

# Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks and Home Horticulture

*Christmas 2019 Issue*

Written and compiled by Ricky D. Kemery, Allen County Extension Educator Retired, phone: 260-431-6893

**Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks and Home Horticulture** is an online newsletter designed to provide citizens of Allen County and northeastern Indiana with up-to-date information about Horticulture and home issues, written in a lighthearted style! To subscribe, send an email to [kemeryr7@frontier.com](mailto:kemeryr7@frontier.com).

---



## What's Going on with Increased Prices for Christmas Trees and Other Items This Year?

Has anyone else noticed a big price jump for Christmas Trees, wreaths, and other items this year? I have seen some artificial trees going for as much as 300-500 dollars or more in some big box stores, with price jumps of ornaments and other items. Live trees have also seen a big price jump.

The Christmas tree market has changed with the times. Nowadays artificial trees are more popular than live trees.

According to the Associated Press, between 75 and 80 percent of Americans who own a Christmas tree own an artificial one. The trend towards using artificial trees over real trees began in the Mid-1970's, with a big jump in the

early 1990's. A 1975 poll by Michigan State University showed consumers were beginning to prefer artificial over natural Christmas trees because they thought artificial trees were safer (less fire hazard). Other reasons were: One-time purchasing, environmental responsibility (no yearly disposal of a live tree), and no messy needle clean up. Nowadays, busy consumers prefer artificial trees that are also pre-lit and decorated. LED Christmas lights are the newest rage. 46% of all holiday shopping occurs online.

It is interesting to know that members of the Millennial generation prefer live trees over artificial trees because most artificial tree needles are made of environmentally unfriendly polyvinyl chloride. In addition, millennials prefer to purchase trees grown in the U.S. compared with artificial trees made and shipped from China. It is also interesting to note that a recent sustainability study found that an artificial tree reused for at least five years is better for the environment than a real tree. That may be true for trees just tossed in the garbage. I would disagree on the grounds that live trees can be composted, used in a landscape to provide cover for birds, and used in ponds for fish nesting.

*There's a growing trend of two-tree households, with an artificial tree put up earlier in the season and real trees purchased in the last three or four weeks of the Christmas season, according to the American Christmas tree Foundation.*

The CEO and founder of Balsam Brands, whose high-end luxury trees are frequently featured in Hallmark Christmas movies and the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, can't pinpoint why costs are increasing on artificial trees. All artificial trees sold this Christmas came into the U.S. tariff-free from China and aren't currently subject to the ongoing trade war. But other Christmas accessories have had tariffs applied, which explains the higher costs for those items.

Live Christmas trees costs are higher this year (\$25.00 or more) because of shortages related to weather related issues. The National Christmas Tree Association said it started with a shortage of seedlings eight to 10 years ago (due to drought conditions). Hot dry summers in 2017 and 2018 also destroyed thousands of younger trees in parts of the U.S. Sadly, many Christmas tree farms have closed because of retirement, declining interest in live trees, and lower profits.

# Weed Control – Leave it to the Goats

*Edited from an article by Eric Rogers: Florida Today:*

For more than 20 years, the only ones to really step foot in the overgrown reservoir on the east side of Imperial Estates Elementary in Titusville have been a family of gopher tortoises.

Rough terrain has made clearing and maintaining the dry pond bed dangerous for human service crews, and the tortoises, a protected species under Florida law, only complicate the issue.



To tame the wild acre, the Brevard School District has hit on a creative solution: a crack squad of bramble-munching goats. About two dozen of the hungry animals will bite back the problem shrubs in an effort to clear the unruly plot, which puts students at risk of close encounters with snakes and other critters.

The goats — on loan from the South-Central Florida franchise of Rent-a-Ruminant, a national company that specializes in landscaping livestock — are an elegant solution to a dicey problem, said grounds services supervisor Matt Nolle and Jim Ross, Brevard Public Schools' director of operations and maintenance.

The area around the pond is too dangerous for tractors and other heavy equipment, Nolle said. "Very steep banks, vertical drop-offs in some spots. Even putting a guy on foot in there would be hazardous," he said.

Not to mention the expense and hassle of removing the gopher tortoises, Ross said, which must be done by law prior to conventional ground clearing and requires a special permit.

Goats are gentler on the environment, eliminate the need for hazardous chemicals and are able get into places human crews just can't, Nolle said. "Somehow, four legs is an advantage," he said.

