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Josh Morgan, Journal staff

Scott Sime of Jolly Lane Greenhouse touches the bracts of a pink poinsettia plant. Poinsettias are popular during the holiday season due to their vibrant colors that bloom in late fall.

## DIGS

# Change in climate should be addressed

A recent United Nations document stated: "The 20th session of the Conference of the Parties and the 10th session of the Conference of the Parties serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol is taking place from 1 to 12 December. COP20/CMP 10 is being hosted by the Government of Peru, in Lima, Peru." I hope that was clear because it is important and it ended today.



Cathie Draine

What's happening in the atmosphere,

in the oceans, across the land — whether called climate change or global warming or weird weather — affects us all. Because scientists, since French mathematician and physicist Joseph Fourier first described the atmosphere's contribution to planetary temperature in 1824, have been measuring changes, it seems to me that there is a body of evidence to support the reality of a changing climate. What continues not to be completely clear is what (or whose) actions are contributing to this.

The UN meetings are about agreements between nations in the broadest sense. But increasingly policy makers are aware that strategies — accommodation and mitigation — are best planned regionally.

The Journal recently had an article about Rocky Mountain governors meeting to determine what could be done to save the Colorado River water system, which supports over 40 million people. While it is unrealistic to think that great water decisions can be achieved in a weekend of talks, perhaps being more aware of the dread potential of water scarcity across large areas will encourage creative and positive thinking.

I am as confused as anyone about weather anomalies, atmospheric change, inputs, outputs, greenhouse effects and carbon issues so I joined an online (free) class taught by the University of Reading in England. From the many classes accessible on FutureLearn, I chose "Our Changing Climate: Past, Present and Future."

Predictably, I enjoyed the sections on the past, dealing primarily with civilizations in the Middle East, India, Asia and Central and South America that rose because they controlled productive soils and water sources and fell as those finite resources were over used and abused.

» Draine, B2

# Bringing poinsettias to fruition

Ava Henrikson  
Journal staff

Poinsettias are a popular way to deck the halls at Christmas time, but these tropical plants suffer from some common misconceptions.

Its botanical name is *Euphorbia pulcherrima* and while it grows naturally in Mexico and Central America as a shrub, it is usually an ornamental potted plant in the United States.

The colored areas are often mistaken for flowers, but they are actually specialized or modified leaves called bracts.

The flowers, called the cyathia, are the small yellow parts in the center of the bracts and are the poinsettia's reproductive component.

The plant blooms when the bracts develop their color, which happens around Christmas in the Northern Hemisphere.

"They are photoperiodic sensitive, meaning that day length is what triggers bract

production," said Scott Sime, production manager at Jolly Lane Greenhouse in Rapid City. "The autumnal equinox is when they transfer from leaf production to bract production. In the Southern Hemisphere, it's out of season (at Christmas)."

Poinsettias were brought to the United States in 1825 by the first ambassador to Mexico, Joel Roberts Poinsett.

The original plant developed red bracts but it has been bred to produce pink, white, cream, lemon, plum, marbled and bi-colored varieties. Other colors can be achieved by spraying a dye on the bracts.

"The blues and the purples, since they are not available naturally, are probably the ones that I do the most of," Sime said.

But it's the plant's original color, and the traditional Christmas colors, red with green leaves, that is the most popular, according to Sime.

» Poinsettias, B2

## Poinsettia points

Today is Poinsettia Day as Dec. 12 marks the death of Joel Roberts Poinsett, who introduced the plant in America.

Poinsettias are also known as the Christmas flower, winter rose, lobster flower, Christmas star and Mexican flame leaf. The Aztecs called it *Cuiltaxochitl* and in Mexico it is called the *Flor de Noche Buena*.

According to poinsettiaaday.com, the poinsettia is the best-selling potted plant in the U.S. and Canada and contributes about \$250 million to the U.S. economy at the wholesale level.

Poinsettia is pronounced with and without the "i" at the end.

There are now more than 100 varieties of poinsettias available.

Poinsettias don't like to have their "feet" wet. "You see more problems with overwatering, killing them with kindness, than underwatering," said Scott Sime, production manager at Jolly Lane Greenhouse. "Once you've over watered it, the root systems rots and there really is no chance of reviving it."

According to Sime, there about 10-12 poinsettia plant breeders around the world. Most of the seed and cutting production comes from stock or mother plants in Central American countries, including Honduras and Guatemala, as well as Israel.

Poinsettias need calcium for healthy development. "The bracts are a drain on the plant because they don't produce any food. The leaves do all the chlorophyll," Sime said. "As the bracts bloom, we supplement with calcium sprays to develop the bracts fully without damaging them."

