



Even though it's busy right now with all the holiday hustle and bustle, it's time for the gardener to take a break. Before you know it, your table will be covered with seed catalogs! Wishing you and your family a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

*Jessica Bessin*

Jessica Bessin,  
Mercer County Extension Agent for Horticulture



### Buggy Gifts Inside the Christmas Tree

If your household celebrates Christmas and prefers to do it with a natural tree, you may end up bringing in more than just a beautiful evergreen. There are several kinds of insects and arachnids that may be hiding on the needles and twigs of your delightful décor.

Some of the invaders with Yuletide spirit include pine adelgids, aphids, scale insects, stink bugs, and spiders. One of the more interesting insects that may crash your Christmas gathering is a praying mantis. These hitchhikers usually enter the home as eggs, which is the normal overwintering state for many arthropods. Mantids specifically, create an ootheca, an egg case that looks like spray foam insulation and protect their eggs. These can be on the trunk or twigs of a tree and hard to spot. Regardless of species, eggs gradually develop as the winter thaws into spring. This is through the accumulation of degree days: certain days in which the temperature reaches a threshold that allows for development. Indoors, however, they will accrue degree days much faster and eggs can hatch during the Christmas season, possibly leading to hundreds, even thousands, of tiny critters running around your gifts. None of the mentioned arthropods pose a hazard to homes, pets, people, or stocking stuffers though. You can always easily vacuum them up and dispose of them.



Mantid Egg Case

All in all, these accidental house guests may be alarming but shouldn't cause much concern. Vacuuming, spritzing individuals with soapy water, or sweeping them outside are all acceptable responses. Bug bombs, liquid sprays, or other insecticides should not be used on the tree. These residues could be hazardous to people and are not likely to control any of the mentioned bugs. Source: Jonathan Larson, UK Entomology Extension Specialist.

#### Smashed Potatoes

**6** large baking potatoes  
Cooking spray  
**1½ cups** sliced, fresh mushrooms  
**4** green onions, thinly sliced

**6 ounces** fresh spinach  
**1 tablespoon** canola oil  
**2 teaspoons** Dijon mustard  
**¾ cup** light sour cream

**1 cup** 2% Cheddar cheese, shredded  
**½ teaspoon** salt  
**½ teaspoon** black pepper

**Preheat** oven to 400 degrees F. **Wash** and dry potatoes. **Spray** the skins with cooking spray and **pierce** potatoes in several places with a fork. **Place** on a 13- by-18-inch baking sheet. **Bake** until tender, about 1 hour. **Wash** mushrooms, green onions and spinach. **Heat** oil in a skillet over medium-high heat. **Add** mushrooms and **sauté** for 6 minutes. **Add** the green onions and fresh spinach, **sauté** for 1 minute. **Slice** off the top inch of each potato, leaving a ¼ inch border around the edge. **Scoop** out the flesh into a mixing bowl and **mash**. **Add** mushroom mixture, Dijon mustard, sour cream and ½ cup cheese. **Mix** well and season with salt and pepper. **Scoop** mixture into potato shells and **sprinkle** with the remaining cheese. **Return** the potatoes to the baking sheet and **bake** until heated through and golden brown on top, about 20-25 minutes.

**Yield:** 6 servings  
**Nutritional Analysis:** 410 calories, 9 g fat, 4.5 g saturated fat, 20 mg cholesterol, 400 mg sodium, 70 g carbohydrate, 9 g fiber, 4 g sugars, 15 g protein.

