

Our Experts Answer Your Gardening Questions

YELLOWING YEWS

We have yews planted at the front entrance to our home and the needles on them are turning yellow and then dropping off. Is there anything we can do to save them?

—S.B., FORT SMITH, ARKANSAS

What you describe sounds like a symptom of yew dieback, a serious problem that is usually not directly related to a particular disease but rather is associated with adverse environmental factors such as poorly aerated or extremely acidic soil—sometimes a combination of both.

This kind of dieback often happens because yews are planted too deep or too close to the house where they receive flow from a downspout or overflowing gutter. If this is the case, you probably won't be able to save the existing plants. Before replacing them, you should amend the soil and/or reroute water so it won't collect around their roots. Sometimes just moving them out from under the drip line from the roof can solve the problem.

Yews will do best if planted in well-aerated soil that has a pH between 6 and 7.5. Get your soil tested and amend it with lime if it proves too acidic. If your soil is heavy clay, amend it with fine pine bark mulch and other organic matter. When replanting, be sure the crown (the place where the main stem meets the root system) is at or just above the soil line.

PLANTING FREESIAS

How hardy are freesia bulbs and when is the best time to plant them?

—T.R., MOBILE, ALABAMA

While freesias are suitable only for greenhouse culture in most parts of North America, you live far enough south to try them outdoors. The best time for planting freesias outside is early fall for flowering the following spring. If you want a succession of these fragrant flowers, next year try planting their corms at two-week intervals

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from September through November.

Plant the corms so the tops are an inch below the surface in a sheltered site in full sun or high, filtered shade. They will grow best in a sandy loam or other well-drained soil. Provide a light mulch of pine needles or fine bark to help them through any heavy frosts.



Freesias are not hardy and can only be grown outdoors year round in warm regions.

Gardeners north of USDA Zone 8 can pot corms in a soilless mix in late summer or early fall, keeping them outdoors in full sun until just before frosts are expected. They should be brought indoors to a cool, well-lighted area at that point—or they could be placed in a cold frame as long as it doesn't get cooler than 40 degrees.

Freesias will do best if they are exposed to nighttime temperatures of 45 to 55 degrees while their foliage and flowers are developing. High temperatures or low light will cause plants to become leggy and bloom poorly or not at all.

Mail-order sources for freesias include: McClure and Zimmerman, (800) 883-6998, <http://fall.mzbulb.com>; Brent and Becky's Bulbs, (804) 693-3966,

www.brentandbeckysbulbs.com; and John Scheepers, Inc., (860) 567-0838, www.johnscheepers.com.

SHRUBS FOR CONTAINERS

I have a covered walkway in front of my house that gets very little direct sunlight, but has bright shade. I want to place three containers next to my windows and plant something in them that will eventually reach about five feet and is evergreen. What shrubs will work in USDA Hardiness Zone 6?

—V.C., SPOKANE, WASHINGTON

One plant you might consider for the conditions you describe is the dwarf Alberta spruce (*Picea glauca* var. *albertiana* 'Conica', USDA hardiness zones 2–7, AHS heat zones 7–2). It adapts well to container culture, and although it eventually can grow to 20 feet in height, it is very slow growing—reaching only about seven feet in 35 years. It has soft needles and a pyramidal habit.

Other possibilities include 'Otto Luyken' skip laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus* 'Otto Luyken'), the dwarf forms of Japanese andromeda (*Pieris japonica*), one of the many selections of Japanese holly (*Ilex crenata*), or a dwarf *Chamaecyparis*. If the plants should eventually get too large for the container, you can always plant them out in your landscape.

Jackie Fazio, director of horticulture at New York's Brooklyn Botanic Garden, advises "not to plant them too late in the season so the plants have a chance to become comfortable in the containers before they are hit with the cold of winter." And given that your site is a covered walkway, make sure to water the plants through the winter. Fazio says, "We usually keep watering until the end of November, then put on a heavy mulch for the winter months." 🌿

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