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**The Mendota Reporter**  
**Wednesday, May 6, 2020**



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## Aralia cordata 'Sun King' is the '20 Perennial Plant of the Year

URBANA—The Perennial Plant Association has announced the 2020 Perennial Plant of the Year. *Aralia cordata* 'Sun King' is a fabulous high-impact perennial that brings a bold pop of glowing color and texture to the shade or part shade garden.

"*Aralia* 'Sun King' had been nominated by PPA members again and again over the years. It finally came out on top this year," says Martha Smith, horticulture educator with University of Illinois Extension. "Persistence pays off!" *Aralia* 'Sun King' also won the International Hardy Plant Union Outstanding Plant Award in 2012.

Native to shady forested areas in Japan, 'Sun King' was "discovered" by plantsman Barry Yinger in a Japanese garden center atop a department store. This perennial has become a beloved shade garden staple across the country. Bright yellow shoots emerge in spring, then grow to 4 to 6 feet tall and nearly as wide. Small, cream-colored umbels of flowers appear in late July and last through September, attracting bees and eventually developing into tiny, dark, inedible berries. Despite Sun King's stature, it's very well behaved, with little to no reseeding or suckering.

"Place 'Sun King' where you want height. It is fast growing, filling a background space all season long," Smith says.

Hardy to USDA zones 3 to 9 (Northern Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico), it's hard not to find a place in the garden for this gold-leaf beauty. To retain its color, place in part shade. If in heavy shade, Smith says the color will become more lime green.

'Sun King' will tolerate more sun as

long as ample moisture is provided. This low-maintenance perennial benefits from a pinching or slight cutback in May to encourage branching. During long periods of drought, 'Sun King' will suffer if not kept watered. Being herbaceous, it will die back in the fall and re-emerge in the spring. It is best grown in well-drained soils and benefits from compost being incorporated. No serious insect or disease problems affect it, and deer don't bother it.

Also called Udo, Japanese asparagus, Mountain asparagus, or Japanese spikenard, young shoots of this plant are considered a culinary delicacy in Japan where they are cultivated in underground tunnels. The flavor is reported to taste "asparagus-like" or "lemony." Young shoots are harvested and blanched or pickled. White fleshy roots are eaten as one would consume a parsnip.

Smith says 'Sun King' is terrific in combination with hosta, ferns, and past Perennial Plant of the Year stars such as *Heuchera* 'Palace Purple' (1991), *Brunnera* *acrophylla* 'Jack Frost' (2012) and *Polygonatum odoratum* 'Variegatum' (2013). "It's a knockout when placed near *Acer palmatum* 'Bloodgood' or other maroon-leaf plants," she says. "And don't forget containers – 'Sun King' is bold and beautiful in a big pot!"

The Perennial Plant of the Year® (PPOY) program began in 1990 to showcase a perennial that is a standout among its competitors. Perennials chosen are suitable for a wide range of growing climates, require low maintenance, have multiple-season interest, and are relatively pest/disease-free.



Add an outlet to raised outdoor floors, porches and decks.

## How to extend your living area to outdoor spaces

(StatePoint) When warmer weather arrives, it's all about spending time in your home's outdoor spaces. Here are a few new ideas for transforming your porch, deck or yard into an oasis of relaxation.

### Spruce Up

Before getting down to brass tacks, it's time to give your outdoor spaces a once-over and note what basic maintenance and cleaning are needed; be sure to sweep up porches and decks of debris, dust off and move outdoor furniture out of storage and prune trees and plants that need it. This may be a good time to refinish or re-stain an older deck in need of some tender loving care. Want to add a splash of color to the space? Give some time-worn wooden furniture a new paint job in a bold hue.

### Power Up

To match the true comfort of indoor life to your home's outdoor spaces, you'll need a safe, code-compliant and unobtrusive way to power fans, lighting, entertainment, electric appliances and more.

To add an outlet to raised outdoor floors, porches and decks, consider installing a Deck Outlet Cover from Hubbell TayMac. Accommodating two power cords, it lets you put the power where you want it -- in a safe place

where people are less likely to trip over cords.

Weatherproof, UV resistant and durable even in harsh environments, it also features a low-profile design that meets ADA standards, and an attractive slip-resistant texture available in gray, white and bronze.