The animals will be housed in a special trailer at the school for about two weeks to complete the job, at a total cost of about \$4,500, Nolle said.

The idea came about after drastic staffing cuts following the district's 2013 decision to consolidate its groundskeeping services led to overgrown playgrounds and athletic fields.

The goats are contained behind the high fence surrounding the reservoir, she said. "There's no interaction with people,"

Authorities have also successfully used goats as an eco-friendly and cost-effective alternative to clear flammable scrub in California, where they were credited with saving the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library from a wildfire that burned nearly 1,700 acres near Los Angeles this month.

## Ricky's Thoughts

I wonder if the person who owns the goats would have ever thought he/she would own a company called "Rent a Ruminant?"

Somehow, I picture the "special" trailer for the goats having a 65-inch smart TV, Wi-Fi, and bins of carrots.

Just wait until the goats organize and make demands for rest breaks and higher pay.

I think everyone secretly wishes for "the advantage" of four legs... and horns...

## Weather Update:

Forecasters are predicting a colder winter for areas of northern Indiana with an above average chance of precipitation for the winter of 2019-2020. Some maps disagree slightly, but everyone agrees that we are currently under Enso neutral conditions meaning we are currently not under the influence of either an El-Nino or La-Nina weather pattern.



## Affordable Squirrel Housing

There is a lot of discussion nowadays about the lack of affordable housing for Millennials and also discussion on what we will do with the thousands of mega-mansions currently occupied by baby-boomers when we retire or die – whichever comes first. Actually, boomers plan to do neither. Squirrels, on the other hand, have no shortage of affordable housing as long as there are trees – though nowadays nothing is certain.

Tree squirrel nests can currently be seen high in trees and look like oversized round clumps of leaves and twigs. The exterior shell is typically composed of sticks woven together with leaves for insulation. The hollow interiors usually measure eight inches in diameter and are lined with leaves, grass, moss, and shreds of bark. Squirrel nests are effective at keeping squirrels warm and dry and are perfect for raising babies (called kittens) or for huddling or cuddling together for warmth during winter. Cuddling sounds more romantic -don't you think?

Squirrels build two types of nests, one called a drey which looks a lot like a bird's nest and the other a den built into tree cavities and other hollow spaces. A drey can be up to 30 feet from the ground and is surprisingly sturdy. Squirrels construct both summer and winter dreys. Winter dreys are obviously made with thicker walls.

If a squirrel had its druthers, it would build a den over a drey. Dens are constructed in tree cavities such as hollow tree trunks and previous woodpecker nests. The squirrel stuffs the den with moss, twigs and leaves to make it warm and comfortable.

Researchers have discovered that squirrel kittens born in dens have a significantly higher chance of surviving to adulthood than those born in dreys.

Squirrels spend most of their active daytime hours foraging for food and often build auxiliary nests. These alternative dreys or dens are usually built haphazardly compared to the main ones but offer great protection if the squirrel needs to

escape from predators quickly or if the weather turns suddenly. The squirrels may also store extra food in these alternative homes or use as pit stops to rest before going out to forage again.

Squirrels also will take any opportunity to break into your home especially during the winter or breeding season. Squirrels prefer garages, attics, under sheds, inside walls, in the chimney and in crawl spaces. These locations offer optimal protection from the elements and from predators. Pay mind to the fact that squirrels also break into the house to breed.

If squirrels could talk, they would tell us they also prefer central air, radiant heat during the winter, cable television, and a large king-sized bed.....



## The Christmas Spider

Tales about the Christmas Spider seem to have started in Eastern Germany, Poland or Ukraine but are also told in parts of Finland and Scandinavia. The stories are now also popular in other countries such as the USA; although I have never heard of the spider legend.

All the versions of the story involve a poor family who can't afford to decorate a Tree for Christmas (in some versions the tree grew from a pinecone in their house, in others the family have bought a tree into the house). When the children go to sleep on Christmas Eve a spider covers the tree in cobwebs. Then on Christmas morning the cobwebs are magically turned into silver and gold strands which decorate the tree!

Some versions of the story say that it's the light of the sun which changed the cobwebs into silver and gold but other versions say it's St Nicholas, Santa Claus, or Father Christmas which made the magic happen.

In parts of Germany, Poland, and Ukraine it's good luck to find a spider or a spider's web on your Christmas Tree. Spider's web Christmas Tree decorations are also popular in Ukraine. They're called 'pavuchky' (which means 'little spider') and the decorations are normally made of paper and silver wire. You might even put an artificial spider's web on your tree!

