

# Southern Living



## The Grumpy Gardener

Get Your Garden Growing with the Humor  
and Wisdom of Steve Bender



### You Ask, I Answer -- Grumpy's Timely Garden Tips

Posted by [Steve Bender](#), February 8, 2011 in [Stump the Grump](#) , [Timely Tasks](#) , [You Ask, I Answer](#)

#### Wherein The Grump Responds to All Sorts of Gardening Questions with His Customary Wit & Wisdom

#### Replies Guaranteed 100% Correct or Your Money Back

It is a happy day in Grumpiana, for once again the Grand Poobah of the EIG (Excellence in Gardening) Network deigns to fill the skulls of the huddled masses with much-needed learning and knowledge. Surely you will recall its intelligence all the rest of your days.



The first question today concerns stinking, mushed-up pansies.

*June writes, "I thought **pansies** were impervious to cold weather. However, every fall I plant, mulch, water, etc. a nice crop of pansies and as soon as it gets cold here in southern Virginia, most of them die. What the heck am I doing wrong?"*

**Grumpy's totally excellent answer:** If your soil is heavy and drains poorly, the plants could be dying from root rot. You can fix this by working in lots of organic matter into the soil before planting. However, Grumpy suspects you're just planting the wrong pansies. Some types are more cold-hardy than others. Next fall, plant either 'Majestic Giants II' or 'Plentifall' pansies. Both come in a full range of colors. The latter takes sub-zero cold with no problem. Another option is planting 'Sorbet' violas or Panolas (crosses between pansies and violas). Both are hardier than most pansies.



Our next inquiry comes from a worried crepe myrtle owner who wants to ease its pain.

*John writes, "After the last snow melted, a large branch of our **crepe myrtle** broke and fell. Is the tree vulnerable to fungal infection if the core wood is exposed? Should I cut off the broken limb and, if so, treat the cut with anything?"*

**Grumpy's totally excellent answer:** Painting the wood where you cut off a branch is a widespread, time-honored practice. It is also totally pointless, as it has zero effect on the tree's health and healing. The best way to help a tree heal is to make a nice clean cut just above the branch "collar" -- a distinctive bulge where the branch attaches to the trunk. Avoid tearing bark or leaving a long stub.

OK, let's turn our attention to the subject of what the heck to do with amaryllis in February.

*Molly writes, "I grew an **amaryllis** bulb in water and it bloomed, but now it's dying back. Can I plant it in sand? I don't know where you live, but we are getting another foot of snow and I'm tired of it!"*



**Grumpy's totally excellent answer:** I live on Talos IV, a snowless world whose surface was ravaged by war, forcing us to live underground and use our giant brains for devious purposes. Don't plant the bulb in sand, because sand lacks nutrients. Plant it in good quality potting soil, leaving the top half-inch of the bulb exposed. The pot should be about 1-2 inches wider than the bulb. The bulb will soon shoot out long leaves. Keep the pot in a sunny window until after your last frost and then take it outside. Feed with liquid fertilizer about twice a month until the fall. Then stop feeding and gradually reduce watering until the leaves turn yellow and wither. Take the pot inside to a cool, dark, dry place and let the bulb rest. After a month or two, it will send up another bloom stalk.



Here's question about pruning loropetalum from Joan in north Florida.

*"My loropetalum plants are five years old and very leggy. The leaves are gone from the bottom. I want them to be full and bushy again. Should I trim them down and how far? Should I do it now?"*

**Grumpy's totally excellent answer:** To rejuvenate a leggy loropetalum, you can cut it back quite severely. It will grow back quickly. However, wait to prune until after it blooms. Also, don't prune it any lower than a foot tall or you may cut off the graft and have a different kind of loropetalum grow back.

One final exercise in futility we'll deal with today is one we call "Stump the Grump." This involves a faithful reader sending Grumpy a photo of a mysterious plant to identify -- which, coincidentally, Grumpy does with total accuracy in the blink of an eye. For example, here's an entreaty from Diana in northeast Atlanta.



*She writes, "I need help identifying the weed pictured here and finding out how to rid my flower bed of it. During the summer, I plant begonias, and since they are full with large leaves, they must squeeze it out. However, it takes over my pansy bed. It has fairly small leaves, can grow along the ground for 6 or 7 inches, and has very fragile stems. Any suggestions other than pulling?"*

**Grumpy's totally excellent answer:** The weed in the photo is **chickweed**. The reason you don't see it among your begonias is that it is a cool-weather weed. It dies in warm weather and then sprouts from seed the following winter. You'll have to pull it now to keep it from covering up your pansies. To forestall its return next winter, apply a granular weed preventer called **Preen** to the soil surface around your pansies after you plant them next fall. Follow label directions carefully.