

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



PHOTO BY Dr. William M. Johnson

Most gardeners are familiar with schefflera (*Schefflera actinophylla*) as a tough indoor plant. Although an uncommon occurrence, scheffleras grown in the landscape will form flowers that eventually produce striking red and orange colored fruit.

The Master Gardener volunteers sponsored a fruit tree seminar and sale in early February. Individuals attending the event had a variety of questions on growing fruit trees as well as a variety of non-fruit tree related questions. The following is a sampling of the questions asked.

Question: What is the difference between "clingstone" and "freestone" peaches?

Answer: In a clingstone peach, the flesh clings to the stone and will not separate easily from the stone. The

freestone peach will separate very easily from the stone when the peach is cut and twisted. One note of importance - a clingstone peach contains more pectin in the fruit than a freestone; therefore, clingstone peaches are the best type to use when making jelly.

Question: Some of my established peach trees started blooming in early January. Why did it bloom so early this time?

Answer: Most hardy fruit trees need a certain amount of cool winter weather to end

their dormancy and to promote spring growth. Peach trees need the cool weather during the winter in order for the buds to develop properly, so the tree will flower and leaf out normally. Weather conditions can dramatically speed or delay the onset of blooming.

The number of cool temperature hours needed is known as the chill hour requirement. The lower a tree's chill hour requirement, the more likely it will set blooms early when extended periods of warm weather conditions occur. More information on chill



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hours is provided in the following question.

Basically, your peach tree had received sufficient cold to be able to bloom. Since temperatures were unusually warm during January, your peach tree "decided" that spring was here and it's time to bloom. Don't get too upset with your peach tree as lots of other peach trees across the county came to the same conclusion and have been blooming a bit earlier than normal.

Question: What does the term "chill hour requirement" mean?

Answer: In order to set fruit, most trees require exposure to a minimum number of hours of temperatures within the range of 32 to 45 degrees Fahrenheit. This temperature range is called "chill hour requirement" and the amount can vary widely for varieties within a given fruit class. The local growing area has a range of 500 chill hours to less than 200 chill hours over a winter season.

If an advertisement claims a fruit tree is hardy to zero for a zillion hours, then don't expect a lot of fruit if you grow it locally! Look for a variety that says it needs "low chill hours" or 400 chill hours or less.

Q. I planted broccoli in my garden last fall. I was surprised to see several of the plants produce an abundance of bright yellow flowers in late December and early January. Do broccoli plants normally produce flowers?

A. The heads of broccoli are really flower buds. These must be harvested before the yellow flowers begin to open. Warm temperatures over the winter season contributed to pre-mature flowering of plants.

Broccoli is a hardy vegetable that develops best during cool seasons of the year. High temperatures at heading time usually cause premature flowering and consequently reduce the quantity of home-

grown broccoli. Broccoli will flower quickly if it is forced to mature when daytime temperatures are above 80 degrees F. and nighttime temperatures are above 60 degrees F.

Broccoli (*Brassica oleracea*) is a member of the cole crop family, which includes cabbage, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, collards, kale, and kohlrabi which furnish Texas gardeners with many gourmet delights during the winter months. Gardeners are often surprised to see these plants produce such massive displays of rather attractive flowers.

Q. I have grown a schefflera for several years in my landscape. It started to produce flowers in late November. I've never seen a schefflera in bloom. Is this a common occurrence?

Most gardeners are familiar with schefflera (*Schefflera actinophylla*) as a tough indoor plant where it can reach up to 10 feet in height if it is not pruned regularly.

In an outdoor growing environment, schefflera can grow 25 feet or more in height with foliage spreading out 10-to-15 feet from the base. I have seen schefflera produce flowers but it is a rare occurrence and you obviously have inherited two dominant genes for green fingers. Plants require good growing conditions and exposure to full sunlight to flower. The flowers eventually producing red and orange colored fruit that appear on long stalks (to 2 feet long) that radiate out like the tentacles of an octopus, hence the additional common name of octopus tree.