## A Hallmark Christmas

I must admit I am a sucker for Hallmark Christmas movies. Even though I am a reclusive, somewhat grinchy and grumpy person that my kids used to call "Mr. Scrooge"; I still end up blubbering like a baby at the end of the movie, which usually involves snow, true love, saving a business from a hostile takeover, and an unbeliever recapturing their Christmas spirit. In 2018, roughly 70 million people watched Hallmark's holiday movies. 40 new films have been added this season. (as if we somehow needed more).



The idea of "feel good" holiday films began in the 1990s, when ABC offshoot network ABC Family started a "25 Days of Christmas" programming. The Hallmark Channel, which launched in 2001, didn't fully embrace the concept until 2011, when ABC Family moved away from the concept in an effort to appeal to teen viewers. In

our area, of course, folks remember and still view the Christmas Day holiday movie marathon - hosted by Steve Shine - local attorney and community leader – for 35 years and counting.

Most Hallmark Channel holiday features are shot in Canada, where tax breaks can stretch the dollar for these low-budget films. Vancouver is a popular site, though films have also been shot in Montreal and Toronto. So “Christmas in Louisiana, and the “Rocky Mountain Lodges” episodes are most likely filmed in Canada.

Most Hallmark holiday movies take just two to three weeks to shoot, meaning actors don’t have to commit months out of the year to a project. Actors like Rachael Leigh Cook, who stars in this year's *A Blue Ridge Mountain Christmas*, have also complimented the channel on giving them opportunities to be with their families while on location: Cook said that the production schedule also allowed her time to FaceTime with family back home.

Because some of the films shoot in the summer - producers use a variety of tricks to simulate snowfall, including snow blankets that mimic the real thing when laid out; foam; commercial replica snow; crushed limestone; and ice shavings. Actors might also get covered with soapy bubbles for close-ups. The typical budget for snow per movie is around \$50,000.

In 2018, Fans of Hallmark Channel’s Christmas programming attended ChristmasCon, in Edison, New Jersey. Throngs of people gathered to attend panels with movie actors and writers, scoop up merchandise, and vie for prizes during an ugly sweater competition. The first wave of \$50 admission tickets sold out instantly. Hallmark Channel USA was the sponsor.

For the fourth quarter of 2018, the Hallmark Channel was the most-watched cable network among women 18 to 49 and 25 to 54, even outpacing broadcast network programming on Saturday nights.

This year, viewers had the opportunity to watch 24 Hallmark Channel holiday films in 12 days as a part of the , Hallmark Movie Dream Job contest, which will pay \$1000 to the winning entrant who seems most capable of watching the films and making wry comments about them on social media. Really most folks will gladly post their important “opinions” on a wide variety of trivial issues for free.

## Coyotes

One of my favorite cartoons when I was growing up was “the Roadrunner”, which featured efforts by Wiley Coyote” to capture and perhaps eat the tricky little creature called a roadrunner. As it turns out, the roadrunner proves much to smart to be captured – even with the extraordinary efforts and planning by the coyote. The fact there was no actual dialogue in the cartoons was amazing – even today the cartoons are hilarious.



Recently, sighting of coyotes in our area have increased, and attacks on pets are becoming more common – which of course causes concern. Here is some info regarding coyotes.

- Coyotes can breed with both [wolves](#) and [dogs](#). For example, a type of coyote hybrid named the eastern coyotes contain genes of both wolves and dogs and are known as "coywolves" and "coydogs."
- Coyotes are great swimmers, which has helped them colonize islands and spread their populations.

- Although coyotes have been known to attack humans (and pets) and as such are a potential danger to people, especially children, these attacks are rare.
- Coyotes are monogamous and mate for a lifetime
- Coyotes can run up to 43 miles per hour (69 km per hour). The top speed of a human is 28 mph (45 km per hour).  
Coyotes eat anything they can find, including rabbits, rodents, birds, fish, frogs, deer, fruit, grass, and carrion.
- Even though they have been hunted and trapped for over 200 years, there are more coyotes today than when the U.S. Constitution was signed.
- Coyotes sometimes walk on their toes to make as little noise as possible.
- The coyote is one of the most adaptable animals in the world. They can change breeding habits, diets, and social dynamics to survive in a wide variety of habitats.
- Only 20% of coyote pups survive their first year.
- Coyotes can jump a distance of over 13 feet (4 meters).
- Coyote attacks on humans are rare and usually do not cause serious injuries. Attacks, however, have increased, especially in California.
- Coyotes kill more livestock in western North America than any other predator.