#### Chicken and Brussels Sprouts One Pan Meal

**2** skinless, boneless chicken breasts (about 1 pound)  
**1 tablespoon** olive oil  
Salt and pepper to taste

**12-14** Brussels sprouts, trimmed and quartered  
**1 cup** sliced fresh mushrooms  
**1** red bell pepper, diced, about 1 cup

**1** medium yellow onion, diced, about 1 cup  
**2** cloves garlic, minced  
**½ cup** half-and-half  
**¼ teaspoon** nutmeg  
**¾ cup** Parmesan cheese

**Preheat** oven to 425 degrees F. **Cut** chicken into bite-sized pieces. **Heat** oil in a heavy, oven-safe skillet or pan over medium heat. **Add** chicken and **sauté** 3-4 minutes. Lightly **season** with salt and pepper. **Add** vegetables and **stir** gently to combine. **Cook** 3-5 minutes until vegetables are tender. **Remove** from heat. If skillet or pan is not oven-safe, transfer mixture to a baking dish. In a small bowl, **combine** half-and-half, nutmeg and salt and pepper to taste. **Pour** mixture over chicken and vegetables. **Sprinkle** with Parmesan cheese. **Bake** 25-30 minutes until lightly golden on top. **Serve** hot.

**Yield:** 6, 1 cup servings  
**Nutritional Analysis:** 220 calories, 9 g fat, 3.5 g saturated fat, 0 g trans fat, 70 mg cholesterol, 340 mg sodium, 11 g carbohydrate, 3 g fiber, 4 g sugars, 23 g protein.

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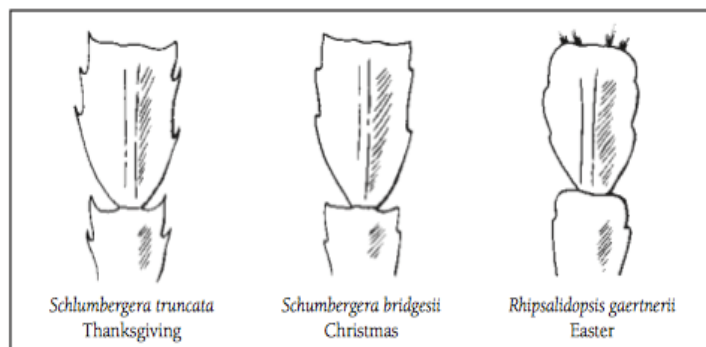
## Holiday Cactus

Many families have different heirlooms that are passed down through the generations, a common one for plant lovers is the holiday cactus. My family is one of those. I currently have a Christmas cactus in my living room that was a piece of my great-grandmothers. The reason these plants enjoy such a long life is because they are easy to grow. They thrive on benign neglect, have few insect and disease problems, and don't require frequent repotting.

There are actually three types of holiday cactus that often all get called Christmas cactus. The one you come across the most is probably the Thanksgiving cactus. Thanksgiving cacti are available from early fall through Christmas. The flower colors range from white through red, lavender, and salmon with many shades of each. The leaf margins of the Thanksgiving cactus bear two to four saw-toothed, upward pointing projections on the sides of the stem. The flowering period is generally from about Thanksgiving through the Christmas season. The true Christmas cactus, has leaf margins that are rounded with scallops along the edges of the stems. The arching branches produce 3-inch-long, rosy-red flowers from late December through March. The Easter cactus, sets buds from January to March and blooms from March through May with pink or red flowers. It may bloom again in early fall. The leaf margins of Easter cacti are smoother, with 4 to 6 slight ripples along their edges, and brownish hair-like bristles at their tips.

These holiday cacti have their origins in the forests of South America. They are epiphytic plants, which means they live on another plant but are not parasitic. The big question is how to get these plants to bloom? All three groups require similar growing conditions. However, the Thanksgiving and Christmas cacti depend on short day lengths and cool temperatures to set flower buds, while Easter cacti will bloom with cool temperatures at the normal seasonal day length. To ensure that the plants bloom around Thanksgiving or Christmas, place them in a spare bedroom or basement where no artificial lights are used at night. The plants should receive bright light during the day and the temperature should be kept cool, under 65°F. Some Christmas and Thanksgiving cacti will bloom if kept at 55°F. during the fall, regardless of day length. Keep the plants a bit on the dry side until you see pinpoint buds forming, then resume normal watering. Once buds have formed, you do not need to continue the short-day treatment. However, you do need to keep the soil moderately moist, give them bright light, and maintain a cool temperature to avoid bud drop.