### Furnish

Given the broad scope of weatherproof furnishings, cushions, pillows and even rugs available on the market today, there is absolutely no reason that your outdoor spaces can't offer the same level of comfort and beauty as any den or living room, especially now that you've supplied your outdoor space with electrical power and the flexibility to install such amenities as an entertainment center, ceiling fans and even chandeliers.

Just be sure everything you install is weatherproofed and protected against the elements, and that you select only outdoor-grade products. However, you can extend the life of certain items by taking extra precautions during extreme weather and the off-season.

By giving your home's outdoor spaces the same attention to detail as the indoors, you can extend your living spaces and even create new "rooms" in which to dine, relax and entertain.

## Beat the heat: Tips for caring for your yard in summer

Summer heat will soon be here, and that might mean less water in your area. Does that mean you need to let your living landscapes suffer? Is watering your yard or lawn frowned upon by neighbors?

"Having a yard and being a good environmental steward are not mutually exclusive, even in drought or high heat conditions," explains Kris Kiser, president and CEO of the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI), an international trade association representing more than 100 power equipment, engine and utility vehicle manufacturers and suppliers. "Grass, trees, shrubs and flowering plants are a vital part of our living landscapes that contribute to our communities, our families and our health. You'd be surprised at how resilient they can be during times of water scarcity."

Keep your lawn looking good in the summer with these helpful tips from OPEI.

### Accept that brown may not be bad

It's okay to let your grass go brown. Grass will grow in cycles, "turning on and off," based on the resources it gets. As water becomes less available in an area, grass will slow down, go dormant and turn brown. Turfgrass is resilient. It will green up again when the rains return—and they always do.

### Save your water for more delicate plantings

Flowering plants may require a little more water during drier conditions. That's okay since these plants are vital to our birds, bees, hummingbirds and other pollinators.

### Avoid over-watering

Too much water is actually bad for grass, in particular.



Grass, trees, shrubs and flowering plants are a vital part of our living landscapes that contribute to our communities, our families and our health.

Overwatering causes the grass roots to grow horizontally, rather than vertically. With less water, the grass has to work harder and will grow its roots deeper into the soil in search of moisture. This helps it do a better job of trapping carbon and releasing oxygen.

### Know when to water

Most lawns require about an inch of water per week to stay healthy. Water deeply early in the day during the morning. Moisture can be more efficiently absorbed by your lawn's root system during the cooler part of the day.

### Keep grass and shrubs growing

Trim back shrubs when the temperatures aren't sky high for your area. Set your mower to trim turfgrass a little bit higher. Longer blades give more shade and grass roots extend deeper into the soil. This helps limit weeds and the lawn retains moisture better. Dense turf requires less water too.

### Sharpen your mower blades

Dull blades can cause grass to fray. Frayed grass

is far more likely to brown. A sharp blade is always important, but it's critical to lawn care during hot summer months.

### Practice grasscycling

Instead of bagging grass clippings, use a mulching mower and return your grass clippings back to your lawn. This will help trap moisture, keeping the lawn cooler and better hydrated. It also saves you some time and energy because you won't need to bag up the clippings!

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# How you can help protect wild birds in your yard

(StatePoint) You may not think about it often, but wild birds use your lawn as a rest stop and place to call home. As you spruce up your lawn and garden for the season, there are simple steps you can take to protect them and help them thrive.

According to Spencer Schock, founder of a company that makes bird-friendly products for homes, the following changes are easy to implement in order to create a safe harbor for wild birds:

- Plant native species: Planting native species on your property is one of the most impactful ways you can improve your local environ-

ment, as well as make your lawn and garden a healthy habitat for wild birds and other fauna. Native plant species provide birds with food and places to rest and nest. Birds in turn, spread pollen and seeds, while acting as a natural pesticide. Speaking of which, gardening organically will also go a long way to protecting the health and safety of feeding birds.

- Make windows visible: Up to 1 billion birds die annually from striking windows in the US, according to the American Bird Conservancy. The good news is that it's relatively easy and affordable to prevent your

home from being part of the problem. Special window decals that reflect ultraviolet sunlight, a wavelength of light noticeable to birds, have been proven to substantially reduce the likelihood of bird strikes.

- Monitor cats: Monitor your cat's time outdoors to ensure they are not terrorizing or hunting birds. An enclosed play area for your cat is the most effective way to keep birds in your yard safe from your furry companion's natural instincts.

