



Gardeners Information Service

GROWING BAT PLANT FROM SEED

Can you tell me how to germinate seeds from a plant commonly referred to as bat plant (*Tacca chanteri* and *Tacca nivea*)?

E.G., PALM HARBOR, FLORIDA

The seeds of *Tacca*—a genus of 10 or so herbaceous perennials from the subtropical forests of West Africa and Southeast Asia, grown for their handsome foliage and unusual flowers—should be sown in the spring on the surface of a porous soil mix at 70 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit. Keep the seed evenly moist. Bat plants can also be propagated in spring by dividing their rhizomes; be sure each section contains a bud.

The plants require a moist, warm environment, and if grown outdoors they will need some shade. Since they are not hardy—the minimum temperature at which they will survive is 55 degrees Fahrenheit—they are often grown in a greenhouse.

WANTED: HARDY HOLLIES

Are there any hollies that are hardy in USDA Zone 4 or 5 that I might be able to grow in my Minnesota garden?

N.H., EDINA, MINNESOTA

Though most evergreen hollies (*Ilex* spp.) are cold hardy in Zones 6 to 8, a few are hardy in Zone 5, including some of the blue hollies (*Ilex x meserveae*) known for their dark, bluish, evergreen foliage and red berries.

Many deciduous hollies are hardy in USDA Zone 4, including inkberry holly (*Ilex glabra*), so called because of its black fruit. It is pest and disease free and is excellent in mass plantings or for naturalizing.

Another candidate is winterberry holly (*Ilex verticillata*), hardy to Zone 3. This, too, is deciduous but bears red-orange berries that are striking against snow, making it a good specimen plant. There are many cultivars of both the above species, almost all hardy in

Zone 4. Almost all hollies are dioecious—male and female flowers are borne on separate plants—so you will need plants of both genders to produce fruit.

It is often possible to grow plants that are slightly outside of your normal hardiness range by taking advantage of protected areas that create a microclimate. If you try this, be sure to water the plant thoroughly in the fall before the ground freezes, mulch well, and provide protection from wind.

Another precaution that often helps marginally hardy plants survive the winter is to surround the plant with burlap stapled to stakes and fill the burlap enclosure with dry leaves.

REJUVENATING A CENTURY PLANT

I recently moved to Alabama. In the back area of our new lot I found a century plant that is seven to eight feet high and 10 to 12 feet wide. Is this size unusual? Its lower leaves are dried and shriveled—can I remove them? Would it be safe to remove surrounding vegetation?

D.W., MOBILE, ALABAMA

There are about 200 species of century plant (*Agave* spp.), most of which are monocarpic—they die after flowering—but some are perennial. The monocarpic varieties usually bloom after 10 to 12 years—not a century, but a long time to wait for a flower. Some are very large, with the flower stalk reaching 20 feet or more, but some grow no higher than two feet.

Of the 50 or so varieties grown in the United States, most are native to the southwestern states and Mexico. It sounds like you may have *Agave americana*, sometimes called American aloe, the crown of which can reach six to 10 feet, with individual leaves up to six feet long. Because it is monocarpic, it probably won't live very much longer. It will, however, produce a spectacular bloom when its time comes.

Pruning the dried leaves is advisable to improve air circulation and reduce the chance of disease. It is also safe to remove any other vegetation around the plant, but do this in stages to prevent a sudden change of exposure to wind and sun. Spread a two- to three-inch layer of stones or chunky bark mulch under the plant to suppress weeds. Agaves tolerate poor soils and drought conditions, so don't fertilize or water. This is the quintessential low-maintenance plant in its native or an adapted habitat. Just sit back and wait for the show.

A useful and authoritative new reference on agaves is *Agaves, Yuccas and Related Plants: A Gardener's Guide* by Mary and Gary Irish, published last year by Timber Press.

A TREE CALLED STAR ANISE

I used to buy a spice called star anise at the local health food store. I believe it was actually the dried seed head of the plant. What is the "real" name of the plant?

VIA AHS LISTSERVE

Star anise (*Illicium verum*) is a magnoliolike evergreen tree native to Japan, China, and India. Its glossy brown seedpods are star shaped and have a very pronounced aniselike fragrance, hence the common name. In its native environment, the seed pods are burned like incense to scent homes, and they are chewed after meals to freshen breath. The seed pods are also used as a seasoning in Asian cooking and are an ingredient in Chinese five-spice powder.

The tree may grow to 60 feet in height and is hardy in USDA Zones 7 to 9 and heat tolerant in AHS Zones 9 to 7. It bears small, star-shaped flowers with yellow tepals—petals and sepals that are indistinguishable—in early summer.

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WE'RE READY TO HELP: For answers to your gardening questions, call Gardeners Information Service at (800) 777-7931, extension 131, between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Eastern time, or e-mail us anytime at gis@ahs.org.