# Risks of using mulch are vastly overstated

Lee Reich  
Associated Press

Rumor has it that mulching your garden beds or trees and shrubs could starve your plants. It's a rumor that has circulated for the past 40 years or so, ever since mulching surged in popularity as a way to quell weeds and conserve water.

Is there anything to it? If anything, you'd think that nutrients in mulches would help nourish plants, not starve them.

The logic behind the starvation rumor goes like this: The two nutrients most needed by soil microorganisms are carbon and nitrogen. Wood chips, straw, sawdust and many other organic mulches are high in carbon but low in nitrogen. When soil microorganisms chew away on such mulches, decomposing them, they have to balance their carbon-rich diet with extra nitrogen, which they must find somewhere else. So they pull this nitrogen from



Associated Press

The chances of carbon-rich mulch starving the plants in your yard are extremely slim.

» Mulch, B2

## INSIDE

### Unique addition

Couple literally raises the roof on their house.

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## INSIDE

### Songwriter's digs

The Beverly Hills estate of songwriter Robert Sherman is on the market at \$9.95 million.

## READER WRITE-IN

### Christmas services

Area church listings for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day will be published in the Religion section on Saturday, Dec. 20. To have your services and events published, submit them by 5 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 16, to features@rapidcityjournal.com

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# Couple raises house to add new main living floor

Rebecca Teagarden  
Seattle Times

**SEATTLE** | We're standing in the master bathroom upstairs, and Peter says, "This was our kitchen."

Nearby is a small sitting room: It was once the dining room. And their large, comfortable bedroom? It used to be the living room.

So how did it all get up here, high over Lake Washington in Seattle's Laurelhurst neighborhood?

"We lifted the house," says Aimee, Peter's wife.

"It was definitely something we'd not heard of before," he adds.

The couple set out with a desire to add a grown-up master suite to their 76-year-old, 1,600-square-foot Cape Cod bungalow, cut up and closed off. They thought a new second floor was the way to go on that. Tear off the roof, head upward.

But their architect, Amy Janof of Janof Architecture, had a different idea. Keep the roof right where it is and hoist up the house. Insert an entirely new main floor between old house and the foundation. Why? Because, Janof says, "the house was tiny, needed a new kitchen and had such poor connection to the backyard (the two original bedrooms and bathrooms took up that whole end of the house).

"It was a much more ambitious project, but it gave them a much more livable home." And the opportunity for the couple to rid themselves of worn knob-and-tub wiring, encrusted plumbing and single-pane windows while adding



The new main floor incorporates a modern touch, including a dining room with deep gray paint, to classic charm. The new ceiling reaches 9 feet.

insulation.

Aimee and Peter trusted their gut and their team: Janof, contractor Joe McKinstry of Joseph McKinstry Construction Co. and structural engineer Harriott Valentine Engineers.

"Amy was down-to-earth and honest," Peter says. "She had never done this before. Joe had never done this before. But it was the best thing to do, and they told us everything all along the way."

Meanwhile, the company hired to do the lifting,

Kunkel Moving and Raising, has done this kind of thing before, since 1911. There is not so much as a crack in the old plaster walls.

The new main floor offers up a living and dining room, spacious and open to the deck and water views beyond with a double set of French doors. Janoff respected the home's history and the traditional desires of her clients (in moldings, fireplace mantels, floors in white oak), while adding just a touch of contemporary throughout

(walls painted in shades of gray, colors from the Restoration Hardware palette). The country kitchen, across the back of the home, is large (more than twice the size of the old) and classic with white cabinetry from Acorn Custom Cabinets, white subway tiles and counters in honed Absolute Black granite from Architectural StoneWerkes. A small powder room holds large glam with a white marble counter and sparkling chandelier (one of a number that homeowner



The old house is now the top floor of this taller home that has a view of Lake Washington in Seattle.

Aimee had installed throughout their new spaces).

One floor up in the old house, the former kitchen makes for a fine new master bath; white hexagonal tile floors, his-and-hers pedestal sinks. Waving at the soaking tub, Peter says, "This is where the refrigerator and stove were."

Living room as master bedroom comes with a fireplace, romantic and just plain useful. The former dining room? A sitting room (one with a bay window), a

space Peter uses to tie fishing flies.

The house that Peter knew was too small when he bought it (beating out multiple offers the day it hit the market during the recession in 2010) is now perfect at 2,700 square feet, the couple says.

"We wanted to be in Seattle, but this place feels like we're way out of the city," Peter says.

Their architect credits the couple for going for it. "Major points for courage," says Janof.



Poinsettia plants display their vibrant leaves at the Jolly Lane Greenhouse in Rapid City. The plant is native to parts of Central America and Mexico and its leaves bloom into vibrant reds and other colors around Christmas time, making it a popular plant during the holiday season in the U.S.

