

## MERRY, BRIGHT & GREEN

Betsy Mahmassani, Frederick County Master Gardener

There is something new growing on front porches and doorsteps around Frederick this month. Sprouting up alongside potted pansies and past-their-peak mums are stacks and stacks of boxes. Of course, these burgeoning displays of cardboard aren't produced by sunshine and rain but by record setting on-line sales and the deliveries they generate. UPS alone expects to drop off 750 million packages this holiday season. That's a fraction of the estimated 165 billion packages shipped in the U.S. this year.

A green solution to all that brown is found in the three R's. Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle to cut down on waste of all kinds making its way to the landfill. Happily for gardeners, there are some great ways to reuse packing material.

First of all, cardboard boxes can be flattened and placed in beds to kill weeds or on grass to create new garden areas. Topping the cardboard with yard clippings, kitchen scraps, mulch and/or shredded leaves, a method called lasagna gardening, builds productive soil in a few months without lifting a shovel.

What's more, shredded cardboard counts as "brown matter" in the 2:1 compost mix. A more relaxed approach is to use a handy sized box as a container to collect plant debris as you work in your yard. Throw the whole thing into the compost bin when finished.

Use medium sized cardboard boxes, as is, to store plants for overwintering. Bare-rooted geraniums can be placed in boxes without any filler; tender corms and tubers such as gladioluses, cannas and dahlias do better tucked into peat moss or wrapped in newspaper. Just loosely reclose the flaps since some air circulation is a plus and you'll need to check on the contents occasionally. A collection of same size boxes can be neatly stacked in any cool but freeze-free space.

What to do with all those packing peanuts? Added to bottom third of a large pot, they will decrease the total weight of a container display and save on potting soil. Placing a coconut fiber liner between the peanuts and the soil keeps the project neater and makes it more likely that you can reuse the peanuts the next time.

When falling nighttime temperatures threaten annuals planted a little too early in the spring, sheets of bubble wrap come to the rescue. Lightly place them over tender plants in the evening securing with wire pins or even some rocks. Usually the morning sun will warm the air enough to remove the sheets. With luck and persistence, these repurposed insulating blankets can also be used to keep frost intolerant plants growing deep into fall.

So, as the festive rumble of delivery truck engines signals the peak of holiday purchasing, remember there are plenty of ways to practice the Three R's. Reducing consumption may seem

counter to the spirit of the season but it is possible to buy items with minimal or biodegradable packaging. Reusing the packing material that does end up on your front stoop is a win for the garden and the greater environment. If all else fails, break down those cardboard boxes and place them on the curb on recycle day resting assured that the holidays can be both merry and evergreen.

*For more information about the Frederick County Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, visit: <http://extension.umd.edu/frederick-county/home-gardening> or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596.*

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