

# Gardening Q&As for October

*Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office*



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**PHOTO CREDIT: William M. Johnson**

**Air potato vine is a non-native vine that can quickly grow 60-to-70 feet in length. It is covered with large, glossy, heart-shaped leaves and produces large numbers of potato-like, aerial tubers along its stems.**

**Q: I have a vine growing in my landscape that produced a crop of weird, Irish potato-like fruit with warts! One vine has grown to the top of a tall oak tree. What is this vine called and is the fruit edible?**

**A:** Your vine is known as air potato vine but it's also known as tater vine in oth-

er parts of the South. Air potato vine is believed to have been introduced in Florida during the early 1900's as an ornamental. The vines grow vigorously (up to 60-to-70 feet in length) up tree trunks or over wood fences but the plant is difficult to control.

Air potato vine produces large numbers of potato-

like, aerial tubers along its stems. These air potatoes are grayish, somewhat irregular in shape with distinctive bands of wart-like growths. The tubers drop from vines and grow into new plants over the next growing season.

Now to the question of "Are the tubers edible?"





Some reports indicate that the tubers are edible while others report that tubers are poisonous. One gardener noted that even the possums just sniffed and passed on the tubers produced in his rural acreage! I always err on the side of caution when it comes to the consumption of novel foods but if possums passed up on a food item, I will certainly pass it up as well.

**Q. Are broccoli leaves edible?**

A. Yes. As a matter of fact, most people would have a hard time distinguishing between the young leaves of broccoli and those of collard greens. Harvest and prepare only young and tender leaves as older leaves of broccoli become tough and often develop a somewhat bitter or off-taste.

**Q. Are ornamental cabbages or kales edible?**

A. There are certain varieties of cabbage and kale that produce decorative, non-heading plants with green or purple leaves and colorful white, cream, pink, red or purple interleaves. These are sold as "flowering cabbage" and can be attractively used as edging or for low, colorful accent plants in flower beds. Ornamental cabbage, like other members of the kale crop family, does best when it matures under cool weather conditions. While the leaves are edible, they are rather tough and strong in flavor.

**Q. I am growing cauliflower for the first time. I read somewhere that it must be blanched to reach its best quality. How does one blanch cauliflower?**

Blanching of cauliflower means protecting the heads from sunlight. Unblanched heads will be yellowish green while blanched heads are pure white. When the head begins to enlarge, pull the outer leaves over the head and tie them with a rubber band or soft twine.

Start checking your plants for small cauliflower heads 4-5 weeks after planting them in the garden. The cauliflower heads develop quickly and it's that development that tells you when to blanch. Start blanching cauliflower heads when they are about the size of a chicken egg.

**Q: Should I cut back my Miscanthus and other ornamental grasses after they have dried?**

A: I recommend cutting back ornamental grasses in the spring before new growth emerges. This ensures that their attractiveness in the landscape is utilized throughout all four growing seasons. I recommend cutting the clumps back to 7-to-8 inches from the ground.

In case we have a late cold snap, leaving some dried vegetation will help insulate the live vegetation below and avoid die-back of the clump. The old growth will quickly be hidden by the new growth.

**Q: What type of caterpillar is eating the flowers produced by candlestick plants growing in my landscape?**

A: Candlestick plants (*Senna alata* or alternately *Cassia alata*) are grown as cold-tender tropicals in our growing area. Candlestick plants are grown for their showy displays of bright yellow flowers that bloom mainly in the fall, winter and spring months.

The customer had taken photos of the caterpillars using her smart phone. My how times have changed. I did not need to rely on vague descriptions. The caterpillars in question are quite distinctive. It was the caterpillar stage of sulphur butterflies which are among the showiest butterflies seen during mild winter months. Sulphur butterflies utilize this plant both for nectar and as a larval food source.

Caterpillars are usually green with black stripes for those that feed on leaves of candlestick plants. However, caterpillars that feed on the flowers of candlestick plants are yellow with black bands on each body segment. Such coloration patterns help caterpillars hide from predators such as birds and other insects.

