

## Resolutions for Gardeners

Just because New Year's Day looms we make resolutions, one of those things that is probably a genetic predisposition. Experience tells us they will be soon broken but the exercise is probably good for the soul. Recently I read that you can form a good habit within weeks so do not give up on those resolutions too quickly.

One good resolution for some of us: "Stop killing the houseplants!" I have friends and fellow gardeners who have glorious inside greenery, but my current total is a few precious sprigs of Christmas cactus in a little pitcher for rooting. Sometimes called crab cactus, *Schlumbergera truncata* is, first of all, not a cactus. It is an epiphyte native of the humid coastal areas of Brazil so it loves warmth and moisture. If you put it outside for the summer don't drown it but keep it barely moist.

Shorter days encourage buds to form but if you put it where it is subject to drafts of hot dry air, those buds will fall off. The perfect spot to keep this plant overnight is in an unheated room. Before the holidays were one long shopping season from Halloween until Superbowl Sunday, these seasonal plants were either Thanksgiving or Christmas bloomers. Now, so many hybrids have been developed the distinctions have been rendered trivial by the hundreds of cultivars.

Houseplants are good for you: research is finding that a few plants grown in your house can actually make it cleaner by reducing dust particles and contaminants such as benzene and formaldehyde that come from smoke, paint, furniture, and some building materials. You don't have to assemble a jungle array; one or two small plants will handle the air in your living room.

Lots of foliage is good, providing more oxygen-producing leaf surface. One favorite, peace lily, *Spathiphyllum*, is so tough it survives in airport waiting rooms. To avoid brown tips in the long leaves, don't overfertilize it. On any houseplant, the buildup of salts from fertilizer can be a problem. Setting the plant in the sink and flushing water through it helps remove those salts. Use about half the amount of fertilizer suggested. To keep blooming, a peace lily needs cool nights during the winter, about 50 degrees so if your living room is not that cool, perhaps an entry way is?

A timely resolution aimed at both a healthy planet and healthy budget is to reduce, recycle, and reuse. Replanting can be a part of that. Faced with a bare spot in your shrub border, find another where plants are crowded and move one of them where it is needed. Every New Year finds us determined to eat healthily, exercise, and save money. All three of these good intentions can become reality by planting a garden. If a long commute makes it difficult, try raised beds that can be managed by a weekend gardener.

A vegetable garden is a great way to ease away from our dependence upon all those foods that are bad for us and bad for the planet. How can you miss fatty meat when you have four or five vegetables on your plate? Vegans are the committed few, but all of us could cut our consumption of meat in half and barely notice if that bare spot was filled with a huge tomato or a heap of Kentucky wonder pole beans.

If you have retired from the vegetable garden projects of other years, shop locally. You know a transnational trip has not improved that produce so look for farmers markets and stands close to home.

A resolution that will save a lot of money is to shrink your lawn. That expanse of green grass eats time and money so you are ahead if you enlarge the shrub borders. That does not mean adding plants necessarily: chop the edges further from the shrubs and mulch the gap. This gives a richer look to the shrubs as well. Another way is to create an island, linking two or more trees on your property so you avoid the spotty look that results from a tree here, another one there. Single trees are under assault from both mowers and string trimmers so you are protecting your investment when you surround them with small shrub companions in a mulched island.