The number one most effective way to prevent coyote attacks in your neighborhood is to eliminate wildlife feeding. Coyotes that are fed in residential neighborhoods can lose their fear of people and may eventually test humans (and pets) as possible prey. Many people unintentionally feed coyotes by leaving pet food or garbage out at night or having large bird feeders. Coyotes are usually not interested in bird food, but bird feeders often attract rodents, especially squirrels, which then attract coyotes.

Coyotes probably live nearby, even if you don't know it, so do not let pets run loose. When hiking in parks, keep dogs on leashes. Pets left outside, even with fencing, remain at risk for predation. Try not to leave your pets unattended outside.

Free-ranging domestic cats and feral cat colonies may also serve to attract coyotes; it is important that domestic cats be kept indoors.

If you see a coyote during the daytime, you should exhibit caution, as that coyote may have become habituated to humans (and may be more likely to attack). If you are approached by a coyote, you should yell, wave your arms, and/or throw something at the coyote (do not run away).

Fencing may keep coyotes out of a yard, particularly if it is more than six feet in height with a roll bar across the top. Spray repellents (pepper spray, etc.) that you can carry with you have been reported with only moderate to no success.

# Hoggles'

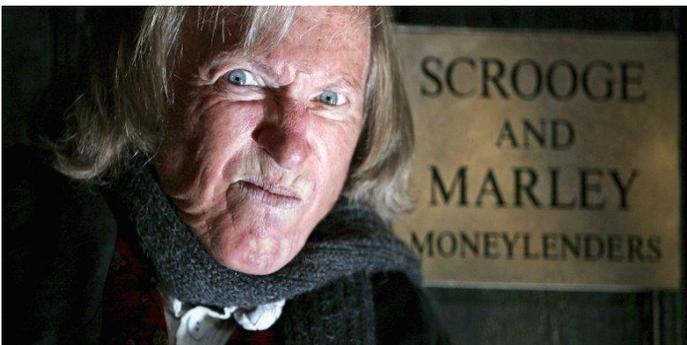
## Demented Cat Logic

### Logic



**To my Caregiver:** Enclosed you will find a script with a form letter for you to fill out and mail to recommend me – your humble feline – for a new Hallmark movie entitled “The Cat who Destroyed Christmas”. In the movie – totally written by me - a billionaire cat named Ebesneezer Cat Scrooge is visited by the spirits of Christmas past, present, and future in an attempt to fill him with the Christmas spirit and save the lovely town of Kitty haven.

In my brilliant script, I ignore the spirits, enslave the townspeople, who must pay tribute to me daily in the form of cans of cat food, salmon patty treats, heated cat bed, and toys. Essentially the residents of Kitty haven must fulfill my every need and desire-forever. Really a cat must look after Numero Uno – me of course. Yawn... I am so filled with Christmas Joy....



## A Grouchy Reclusive Scrooge Retiree's Lonely Christmas Meal Made in Under an Hour

Over the years, the Christmas spirit has eluded me. My children and siblings mostly live far away. My parents are both deceased. I hate to travel, and my house is too small for comfortable gatherings. Don't feel sorry for me – I actually don't mind being by myself.

I am not totally devoid of the Christmas spirit. I have an artificial tree that I decorate yearly-sometimes with “natural” ornaments like pinecones and berries and herbs. Lately since my knees are bad, I decorate the tree with silk flowers that I change every year or two. I see lots of people doing this nowadays, with theme trees based on color or theme such as reindeer, for instance. Sometimes I ask my Alexa to play Christmas music – If she understands me of course. Sometimes if I ask her to play a Brenda Lee Christmas song, she will cheerfully list all the Bruce Lee Kung Fu movies – or recipes for Kim Chee.

My theme this year for the tree is sunflowers and cows – both “spark joy” in my inner psyche.

I used to cook large Christmas dinners long ago and I remember the stress involved in cooking turkey or large hams, stuffing from scratch, baking pies, etc. After cooking and cleaning up – I was exhausted.

