

Petal Power

Golby-Reasoner Chapter
American Hibiscus Society

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Festive Christmas Party

The Annual Christmas Party, December 12th at El Conquistador Country Club was, as usual, a festive kick-off to the Christmas Season. OK, so perhaps it was a bit late to be the kick-off to the Season for many, but it was festive for everyone. Everyone attending would agree that it was well planned and the setting was outstanding. It was noticeable, only after-the-fact, that the Club staff appeared to be relatively transparent which is a sign that they performed their duties well.

The event was the fruition of the efforts of several members, beginning with Petey Birchall as our hostess and, as we understand it, served as the liaison between the Club and the Chapter on most, if not all, aspects of the event. All the telephone calling necessary was carried out by Jeanne Nathan, Dottie Taaffe, and Karin Delbert. Marilyn Young sold tickets and it appeared, “did what needed to be done”, including making the place cards which were once again, “Marilynistically unique.” Everyone enjoyed Jean Tourt’s efforts on the piano for caroling (Carl Kramer was missed). Len and Dorothy Erikson, along with Gayler and Nancy Boettcher, contributed the poinsettias for the door prizes. Several members brought gifts for the migrant worker children and Donny and Eva Waldroup diligently took the nicely wrapped boxes to Sally and Bill Beasley’s to await distribution.

It was such a nice occasion it’s a shame we have to wait 12 months before we can do it again.

It’s a Workshop in January!

While the thought of “work” is something many of us would just as soon not think about, the workshop that will be held in the January Chapter meeting should not bring back bad memories to any of us. While the subject of a Hibiscus Chapter meeting workshop could be challenging, it certainly shouldn’t be work-like. What it surely should be is informative, interesting and fun. You shouldn’t miss this meeting - your input may just be what is needed.

As always, (if it’s warm enough) wear your Chapter shirt and bring blooms! There were some beauties at the Christmas Party! It’s time to show off your blooms.

Gardening “Odds and Ends”

Several months ago a representative of Southern Agricultural Insecticides, Inc., commonly known as Southern Ag., presented the program at our Chapter meeting. We recently looked at their “Lawn and Garden Product Guide” that was distributed at the meeting. (We have several copies that we will try to remember to bring to a couple meetings for anyone who would like a copy.) As we paged through it, we were reminded that they carry a number of products that are not on the shelves of the chain garden centers. Local garden centers that carry Southern Ag products include Come See Come Save Feed, Farm & Garden, Jones Garden Center, and Wholesale Landscape Supply.

A product that might be of interest to our members is neem oil – Southern Ag calls it “Triple Action Neem Oil”. The description “triple action” is accurate since it is a broad spectrum fungicide/insecticide/miticide. Neem oil is derived from the seeds of neem trees, which are native to South East Asia and are grown in many countries throughout the world. The information we found about the neem tree said that they are grown in the United States, mostly in Florida as an ornamental shade tree. Therefore, we Floridians may have seen a neem tree and didn’t know it – and then again, some of our members may know where the neem trees are in our community.

Neem tree products are widely relied on for herbal medicine in its native countries and are used in many cosmetic and pharmaceutical products as well as for pest control in homes and crops.

Perhaps of particular interest is the fact that, ecologically, it is non toxic to just about everything. However, it can affect some beneficial insects if it is actually sprayed on them – after it has dried it will not hurt most beneficial organisms.

Contributors to the Internet “The Hibiscus Mail List” (THML) indicate that use of neem oil during the heat of the day and/or in the direct sun is not a good thing to do. (Spraying oil on foliage in the sun is something like deep fat frying the leaves.) Those contributors to THML who apparently sprayed neem oil in the early morning/late afternoon had good words to say about its effectiveness, with particular kudos given about its environmentally friendly aspects. During our last trip to Come See Come Save, neem oil was not on the shelf. However, the folks there are very helpful and have been known to order products for customers. (Try that at Home Depot.)

Hibiscus Gardening in January

As this is written (December 16th), we have already experienced more cold weather than we’d really like to have all winter long. It was 36 degrees east of I75 on the morning of December 15th. The wind made it a few “feel-like” degrees colder and plants do “feel” wind chill. (Did you notice that in the winter it’s a “wind”, while the same thing in the summer is a “breeze”?) It is doubtful that the wind chill was enough to cost our hibiscus some leaves. However, if the seven day forecast is accurate in saying temperatures will be in the twenties within a week, unprotected hibiscus will lose more than a few leaves. We will hope that the forecast is as accurate as it usually is, but this is a good time to discuss the subject of protecting our hibiscus plants from the cold.

Protecting plants from the cold has a lot to do with where you live in relation to the gulf and how many plants you have. As we have said before, those on Anna Maria or thereabouts have little to be concerned about. (The same goes for Tom and Sandy Brown in Venice.) Folks living east of I75, or thereabouts, could have lots to be concerned about almost every year. Somewhat similarly, you may be capable and willing to do a great deal to protect your plants if you have a very few, while the same expenditure of effort per plant may be out of the question if you have lots of plants. Each gardener will have to make their decision about the course to take based on his/her situation.