Good deeds start at home. This season, do your part to help migrating bird populations reach their destinations safely.



As you spruce up your lawn and garden for the season, there are simple steps you can take to protect wild birds and help them thrive.



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Regular pruning is necessary to keep your yard looking beautiful and well-maintained.

## Proper pruning is all about the right tools

(StatePoint) If you are like most homeowners, you need to prune trees, shrubs, bushes and other plants in your yard from time to time. But do you know which tool is best suited for each particular job? Experts say that choosing tools wisely is key to maximizing beauty, and minimizing damage to plants.

There are a few things to keep in mind as you go about selecting tools for your pruning jobs, big and small, and landscape designer Doug Scott is sharing a few insights to get you started:

- For most basic pruning around the yard, bypass or hand pruners, also known as garden or pruning shears, are go-to tools. Best for making clean cuts through living plants and tree branches, they work much like a set of heavy-duty scissors and are capable of getting into tight spots for close, precise cuts. Scott advises against a common pitfall here: the urge to save money.

“Since pruning shears see so much use, it makes sense to buy the best ones you can afford. From my experience, inexpensive models simply don’t last very long,” he says. “A well-cared for, high-quality set of bypass pruners however can be a lifetime investment for the average homeowner.”

- For larger branches, Scott says anvil-style shears can be a good choice, which feature one sharp blade closing against a flat, wide blade and work much like a knife cutting against a cutting board. However, he warns that they should be used selectively, as they crush plant stems more than bypass-style pruners.

- When it comes to branches of more than 1/2-inch (12.7 millimeters) in diameter, loppers are the best choice. Like hand pruning tools, there are bypass loppers, which operate much like a large, long-handled set of bypass shears, while anvil-style loppers use just one cutting blade.

“Bypass loppers generally cut with more precision, while anvil-style loppers are typically capable of generating more cutting force,” Scott said.

Regular pruning is necessary to keep your yard looking beautiful and well-maintained as well as to improve the health of plants. Be sure you’re equipped with the proper tools and knowledge to do so effectively.

## Dig into gardening trends: Tips to get started

(BPT) - Just like fashion, trends in gardening come and go...and sometimes come back again. Some shifts in gardening were inspired by necessity, like the “victory gardens” of WWII for growing food during years of rationing. Others reflected societal changes, like the green lawns of the 1950s and 1960s, when families spent more time playing and entertaining in their yards than ever before. If you look further into the past, to the 1920s, you see a trend that’s on the rise again—a yearning for going back to nature, celebrating a lush, green and bird-friendly environment. Those gardens overflowed with all sorts of greenery, fishponds, bird-baths and bird feeders.

Today’s interest in sustainable gardens offering a home for pollinators is not too different from the desire for bird watching and natural gardening of 100 years ago.

A new survey by the National Garden Bureau (NGB), which is celebrating its 100th anniversary, found fascinating trends among today’s gardeners, both expert and novice, which may inspire ideas for your own gardens.

### Grow to eat

More than half (57%) of those age 35 and under said they’re using their green space to grow their own food. That interest was echoed by respondents over 35, with 65% of them saying they planned to turn at least part of their future gardens into more of a food source. Many expressed interest in growing their own herbs in their kitchens, with over 65% of those 35 and under sharing plans to grow herbs indoors in the future.

New to growing veggies,

fruits or herbs? Consider starting seeds in your kitchen or creating a small raised garden bed outdoors. Research what grows best in your region and the most ideal time for planting. Start small, with just one or two types of plants, so you don’t feel overwhelmed. And grow something you know you’ll love to eat!

### Mixed use gardens

Gardens past and present have served multiple purposes, and gardening with a variety of plants allows you to enjoy your space and take in the outdoors to your liking. Over 67% of respondents 35 and under shared that while they want some green lawn, they also want the rest of their yard to be planted with trees, shrubs, flowers, fruits, herbs and vegetables.

What does that mean for gardens of the future? They’ll likely offer more variety, from the ornamental to the edible.

And over 60% of gardeners of all ages want to grow pollinator-friendly plants and flowers.

Look at your own yard and decide how much of it you want to dedicate to your garden and containers, or perhaps what other types of plants you could grow instead. Consider consulting a professional in your area as a resource for advice on a strategy for your space.