Following is my strategy, recipes, menu items, and activities for a reclusive, time saving Christmas dinner for one. I am sure others follow this basic strategy. I allow for a few leftovers – really one needs fortification for watching Hallmark movies or watching reruns of “Mash”, The Mod Squad, and Miami Vice”.

## Christmas Ham or Turkey

Really, who wants to go through preparing and cooking a large turkey or ham for one person? No one in their right mind. I prefer the Honey Baked Ham route. One can order the ham or turkey online and pick it up a day or two before. Or one can sort through the bins at the grocery store for the smallest ham possible. I prefer the honey baked route. Ask for the smallest piece of ham or turkey they have. One can just heat up the ham or turkey breast in the oven - adding a bit of water to a casserole dish (oven safe of course) and heating the meat with the oven on low heat. This usually takes about an hour-plenty of time to admire my cow ornaments. This year I have a two-legged cow ornament. The salesclerk dropped the cow when I was purchasing it - breaking off two of its legs. I felt sorry for the poor cow, and the fact I bought the cow for a dollar didn't hurt either. I rationalized that I was saving the cow from a terrible fate and doing my part to save my little two-legged cow (I call her Sparky per Marie Kondo) from a visit to "Mr. Mean Wastepaper Basket". *Years from now I will point out Sparky on my tree and tell her tale for anyone who will listen...*

## Green Beans and Cheese

I don't know about you, but I am tired of the traditional holiday green bean casserole made with mushroom soup, almonds, cheese, and little crunchy things on top. You may not prefer Ricky's Classic Green Beans and Cheese over the traditional casserole - but it is easier to make - and my kids still ask me to make it if and when they visit anytime near the holidays.

### Ingredients

**5 cans of French cut (not Fresh cut) green beans** - drain the beans by pressing the top of the can into the beans to drain as much of the water from the can as possible. I used to put the beans in a colander - squeezing the beans to rid them of excess water. Nope, not anymore. Make sure to recycle the empty cans. *Speak either real or imitation French or watch Pepe LaPew cartoons while making this dish.*

**Velveeta Cheese** - I use about one-half of a regular sized brick of this highly processed cheese that doesn't even require any refrigeration to store - that is scary. I cut the cheese into small pieces about an inch thick.

**Whole Milk and or Heavy Whipped cream** I use organic milk and I don't know why, but it is what I have around.

**Optional** - organic flour to make a "rue" - Organic real maple syrup - salt to taste

### Procedure:

Put the beans in a saucepan - a non-stick pan might do better - but I don't have a non-stick saucepan. Why? I don't know.

On low heat, throw the cheese in amongst the beans. *Listen to Nat King Cole sing "the Christmas Song". Cry softly at the end of the song over chances lost and the fact you are not a billionaire.*

Heat the beans slowly, stirring softly / occasionally. The beans will scorch if you leave the beans unattended. So quit sobbing and pay attention! By the way if you stir vigorously, you will end up with a green cheesy mush.

*This is a good time to enjoy a favorite Christmas libation listening to Dean Martin Christmas songs. Dean Martin always sounded like he had been imbibing a little too much holiday cheer.*

Take a bit of the melted cheese before it becomes too hot and place in a small container - about a half a cup will do. Sometimes I put the melted cheese in the freezer for a bit to cool. Add about a tablespoon of flour to the liquid and mix it in. You do this so the flour rue does not form lumps. Add the mixture slowly to the beans stirring in. Sometimes if I am very lazy, I just sprinkle the flour over the beans just as the cheese is melted - again so the flour does not form clumps. This is riskier of course. Sometimes I take more risks depending on how much Christmas "cheer" I have consumed.

One may of course make the rue in the saucepan first if you want. Just add butter - melt - and add the flour.

Add a bit of milk or a combo of milk and cream to the beans. Just enough to loosen up the bean/cheese mix. Probably a bit less than 1/2 a cup.

Continue to stir occasionally on very low heat. Add salt to taste. Don't let the beans scorch.

This whole process takes about 1/2 hour to 40 minutes.

Before serving, I add a bit of maple syrup to my serving. I like how the syrup offsets the richness of the dish.

**Stuffing:** Just make the stuffing from a box mix. One can cheat and add some bits of turkey (the Honey Baked Ham turkey) and a bit of sage to delude yourself into thinking “this is homemade stuffing!” I am so awesome! *Take a picture of the stuffing and post on Facebook.*

**Sweet Potatoes:** I purchase a large can of Bruce’s Yams - drain off most of the liquid and put in a saucepan. I add about 2 tablespoons of brown sugar, 2 tablespoons of Kerry butter (I have Irish ancestors according to 23 and me), and about a half cup of the maple syrup. No marshmallows – It is a travesty to add those small gooey marshmallows to yams in my opinion. Heat on low heat.