Epiphytic cacti require a well-drained potting soil. The branches of holiday cacti may become limp and shriveled if grown in a compacted, poorly drained soil. Although a member of the cactus family, a holiday cactus should not be kept dry like its relatives. During the summer, you can move them outdoors to a partially shady location. If you buy a holiday cactus during this holiday season, this could be the gift in your family that keeps on giving! Source: Iowa Extension Horticulture.



My son with a Thanksgiving cactus that belonged to his great-great-grandmother.

An equal opportunity organization

# MERCER COUNTY

How can we serve you?

Take a ten-minute survey to help us develop programs addressing needs in our community.

[go.uky.edu/serveKY](https://go.uky.edu/serveKY)



 University of Kentucky  
College of Agriculture,  
Food and Environment

## Marketing for All Visual Merchandising Presentation

January 23 at 6:00pm

We'll take a show-don't-tell approach to learning about display design. Participants will brainstorm and discuss the merits of different designs in a hands-on workshop.

**Open to everyone in all counties, you do not have to be a market member to attend.**

Mercer County Extension Office  
1007 Lexington Road  
Harrodsburg, KY 40330  
859-734-4378



College of Agriculture,  
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### Mark Those Calendars!!

**Mercer County District Board Meeting-- December 4th, Mercer County Extension Office 5:00 PM**

**Fort Harrod Garden Club-December 5th, Mercer County Extension Office 10:00 AM**

**Mercer County Big Blue Open House-- December 7th, Mercer County Extension Office 4:00 - 7:00 PM**

**Holiday Day of Fun-December 8th, Mercer County Extension Office**

Classes filled fast, looking forward to a fun day of celebrating the holiday season!

**Fort Harrod Beekeeping Club -- NO MEETING IN DECEMBER**

Make sure to check out the Fort Harrod Beekeeping Facebook page for all the latest updates and announcements! The bee club will pick back up with their normal meetings in January.

**Mercer County District Board Meeting-January 9th, Mercer County Extension Office 5:00 PM**

**Mercer County Martin Luther King Celebration-- January 15th, Harrodsburg Baptist Church**



Fort Harrod  
Beekeeping Club

*The Mercer County Extension Office will be closed  
December 25th, 2023 through January 1st, 2024 for the holiday season!*



# Kentucky Fruit and Vegetable Conference

## January 3-4, 2024

This premier, state-wide event annually brings together more than 500 growers, researchers, and technical support providers. The conference kicks-off with pre-conference events including fruit and vegetable grower roundtable discussions with university specialists where the group debriefs on the production year, challenges are discussed and questions are answered. The main conference program has more than 20 different educational tracts with more than 70 speakers. The trade show offers more than 60 vendors featuring horticulture products and services. Located at the Sloan Center in Bowling Green.

Register here: [tinyurl.com/kyfruitandveg](https://tinyurl.com/kyfruitandveg)

Kentucky State Horticultural Society  
168th Annual Meeting

Kentucky Vegetable Growers Association  
53rd Annual Meeting

Organic Association of Kentucky and  
Kentucky Horticulture Council

In cooperation with  
University of Kentucky Martin-Gatton College of  
Agriculture, Food and Environment  
Kentucky State University College of Agriculture,  
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Mercer County Extension Council invites you to our

# BIG BLUE OPEN HOUSE

## December 7 4:00-7:00pm

See how Extension can be a benefit for you and your family!  
Meet your county agents and learn more about the programs we have to offer. We will have appetizers, refreshments, holiday crafts, and door prizes. Family-friendly event, all ages welcome. Freebies include: calendars, jar openers, pizza cutters, and more.

### Take your picture with Santa! (5:00-7:00pm)

Children's hats, gloves, socks, and scarves, along with non-perishable food items, will be accepted for Burgin and Mercer Schools Backpack Program. Donations only accepted during Open House.

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