Finding accurate information on the Internet

The Internet is a valuable source of information, however Smart Gardeners must take caution to assure the information is correct.

-Faith Cullens, Agriculture Educator, Michigan State University Extension

We've all heard the joke, "If it's on the Internet, it must be true!" In reality, anyone can create a website and put information on the Internet whether it's true or not. Often, entities that are selling a product will only list information that supports their products. It is important as consumers that we seek out balanced, factual information. Many Smart Gardeners use the Internet as a valuable resource to increase their knowledge on a wide array of subjects, but how do we sort through all of the correct and incorrect information available to us? Fortunately, there are some clues that can indicate whether the information is credible.

Author's credibility

The author should be clearly identified and their credentials should be relevant to the topic. An author writing an informational piece will have their related credentials listed. Don't be fooled by titles. A person with a PhD can be listed as Dr., but it does not mean he or she is an expert in all subjects. The PhD should be in a field related to the topic and the author's current position should be clearly identified.

Fact checking

In general, websites with more citations and links provide better information. On a website you are unsure of, it is a good idea to spot check facts with more reputable websites or research papers. Even in articles written by reputable sources, the author may show bias, so it's still a good idea to look at multiple sources.

Website sponsor

A website sponsor with a vested interest in making a profit is not likely to provide balanced information. Often website sponsors appear on the sidebars of a website or across the top. The "About Us" section of a website will often indicate who the website is sponsored by.

Web address

The ending of a web address can give you clues as to the reliability of the information. Websites ending in .gov means the website is owned and operated by the government. No one but the government can use .gov, so you can feel safe about the content of the website.

Websites ending in .edu are always affiliated with universities, colleges and educational sites. Usually you can feel safe about the trustworthiness of the content; however, many universities let students host websites using .edu, so not every website is authored by an educator.

Websites ending in .org were originally set up for nonprofit organizations, but the designation no longer exists today. This domain extension is often used for non-profits such as schools and communities, but is also used by for-profit entities.

Websites ending in .com or .net are open to the public to use. Keep in mind that some websites ending in .com or .net that offer scholarly advice are trying to sell you their product.

Be alert if...
• The website sponsor is for-profit.
• The authors' credentials aren't related to the topic.
• The address ending has .com, .net or .org.

Be assured if...
• The author is qualified to discuss the subject.
• The information was reviewed by a qualified person.
• The web address ending has .gov or .edu.

Internet resources		
Arborist, certified	www.asca-consultants.org	to find by area
Articles	www.isa-arbor.com	to find by area
	www.msue.anr.msu.edu	latest informational articles
Invasives	www.MIPN.org	MI Invasive Plant Network
	www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/united states/mi.shtm	plants
Gardening	www.misin.msu.edu	MSU invasive fact sheets
	www.migarden.msu.edu	General home gardening info
	www.ohioline.osu.edu	General home gardening info
Native Plants	www.mnppa.org	MI Native Plants Producer Assn.
	www.wildflowersmich.org	
	www.wildones.org	
Soil	www.bookstore.msue.msu.edu	to purchase soil test kits, $25
	www.msusoiltest.com	soil test how to and results
Turf	www.msuturfweeds.net	weed ID
	www.msuturfdiseases.net	disease ID
	www.turf.msu.edu	general information
MSUE - State	http://mg.msue.msu.edu/	MG Prog. information, trainings, events
MSUE Ag. & Natural Resources web site	http://msue.anr.msu.edu/	Click on Lawn and Garden to sign up for MSUE news bulletins