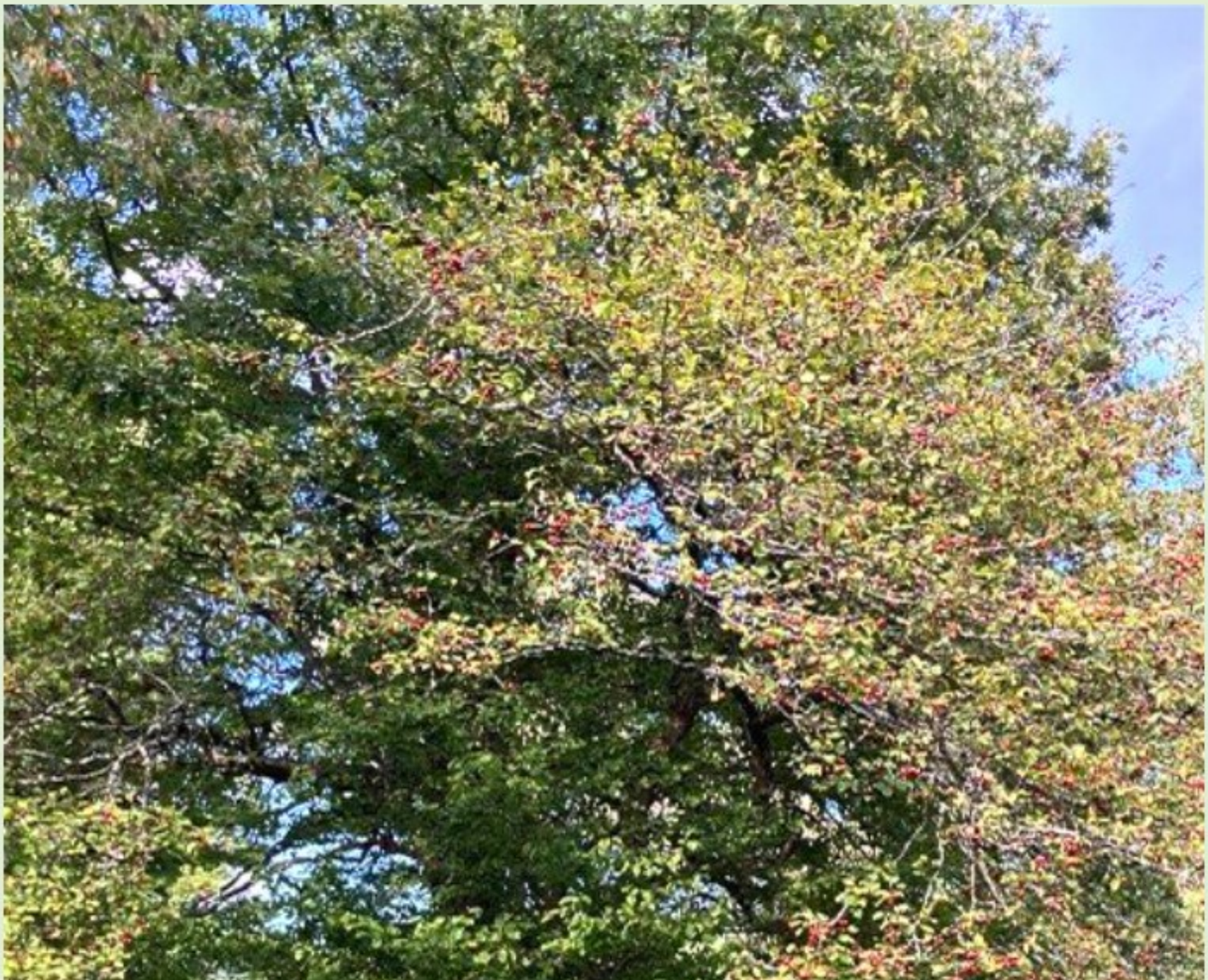
Crataegus goes by many names; hawthorn,quickthorn, thornapple, May-tree, whitethorn, Mayflower or hawberry. The fruiti s referred to as a “haw”. It looks like a crabapple and is about the size of a dime in diameter. The taste is similar to an apple and the fruit can contain one to five seeds (don’t eat the seeds). Hawthorn is in the rose (*Rosaceae*) plant family and is native to all temperate regions of the northern

hemisphere.