### Victory Garden 2.0

When the Victory Garden Manual was first written in 1943, reasons to grow your own vegetables were obvious; it was wartime and food was scarce. Statistics say that in 1943, nearly 40% of all fruits and vegetables grown in the U.S. were grown in home and community victory gardens.

As NGB celebrates its



Gardening with a variety of plants allows you to enjoy your space and take in the outdoors to your liking.

100th anniversary, it seems timely to reintroduce the concept of victory gardening with quick and easy steps to plan and grow your own vegetable garden. Before digging in, it may be helpful to create a list of vegetables that your family enjoys. From there, plan your garden space and determine if you’ll be planting in the ground, raised beds, containers or a combination. Don’t forget to add pollinator-friendly flowers to ensure vegetables are properly pollinated, and you’ll have a great start on the modern victory garden.

### Gardeners of the future

It may seem as though younger people are somewhat less likely to be active gardeners, as 11% of the survey respondents under 35 said they’ve never gotten their hands dirty – as compared with only 4% of those over the age of 35. Commonly, lack of time and space are their two biggest hurdles to gardening. But many younger gardener wannabes hope to graduate from growing houseplants

and succulents indoors to becoming gardeners in the future: Fifty-three percent said they hoped to grow houseplants, with 58% planning to graduate to growing flowers, and over 65% planning to grow fruits and vegetables in the future.

If you’re thinking of taking the gardening plunge for the first time, or expanding your gardening efforts, talk to family and neighbors who have successful gardens for their advice.

### Growing inspiration

The internet can be a great source of inspiration for future gardeners. While gardeners over 35 look to magazines, books and garden retailers for ideas, those under 35 largely browse Pinterest, Instagram and YouTube for information and tips about developing their green thumbs. However, both groups talk to friends and family for ideas and inspiration about what, and how, to grow.

For more information, tips, blogs and lots of inspiring gardening ideas, visit [ngb.org](http://ngb.org).



## Master Gardener Q&A – Lawn Fertilizing

It's spring! The University of Illinois Extension Master Gardeners are here to help you with your gardening questions! Lots of us will be home this spring, and what better way to be outside, stay healthy and enjoy the results of your work than to get outside and work in your yard and garden.

If you have gardening questions, please e-mail [meo@illinois.edu](mailto:meo@illinois.edu) and we'll answer them in an upcoming article. Be sure to put "Gardening Question" in the subject line. Today, we are featuring common questions about lawn fertilizing, which is an essential way to "feed" your lawn for optimal

growth and health.

When is the best time to start fertilizing my lawn? The best time to start fertilizing the lawn is in the spring when the soil temperature reaches 55 degrees Fahrenheit. This is usually mid to late April. The grass has started to grow by this time. Using a granular fertilizer is best because it assures a more even spread. A drop or broadcast spreader should be used, and can be purchased at your local home and garden centers.

What do the three numbers on the bag of fertilizer mean? When you buy a bag of granular fertilizer, you will see three numbers on the bag. These numbers represent the percentage of nitrogen (N), phosphate (P), and potassium (K) in the fertilizer. Grass fertilizer has a higher N number because nitrogen promotes lush green growth. Look for a slow release fertilizer releases nutrients over a longer period of time. The University of Illinois Extension recommends an N-P-K ratio of 3-1-2 or 4-1-2 for lawns.

How many times should I fertilize my lawn? Plan on fertilizing the lawn four to five times through the early spring to mid-fall season. The first feeding will be when the soil temperature is 55 degrees, then four weeks later in May. After this feed every eight weeks through

October. Make sure your spreader is set at the correct rate for granular size.

This information will be included on the bag of fertilizer purchased.

When should I water the lawn? Before or after fertilizing? It is a good idea to water the lawn a day

before spreading the fertilizer. The moisture helps break down the granular pieces and releases the nutrients into the soil gently. Do not apply before rain, as the fertilizer might be washed away.

What happens if I apply too much fertilizer?

Over fertilizing your lawn may directly injure the grass or contribute to disease and other lawn problems. Be sure to follow the application rates suggested by the University of Illinois Extension here: [https://web.extension.illinois.edu/lawntalk/planting/fertilizer\\_schedule\\_for\\_home\\_lawns.cfm](https://web.extension.illinois.edu/lawntalk/planting/fertilizer_schedule_for_home_lawns.cfm). For additional information about lawn care, please visit the "Lawn Talk" website at <https://web.extension.illinois.edu/lawntalk/index.cfm>.