We will not discuss the basic basics, but let’s start with the concept that draping a sheet over a large hibiscus will perhaps provide some protection from a light frost but that’s about all. During a real cold snap, a sheet is not adequate. Multiple layers of sheets may be. A quilt or blanket is what is needed – and it needs to reach the ground. Unlike the ground in the winter up north where the ground is as cold as everything else, the ground here is almost always going to be warmer than the air. That is why it is important to drape your old draperies (or whatever) over the plants and puddle them on the ground (and hold them down with a brick or something if it’s windy). The importance of the use of the ground to obtain warmth is why appropriately sized cardboard cartons are ideal for protecting plants from the cold since they rest on the ground.

We have read somewhere, but have no experience on the matter, that a combination of sheets, or cloth something, and plastic is an acceptable approach to protecting plants from the cold. Plants should not be covered with plastic only, since it will freeze the foliage wherever it touches it. However, apparently if the plant is first covered with a cloth something and then covered with plastic that touches the ground all around the plant, good protection is provided. Plants covered by plastic alone will cook in sunlight. The same thing will probably happen to plants covered by the combination of a sheet and plastic. However, it may take somewhat longer for the plant to get “well done” so the gardener would have longer to get the plants uncovered the day after a cold night.

Plants in pots have the advantage of mobility and can, if the pots aren’t too large, be moved into a garage, living room or some such. If that approach is not possible or practical, the same protection techniques used for in-ground plants come to the fore for their potted brethren – with some additional approaches available.

We have long heard of gardeners with numerous potted hibiscus who lack protective structures and enough materials to cover them. To solve their problem, they lay their plants on the ground overlapping each other. The result is a pile of plants that take a lot less material to cover than they would individually and they are right on the ground thereby getting the advantage of the warmth the ground has to offer. This approach also provides the gardener with plants with a number of broken limbs - which is a small price to pay, for live plants, if the alternate is frozen plants. (We have also heard of folks with large in-ground plants who dug up one side of them enough to bend them over on the ground and then covered them.)

We have seen or heard about numerous plastic covered structures constructed, most commonly, with PVC pipe. One such structure was recently the topic of discussion on THML for several days. A lady named Fran owned what she called her hoop house. She lives in San Leon, Texas, a few blocks from Galveston Bay. Her hoop house was made from PVC bent to form a half circle, covered with clear plastic and warmed by Christmas tree lights. It could be made any length and Fran's was pretty long, - no, it was really long. It had already sustained 45 mph winds and for those who are unfamiliar with the area, it seems like it is always windy there - not breezy - windy summer or winter. There are a number of structural details involved, which we will not get into, that enable the hoop house to sustain reasonable winds, but we thought our readers might find it interesting to hear about the lengths some hibiscus folks go to to protect their plants - short of building a green house.

The editor recently constructed a relatively small PVC and plastic structure with the intent that it should be pretty easy to put up and to take down. If there is something worthwhile to report after we have some experience with it, we will tell you.

So much for winterizing plants. That should read, "Sooooo much for winterizing plants".

The month of January continues the dry season so if it doesn't really get cold where you are, spider mites could be a problem. Use something with *Acephate* in it or a miticide - neem oil could offer protection. Of course keeping our plants watered will be a chore that will be with us for another couple months. Sprinkler systems tend to get a real work out during this time of year. Be sure to check them frequently to make sure they are working and that they are watering what you mean for them to water. That sick looking plant may look that way because it's thirsty, because the sprinkler that is supposed to water it has been watering the lawn. Sound familiar?

Some would say that a light fertilization would be in order to keep the plants healthy, but not to make new growth. Again, where you live in relation to the gulf will have a bearing on your gardening actions, but we tend to be comfortable with not fertilizing until late February or early March - largely depending on when we do some pruning.

The most important gardening activity for many January gardeners involves listening to weather forecasts - and picking a few really nice blooms!

Directory 2005 Correctory

Under Directors, Roy Bradley's name should be replaced by Frank Vejrostek. Sorry about that!

Web Sights

Our chapter's internet website at 4hibiscus.com (now 5 months old) already contains a lot of information: nearly 8 years of *Petal Power* issues, monthly tips on hibiscus care, world-wide hibiscus news items gleaned from the internet, chapter information, hibiscus fantasy pictures, slideshows, hibiscus greeting cards you can email to friends, and much more. It's fully indexed by Google and if you want, you can display and read just those past issues of *Petal Power* containing your name.

Our site is currently being visited by about 25 persons per day from all over: US, Canada, Australia, UK, Spain, Malaysia, Germany, Mexico, Sweden, Netherlands, South Korea, Peru, Italy, China, Philippines, France,

Singapore, Norway ... in decreasing order. So people everywhere can and do read about what we're up to, and occasionally, suggestions and requests are received.

It's turned out that the hibiscus greeting cards are quite popular, especially this time of year, with 20% of the new visitors being card recipients. Over 30 different greeting cards are available which you can view individually or as a really pretty slide show. Then pick one, add your own greeting message, and email it to a friend. To get started, go to:

4hibiscus.com/html/greeting_cards.html

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Cold Porcelain Creations! Lifelike Hibiscus and other flowers, singles/bouquets. Yvonne Santiago: (941) 727-7293, Yvonne@coldporcelaincreations.com, or www.coldporcelaincreations.com

Coming Events

January 7, 9:30 a.m.: Board Meeting, South Branch Library

January 9, 2:00 p.m.: Chapter Meeting, Workshop!

February 4: Board Meeting