Although Cornell University says hawthorn wood has no commercial value, it can be used in turnery and engraving and to make veneers and cabinets, as well as boxes, tool handles and boat parts. It also makes good firewood and charcoal. However, folklore says the hawthorn tree is the entrance to the fairie world and its' destruction will put you at odds with the Queen of the Fairies.

I took note of the gnarly hawthorn in the backyard in the autumn of 2024 because of the massive crop of fruit. The branches were full and later the ground was covered with bright red berries. It had never done this in the past 50 years. The prolific fruiting also made previously un-noticed hawthorn shrubs along the stream visible. Wild apple trees were also loaded with fruit. Was it the work of Mother Nature, the Fairy Queen or climate change? It was an exceptional growing season for many plants and shrubs.

Hawthorn has been prominent in folklore for hundreds of years, especially in Celtic countries. Fall asleep under a hawthorn tree and you are likely to be kidnapped by the fairies and taken to the underworld. It is unlucky and disrespectful to mention fairies by name, so in stories hawthorn trees are called 'lonely' trees or 'gentle' trees.



Cutting down a lone hawthorn tree was said to result in instant death. That is why you often see a hawthorn standing alone in the middle of a field. Hawthorn flowers were used in many celebrations but bad luck if brought into the house. The real reason may have been the disagreeable fragrance from the blossoms due to the chemical triethylamine, like the odor from a decaying mouse under the floorboards.

Text and photos by Rensselaer County Master Gardener Richard Demick.

Local Beech Trees Face Destructive Foe

A destructive nematode pest which feeds on native American beech trees (scientifically called *Fagus americana*) and European beech trees (*Fagus sylvatica*) has been found in Rensselaer County as well as in the Capital District. The first sign of trouble is a unique banding pattern seen in the leaves in the summer, as shown in the photo above, provided by the University of Massachusetts Amhearst. In following years, twigs die, fewer leaves are produced and the trees decline. Trees may die in a few years. American beeches are a tremendously important tree in local forest ecosystems, and European beeches are used as landscape trees. The nematode is a tiny, eel-like creature which feeds on the buds and leaves of the tree.

Cornell's Dr. Margery Daughtrey recently gave a presentation on beech leaf disease for the New York State Integrated Pest Management Program. Learn everything there is to know about beech leaf disease by watching the recording via the link below.

Click here to learn more about beech leaf disease

Spring Garden Day

Come "Bee" With Us!

Bee Friendly Backyards: Supporting Pollinators with Beautiful Landscapes

Saturday, March 15 2025
9:45 am to 3:30 pm
Tamarac/ Brunswick High School
Troy, NY

Snow date: Sunday, March 16

Your landscape can be an attractive flowering oasis that offers habitat for insects and birds. Whether you manage a small garden or a whole landscape, learn how your plant choices and management methods can create a delightful, pollinator haven. Keynote Speaker Jen Lerner will also speak about the efforts Master Gardener Volunteers have made to advance a local Pollinator Pathway effort and engage community partners to create bee-friendly landscapes.

CELEBRATE GARDENING!

- Choose classes from 10 different gardening subjects

Jen Lerner is a Senior Resource Educator with Cornell Cooperative Extension in Putnam County. A Cornell graduate, Jen spent her early career designing and building landscapes in Westchester and Dutchess Counties in NY. She has been with Extension for 20 years as an educator. Her areas of focus include creating pollinator habitat in managed landscapes, log-grown Shiitake culture, and serving commercial and residential horticulture audiences.

-Delicious lunch provided by the Rensselaer County Master Gardeners

-Check out the merchandise at the Tool Sale and Plant Sale

-Pick-A-Prize Auction, with something for everyone

-Fabulous door prizes!