*Listen to Frank Sinatra’s version of “Send in the Clowns” and sob silently or laugh hysterically – it’s up to you.*

## **Mash Potatoes**

My mother made wonderful mashed potatoes from scratch – creamy, buttery, and ohh so tasty. I have made mashed potatoes from scratch, but frankly it is a lot of work. I love the made from scratch judgy judgy folks who rave about their versions of home-made mashed potatoes – how healthy they are made from organic GMO-free potatoes. Here is a clue - in no way are mashed potatoes actually good for anyone – especially combined with all the other holiday food offerings. I also love the Keto people – who boast online that their mashed “potatoes” made with cauliflower are just as tasty as “real” mashed potatoes. You are living in a dream world...sorry

*I am the self-designated King of the “Instant Mashed Potato” Making Instant mashed potatoes taste delicious is my life’s quest. I have become addicted to the series “The Treasure of Oak Island” because I read an account of that treasure and efforts to find it when I was about 10 years old – I have visions of one of my favorite treasure team members - metal detection expert Gary Drayton - getting a beep on his detector and finding a 40-year-old box of Hungry Jack Instant Potatoes. What a find that will be.*

Anyway, I do prefer Instant Potatoes that are actually made from actual dehydrated potatoes – like Hungry Jack. Some are made using other methods and have the taste and consistency of melted Elmer’s glue. Just my opinion, of course.

Mix the ingredients for the amount of potatoes you prefer, but do not premix in the flakes. I use friendly Mr. Microwave to heat up the butter, milk, water, salt mixture. I am old enough to remember when microwaves first appeared for use in kitchens. They came with rather ominous warnings to stay clear of the unit while it was operating. Everyone ignored the warnings of course. How many of you blew up a potato trying to cook it in a microwave the first time? Oh, one can’t get those memories back, can we?

One the mixture is heated (I usually set the timer for about 4 minutes) I use a favorite cow or cat potholder to transfer the microwave-safe bowl to a cutting board. Then I begin adding flakes. Usually the amount listed on the box is not quite enough. The trick here is to realize that the flakes continue to thicken a bit – even after one achieves the right consistency. So, I add flakes until the mix begins to thicken – wait a minute- and then add more flakes until the mix is the right thickness for me. If one adds too many flakes, the mix will be thick, and not smooth and creamy. One can always add some milk to thin out the consistency until the potatoes are smooth and creamy. Sometimes I add about a tablespoon of sour cream, and/or about a cup of cheddar or cheddar jack to the potatoes. Occasionally, I add cubed pineapple to the potatoes. Cream cheese (sour cream and chive or jalapeno) is also tasty. Let your instant mash potato muse take over!

**Dessert:** Since I live near a Kroger, I purchase any of their pre-made pies for dessert. They can make pies really well, and I don’t have to mix and bake ingredients.

Really, the whole menu takes about an hour to cook. I have pre-purchased disposable containers ready to store the leftovers. I use sturdy paper plates so they will be no dishes to wash besides the pots. I wash those around New Year’s

I load my plate and head to the TV to watch episodes of The Crown, Treasure of Oak Island, American Pickers, and Old episodes of What Not to Wear, and of course Hallmark Christmas movies...I have tissue paper nearby for the tears....

*I in no way present this meal as being in any way nutritious or healthy. I do use organic ingredients as much as possible. If I still worked for Extension, I would be careful to present a disclaimer on using brand names, but I don’t work for Extension anymore, so use any brand name you want.... .... Have a very merry Holiday Season!*

Donations to support the cause are accepted –Send to Ricky Kemery 5929 Lorman Court Fort Wayne, Indiana 46835 *To subscribe to this electronic newsletter, send an email to kemeryr7@frontier.com - or text 260-431-6893. I will not share information with others.* If you need a speaker for neighborhood association meetings, business groups, or other organizations, I will be glad to come and talk about gardening, landscaping or turf, the environment, sustainability. I will also diagnose plant disease or insect issues (for a small fee) Just contact me at 260-431-6893.

*Ricky Kemery will not knowingly discriminate in any way based on race, gender etc...*