Do you have some additional questions for us? Remember, you can e-mail [meo@illinois.edu](mailto:meo@illinois.edu) or call our University of Illinois Extension Unit Office at (815) 224-0889. Please note that due to the COVID-19 epidemic, offices are closed until further notice.



## It's always a good time to improve your lot!



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# Confidently growing a garden, big or small

(BPT) - Whether you have an outdoor oasis or are a nurturing indoor plant parent, gardening offers a multitude of benefits and has the power to brighten up any space or mood. Spring is the time to plan what plants to grow, and with some expert insight on top trends, you'll be gardening with success and enjoying the results.

The team at Ball Horticultural Company shares the top trends for 2020, guiding plant lovers at all levels to confidently grow a garden, big or small.

## Indoor Garden Rooms

Mother Nature has made her way indoors with more people planting inside their homes in a variety of ways. Whether it's creating a soothing space by a windowsill filled with houseplants or growing your own edible herbs and microgreens in your kitchen, planting indoors is on the rise. Serious plant-lovers are even dedicating entire interior spaces to gardening, creating "garden rooms" or "indoor jungles."

Indoor gardening lets homeowners experience the benefits of plants wherever they live, regardless of the weather outdoors. Easy-to-care-for houseplants, such as Dieffenbachia, a strong and sturdy plant that has stunning and unique tropical leaves, makes people feel like they are on vacation in their own homes. Studies show that foliage plants also clean indoor air and lift overall spirits. Finally, don't be afraid of indoor flowering plants like Gerbera or Cyclamen. Their flowers last 3-4 weeks and are available in many colors to fit your mood or match your seasonal décor.

**Gardening for Health and Wellness**

It's no secret that consuming fresh vegetables and herbs is beneficial to one's physical health, and gardening at home puts a variety of flavorful produce within arm's reach. The benefits of gardening also extend to mental health, as tending a garden and being close to nature helps reduce stress, calm anxiety and acts as a mood-booster.

Herbs are a simple place to start when growing your own food. You can't go wrong with Everleaf Emerald Towers Basil, which adds flavor to many dishes like fresh Caprese salad. This beautiful, column-like plant not only gives a bountiful harvest, it is also late to flower and can be paired with colorful flowers in a mixed container for month after month of hand-plucked flavor and garden enjoyment.

Mardi Gras Fun Snack Peppers from Burpee Plants are the perfect healthy miniature peppers that add a conversation piece to any garden. They're available in four eye-catching color options that can be grown together in one container for a fun patio display, and kids adore helping to grow, pick and eat these crunchy snacks.

Aromatherapy is also a popular wellness practice, with lavender plants topping the list of must-haves because of its reputation for inspiring relaxation. SuperBlue English Lavender grows rich blue blooms on short flower spikes, providing a calming scent and great garden texture. Alternatively, Primavera Spanish Lavender flowers throughout the summer, displaying great heat tolerance with bushy, scented florets

that attract bees and other pollinators.

## Bold Colors

Bold colors are planted in gardens across the country and different hues blanket landscapes large and small. Additionally, people with container gardens are planting flowers known for their vivid color for instant impact, making this trend accessible to all, including those who live in a condo or apartment with limited outdoor garden space.

Some standout plants that feature the best bold hues include Galaxy Geranium, a brand-new series that is vigorous enough to keep its large, semi-double blooms in-color all season. Look for stunning dark red, pink, purple, salmon, violet, watermelon and white, giving gardeners the option to choose their favorite shade or create a rainbow of flowers.

Another bold option that is wonderful for sunny borders or bright corners is Rose Marvel Salvia. Its mega-large bloom stems result in spectacular displays in spring and summer so you'll enjoy color throughout the warm months. The rose-pink flowers are deer and rabbit resistant, plus they rebloom without being cut back, saving time and minimizing maintenance.



Spring is the time to plan what plants to grow, and with some expert insight on top trends, you'll be gardening with success and enjoying the results.

Ask for these plants at your favorite garden retailer, and you're on your way to

experiencing all that flowers have to offer. To learn more about these plants and the

top gardening trends of the year, visit the plant experts at [www.ballhort.com](http://www.ballhort.com).

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