-For more information see our website at rensselaer.cce.cornell.edu or phone (518) 272-4210

Cornell University
Cooperative Extension
Rensselaer County

Master Gardener
Cornell Cooperative Extension

Welcome To Spring Garden Day 2025

Full Day Registration: The fee of $40.00 entitles each participant to choose up to three classes for the day; to participate in the free lunch and door prize drawing; and to hear the keynote speaker. Register by examining the attached class schedule. Indicate your first, second, and third choice of classes on the form for each of the four class periods. Make sure to choose a lunch period, or another class if you do not want lunch. Your class assignments will be available at the registration table on March 15. **You will not receive registration confirmation by phone or mail, but you can call us at (518) 272-4210 to make sure we received your registration.** The enclosed schedule is final, but last minute changes may be necessary. Although we try to give people their first choice, class sizes are limited, and regretfully, we may have to place you in another class. Registration will be open until classes are full. Registrations are taken on a first come, first served basis. Refunds must be requested on or before March 7. After that date, no refunds will be made.

Time: Registration starts at 9:45 AM. The first sessions start at 10:30 AM. *Please do not arrive before 9:45 AM in order to allow us time to set up.* Your cooperation is appreciated!

Lunch: A delicious lunch consisting of home-made soups, sandwiches, desserts and beverages will be provided for all full day participants, courtesy of the Master Gardeners. Vegetarian items will also be available.

In case of snow or inclement weather: The program may be postponed to Sunday, March 16 in the event of significant snowfall or inclement weather. You will be contacted at the email address and/or phone numbers you provide on the registration form. You can also check our website at Rensselaer.cce.cornell.edu for announcements. No refunds will be given if the program is moved from March 15 to March 16.

Directions to Tamarac/Brunswick/Brittonkill High School:

From the west (Albany, Schenectady, Troy): Take Route 7 East over the Collar City Bridge. From the east end of the bridge, proceed east on Route 7 (Hoosick Street) approximately 9 miles to a traffic light at Route 278 (past the Harley-Davidson dealer on right). Turn right onto Route 278 east and proceed for approximately 3 miles until Route 278 ends at a traffic light at Route 2. Turn left onto Route 2; the school is immediately on your left.

From the south (West Sand Lake/Route 43 area): Take Route 351 north, through the village of Poestenkill, until you reach Route 2. Turn left (west) onto Route 2. The school will be very shortly on your right.

Pick-A-Prize Auction: We will hold a Pick-A-Prize Auction of garden-related items. Participants can buy tickets (10 for $5.00) and "bid" on items by placing a ticket or tickets in a paper bag next to the item. Winners will be drawn at the end of the day after the last sessions. You must be present to win. Proceeds will support the Master Gardener Demonstration Garden.

Sales and Drawings: A Plant Sale, A Garden Tool Sale, and Drawings for fabulous prizes are featured. Our Fourth Annual "Tool of The Year" sale will feature the Spear Head Spade "Mini!" This small shovel is 30" tall and weighs only 2 lbs. It is better than a trowel and ideal for large containers and raised beds. We will also be selling medium-sized Spear Head Spades in a rainbow of colors as well as the Deluxe Soil Knives and Skidger Hoes.

Door Prizes: Each participant is given one free door prize ticket. Door prizes will be awarded at the end of the day in the auditorium. YOU MUST BE PRESENT TO WIN!

Questions: Call the Horticulture Program at (518) 272-4210. Individuals with questions or special needs requiring accommodation should contact Cornell Cooperative Extension of Rensselaer County at the phone number above. "Cornell Cooperative Extension is an employer and educator recognized for valuing AA/EEO, Protected Veterans, and Individuals with Disabilities and provides equal program and employment opportunities."

Click HERE for the Spring Garden Day Registration Form

The Final Dig

"The planting of trees is the least self-centered thing of all we can do. It is a purer act of faith than the procreation of children."

Thornton Wilder (American playwright)

"Root Concerns: Notes From The Underground" is a publication of Cornell Cooperative Extension of Rensselaer County. For more information, contact David Chinery at 518.272.4210 or dhc3@cornell.edu.

Websites mentioned in Root Concerns are provided as a courtesy to our readers. Mention of these websites does not imply endorsement by Cornell University, Cornell Cooperative Extension or by the author.

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