

Gardening and Allergies

OH 71

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If you're like one in six Americans, you get some sort of seasonal allergies each year. If you're a gardener, this doesn't mean you have to suffer. Or you don't have to give up gardening during part of the season. Or you don't have to convert your landscape into silk flowers, gravel beds and garden gnomes or plastic flamingos! Perhaps changing some gardening practices, or some of your plants, may be all that's needed to lessen the grief.

Most see the yellow pollen on their car in spring or summer and think, that's it! But this relatively big, showy pollen you see from trees and flowers really isn't the culprit. It's the microscopic pollen you don't see that causes allergies. This can be from deciduous trees in the spring such as oak, elm, birch, maple, ash, alder, some pines, box elder, and willow. The hardwoods especially are the culprits. Other trees, especially in warmer parts of the country (whether you live there, or may be traveling there to visit gardens) include cedar, cottonwood, hickory, mulberry, olive, palm, and pecan.

Trees with showy flowers, just as with flowers, tend to be pollinated by bees, butterflies or similar, so have larger pollen which doesn't blow around and cause allergies. Examples of low or no allergen trees include many of the fruit trees such as apples, crabapples, cherries, pear, plum and others in warmer climates such as dogwoods and magnolias.

Shrubs to avoid include many junipers, and in warmer climates cypress and privet. Hydrangea, azaleas and viburnum are okay, as are in warmer climates the boxwood and hibiscus.

In his recent book *Allergy-free Gardening*, author Thomas Ogren attributes many of our allergies to recent changes in our landscapes, particularly the planting of male trees and shrubs. We often do this to avoid messy fruit from female trees, but end up as a result with more pollen. He even advocates sex-changes in trees—grafting a female top onto existing trunks of male trees. He has also developed and advocates using the Ogren Plant Allergy Scale, rating plants from 1 (low) to 10 (high) for pollen and allergies.

As with the woody plants, those herbaceous plants with showy flowers are generally okay and include many such as daffodil, tulip, daisies, geranium impatiens, iris, lilies, pansies, petunias, roses, sunflowers, zinnias and many more. Some flowers with strong scents may also aggravate allergies, even if they normally have larger pollen.

Most lawn grasses don't cause problems as they are mowed often and not allowed to set seed. But they can cause problems if allowed to go to seed including perennial rye, fescue, and bermuda in warmer climates.

Of course weeds are often the most allergenic plants. One ragweed plant can produce up to one billion pollen grains, and they have been tracked over 400 miles away! Others include pigweed and Russian thistle. A couple perennials are falsely accused of allergies, as they bloom at the same time as ragweed. You see the goldenrod and helen's flower (alias "sneezeweed") and think these are the enemy, while it is really the ragweed lurking in the background.

Plants and pollen are the only allergy producers in the garden. Molds cause allergies in some people and children, and can be produced from composts and decomposing bark mulch. If you or family members are allergic to molds, consider buying finished compost, not making it at home. And you may want to replace bark mulch, shredded leaves, cocoa hulls or similar organic material with pebbles or even just clean cultivation. I prefer to quickly get plants established, so they cover the bed and leave no room or light for weed seeds to germinate (well, at least fewer seeds).

Here are 13 gardening practices you might change to reduce sneezing, itchy and runny noses and still be able to garden:

- Limiting gardening in the afternoon in spring, and early mornings in fall, when pollen counts tend to be highest
- Remain indoors during windy days, during allergic pollen times as pollen can blow in from far away (even though it is otherwise quite local in nature, such as from a tree in your yard)
- Once done working outdoors, wash well or shower, and wash clothes
- Don't hang laundry on the line during high pollen periods. (I learned this last year, hanging bed sheets on the line to dry, then wondering why I keep sneezing all night even indoors with the windows closed.)
- Use an airconditioner if you have one, particularly at night, or while driving, and set on recirculate if possible
- Beware of, and wash, pets that might pick up pollen outdoors and share with you!
- Cover bodies with clothing, even caps for hair, and breathing masks especially if mowing. Best is to have someone not allergic do the mowing!
- Keep windows closed during, and a few hours after, mowing.
- Begin allergy medication prior to your normal allergy season, follow directions through the season, and if severe consult a doctor or allergist.
- Choose low allergen producing plants to begin with, or to replace others in your landscape. Remember in general to avoid wind-pollinated plants, choosing insect-pollinated plants instead. Choose those with showy flowers, whether woody or herbaceous.
- Possibly avoid strongly scented flowers, as these may aggravate allergies.
- Beware of molds from compost and bark mulches, possibly substituting the latter with gravel.
- Avoid hedges which can trap dust, pollen and mold. Keep existing ones thinned.

For more information, you may wish to consult the book Allergy-free Gardening by Thomas Ogren. Websites with useful information are those of the American Lung Association, the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology, and the Intellicast weather site among others. These any more can be found through a search on an internet search engine such as Google. Also keep watch in your local daily broadcast and print media during the season for pollen counts, and garden when the counts are lower.