» From B1

## Poinsettias

"Probably 60 percent of my production is red," he said.

Sime has been growing poinsettias for about 37 years. He produces about 5,000 plants a year, starting in the summer.

"They are a fairly lengthy crop," said Sime. "I usually get my first shipment about the Fourth of July. So these plants have been in production since June because I get them as a rooted cutting, about 3 inches tall with the root system on and those cuttings are probably three to

four weeks old. So, it's a six-month crop."

In order for the bracts to develop their bright colors, the plant needs 12 hours of complete darkness and 12 hours of light starting at the autumnal equinox in September.

Different varieties have different response times and the flowering season can be manipulated by lighting the plants at night to delay blooming or shading or "blackclothing" them during the day to get an earlier bloom.

The size of the plant depends on when it is planted.

"The larger the finished plant, the earlier you plant

them. I do a two-inch size up to a 10-inch size," Sime said. "The bigger I want it, the earlier I have to plant it, because they all start flowering at that same time."

Some varieties have brittle bracts and can't be mass-produced because they don't do well with shipping.

Most people throw their potted poinsettia away after the holiday season, though they can be reflowered.

"It's possible, but it's very difficult," said Sime. "One of the biggest reasons is low light levels in the home environment. It's hard to reproduce the

habit that they have."

Perhaps the biggest misconception about the poinsettia is that if eaten it is toxic to people and animals.

"That's a myth," Sime said. "There have been several studies done. It was associated with an incident where there was a death of a young man and it was wrongfully associated (with poinsettias) but it continued."

And Sime is willing to conduct his own study to bust this myth.

"I've always thought about getting a bottle of Ranch dressing and eating it in a salad just so I could prove it," he said.

» From B1

## Mulch

the soil, and are a lot better than plants at getting it. The result: plants starved of nitrogen.

All true.

However, this nitrogen starvation is only temporary, for starters. As soil microorganisms die, the nitrogen in their bodies is released back to the soil. There, it becomes available to plants once those microorganisms have used up enough soil carbon, "breathing" it out of the ground as carbon dioxide.

Also, this scenario — plants being starved for nitrogen — holds true when you mix a load of high-carbon, organic material into the soil. But lay that same material on top of the ground as mulch and it's a different ball game. Then, decomposition occurs mostly at the thin interface where the mulch touches the soil, and the rate of decomposition is much slower. So slow, in fact, that a steady state is reached where nitrogen is re-released at about the rate at which it is being used for decomposition. The microorganisms are happy and the plants are happy.

Still, that rumor that plants will suffer from high carbon mulches keeps going around, despite the field experience of agricultural researchers and many gardeners.

A garden, like any biological system, represents

a complex interaction of energies, so sweeping generalizations don't always hold. Yes, there are situations — rare — where that old mulch rumor may hold true. One such situation would be where you mulched with a very high-carbon, very low-nitrogen material (sawdust, for example) on soil that is very low in nitrogen. Another situation would be where you planted a seed right into a high-carbon mulch. The young seedling would be starved of nitrogen until its roots hit the soil below.

Still, there's no need to forsake the benefits of mulch in either of these situations. Just sprinkle on some nitrogen fertilizer, such as soybean meal, to make up the deficiency.

In just about all situations, there's no need to do anything more than spread organic mulch right on the ground. In the coming months, it will insulate the soil against cold and then, when warm weather arrives, insulate it against excessive heat. An organic mulch also softens the impact of raindrops, so water can percolate into the soil rather than run off. These mulches also enrich the soil with humus, that witch's brew of natural compounds that helps feed plants and beneficial soil organisms to fend off pests, quell weeds and improve water use by plants.

So don't pay attention to those ugly rumors.

» From B1

## Draine

We have those tragic stories at our fingertips in books like "Dirt: the Erosion of Civilizations," (Montgomery), "Soil and Civilizations," (Hyams), "Thirst: Water and Power in the Ancient World," (Mithen), "The Soil and Health (Howard)," and "Where Our Food Comes From" (Nabhan). And we

can reread the wisdom of Aldo Leopold, of Lady Eve Balfour, of Sir Albert Howard, J. I. Rodale and Ruth Stout.

The online course stressed that in the future (and that might be now) a strategy for dealing with global warming might be/should be cooperation and consolidation of goods and services as cities and populations grow.

The discussion of

climate change/global warming is head spinning and hard to understand. The task is to think globally and act locally. I wish I had said that first. I didn't, but I can say it again and again.

Actually Walt Kelley's greatest cartoon character, Pogo the possum, said it best in a comic strip on Earth Day, 1971. "We have met the enemy and he is us."

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