



# Gardener's Information Service

## USES FOR GRASS CLIPPINGS

Should I bag grass clippings or let them fall in place as I mow my lawn?

—D.R., SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA

Grass clippings are an excellent source of nitrogen. If you allow them to fall in place, they will slowly decay and naturally feed your lawn. When mixed with high-carbon materials such as twigs, branches, and dried leaves, they are also an excellent source of green matter for compost piles. Finally, grass clippings can be raked up and heaped in piles as a dense mulch to smother undesirable weeds such as poison ivy. Used this way, they also make handy paths in the vegetable garden. But be very careful not to add grass clippings that have been treated with pesticides to the compost heap or the vegetable garden. Studies have shown that grass clippings treated with certain pesticides can have residual herbicidal effects for up to 18 months after application.

## MAINTAINING AN APPLE TREE ESPALIER

I have a two-year-old Belgian fence of espaliered apple trees. The trees have now reached the top of the eight-foot fence they are trained against. Do I trim the branches back at the top or do I train them to run horizontally along the top?

—J.R., WENATCHEE, WASHINGTON

A Belgian fence is a complex lattice-patterned espalier formed by combining at least three single plants (technically called “horizontal cordons”). Each is pruned to two major branches, trained in a broad V. A vertical cordon is positioned at each end to complete the pattern edges. How you treat the top of the fence depends upon the look you wish to achieve. The easiest approach is to stop the growth when it reaches the top, leaving relatively

open spaces between the ends of the branches. Alternately, by training the branches horizontally along the top until they meet, the result will be a closed, more fencelike appearance.

Apple espaliers require pruning twice yearly—in summer and in late winter. In the first couple of years, the main objective is training. After establishment, pruning assures good fruiting and appearance. As the spur systems develop and become more complex, use winter pruning to relieve overcrowding and remove old or unproductive sections.

Regular summer pruning controls vigorous upper growth and redirects energy to the lower branches. If the top growth tends to be more vigorous in spite of summer pruning, thinning shoots on their spurs after growth has started will restore some balance.

## NON-BLOOMING PERUVIAN DAFFODILS

I have been growing Peruvian daffodils in pots for three years now. The foliage is healthy and they multiply vigorously, but so far they haven't bloomed. I feed them with slow-release granular fertilizer in the spring when I bring them out of the greenhouse and give them plenty of water and sun. How can I get them to bloom?

—C.W., KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE

Peruvian daffodil (*Ismene narcissiflora*, sometimes listed as *Hymenocallis calathina*) is a bulbous perennial native to the Andes Mountains of Peru. According to Alan W. Meerow of the USDA's National Germplasm Repository in Miami, Florida, for best bloom the plant needs to be allowed a dry, cool rest period in winter. It is possible that your greenhouse may be too warm for the plant, which should be kept dry and at about 50 degrees Fahrenheit during dormancy.

It is also possible that your bulbs are still immature or undersized—they produce flowers most prolifically when they are slightly crowded in the pot. If so, it will take a couple more years for them to reach blooming size. At the opposite extreme, the bulb may have produced so many offshoots that its energy is being sapped. If that is the case, remove all the offshoots this fall and pot them up individually. Plan to divide bulbs about every three to four years.

Also, be sure you are not removing the foliage too soon in the fall—you should be allowing the leaves to wither and turn brown before cutting them off. The plant relies on the foliage to manufacture and store nutrients for the following year—thus increasing the size of the bulb.

## KNOTWEED CONFUSION

I have seen the plant 'Painter's Palette' listed under several different names. What is its correct name and natural habitat?

—M.B., MADISON, WISCONSIN

'Painter's Palette' is a cultivar of knotweed or smartweed (*Persicaria virginiana*, sometimes listed as *Polygonum virginiana*). The species is native to the Himalayas, Japan, and eastern North America, where it is found in moist soil in full sun or part shade. 'Painter's Palette' is better behaved than the species, which can become invasive, spreading by rhizomatous roots. Even so, 'Painter's Palette' is a vigorous spreader. Give it ample space and be prepared to keep it in check by removing part of its roots if it spreads out of bounds. It is hardy in USDA Zones 5 to 9 and heat tolerant in AHS Zones 9 to 5. ☺

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*William May, Gardener's Information Service Volunteer, and Marianne Polito, Gardener's Information Service Manager.*

**WE'RE READY TO HELP:** For answers to your gardening questions, call Gardener's 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](mailto:gis@ahs.org).