

Eastern Shore Virginia Master Gardeners

December Gardening Tips

By Sharon Wills, Master Gardener

Things I Like About the Shore in December: The buffleheads on the creeks, sunrise on the changing colors of the treetops, the Madrigals, watching the garden hunker down for winter, the ever-changing silhouettes of deciduous trees and shrubs, the brilliant red of cardinals at the feeders

Trees, Shrubs

Rhododendrons Indoors - Branches of evergreen rhododendrons last for months in vases if never allowed to run out of clean water.

Water your Christmas tree - Christmas trees absorb between 2 pints and 1 gallon of water per day, so a tree stand that holds at least 1 gallon of water is recommended. Make sure to check the water level daily and supply fresh water as needed. You might also think about a live Christmas tree this year – it can be planted outside with a marker, Christmas with this year.

Mulch your plants - they will love you for it. An inch or two is sufficient.

Pest patrol - If you see tan felt-like growths about 1 and half inches long on tree bark, lawn furniture and other outdoor structures, remove them and throw them out - they're gypsy moth egg masses. Also keep an eye out for growths that look like black styrofoam at the ends of cherry tree branches - they're egg masses of eastern tent caterpillars. Clip off the affected branch and throw it in the trash.

Energy efficiency of your landscape - Do you have evergreen trees or shrubs blocking a window where the sun's warmth would be welcome? Consider replacing them with deciduous plants that would let sun in during winter, but cast cooling shade in summer.

Perennials, Annuals, Bulbs

Spring Bulbs - If you're behind on your garden projects (and what gardener isn't?), there's still time to plant spring flowering bulbs. Most still can be planted as long as the ground hasn't frozen, or even during a January thaw if it comes to that. Bulbs planted late may bloom a little later and/or a little more sparsely their first year, but most are none the worse for it.

Forcing bulbs - Bulb forcing can be started as late as mid-winter. Plant tulip bulbs with the tops just above the soil line and the flat side of the bulb toward side of the pot. Plant daffodils with the bulb tops even with the soil line. Hyacinth bulbs should be planted with the tops just above the soil. Crocus bulbs should be planted about 1 inch below the soil surface.

Mark perennials and bulbs – Don't forget to mark perennials now, while you still remember what's there. Mark where existing bulb plantings are so you don't accidentally dig them up in the spring when you plant something else.

Interior Gardening

Prolong the life of a flowering poinsettia - keep it evenly moist and protect it from being chilled or subjected to drafts. Keep it in full sunlight between 65 and 72F.

Pitiful Christmas cactus - If the buds drop and the stems shrivel on your Christmas cactus, you may have root injury caused by dry soil. If you have no blossoms, you didn't follow the instructions I gave you earlier!

Clean houseplant leaves - House plants with large leaves and smooth foliage (philodendron, dracaena, rubber plant, etc.) benefit if their leaves are washed with clear water at intervals to remove dust and grime, thus keeping the leaf pores open.

Tools and Equipment

Try coating your snow shovel with a "no-stick" cooking spray; the snow slides right off. Recoat as needed. Spray a fine coating of oil on all your gardening tools for the winter.

Miscellaneous

Teeny herbal wreath - A miniature herbal wreath can be made by coating a wooden or plastic curtain ring with a generous amount of glue and dipping it in potpourri to coat it. A tiny bow completes a wreath for a dollhouse or as a Christmas tree ornament.

Live fruit decorations - The use of fruit in wreaths, such as frequently seen in Colonial Williamsburg, was inspired by Luce della Robbia, a 15th century sculptor who carved garlands of fruit and nuts in his work. Cut a piece of plywood into a 1 x 3' rectangle. Decide on the placement of whatever fruit you like, then drill heavy, long screws through the base. Staple magnolia leaves to cover the base, then stick whatever fruit you like onto the screws – lovely. Window boxes can also be filled with whole fruit and vegetables and will last for a week or more.

Door ornaments - can be quickly and easily made from evergreen branches. Wrap a stout wire around the cut ends of branches of several types of evergreens for contrasting color and texture. Then add a large bow to cover the attachment point.

Pinecone and nut pests - To discourage insects from hatching when nuts, cones, and seedpods are brought indoors for holiday arrangements, place them in the oven on the low setting for an hour.

Enjoy the birds - After Christmas, your tree can be moved outside and redecorated for the birds. Anchor the tree in a bucket full of damp sand. Leave on strings of popcorn and cranberries, and add strings of peanuts (in the shell). Roll pinecones in peanut butter and then in seeds. Apples, oranges, leftover breads and cakes, even peanut butter cookies can be hung on the boughs, but don't use any foods containing chocolate as it is poisonous to some small animals. For best results, push the edible ornaments well into the tree. Things that swing might scare birds.

Sand, not salt for deicing - Be careful when using deicing salts around driveways and walks this winter; salt is toxic to many flowers, trees, shrubs, and lawn grasses. Sand, sawdust, or a combination of these work well for deicing walks and will not injure plants.

Design your Garden - Order seed and plant catalogs to begin design ideas for your garden. One of my greatest pleasures is poring over catalogs and dreaming of what might be. Then purchase the plants from local nurseries!

Kiss under it but don't eat it - Keep mistletoe out of the reach of children and pets, as the berries are poisonous.

Protect furniture - When decorating for the holidays, be sure you do not place fresh, needled evergreens directly on finished furniture or a mantelpiece; sap from branches may take the finish off wooden surfaces. Cut a piece of felt (needs no hemming) and lay it down first.

A different fire - To make your long winter evenings by the fire more enjoyable, burn aromatic woods, such as cherry, apple, and pine.

Christmas Gift Ideas

Gift Certificates - Many local garden centers and nurseries offer gift certificates to be redeemed when spring arrives. To make your gift truly memorable, tuck the gift certificate into a crystal bud vase or pack a catalog and gift card into a harvest basket along with gardener's gloves, pruning shears, and a trowel.

Herb vinegars - You still have time to make herb vinegars from chives, shallots, garlic, or any herbs on your windowsill for the holidays. Use approximately four ounces of fresh herbs to one quart of wine vinegar. Allow the herbs to infuse for at least two weeks. Great hostess gift.

Ask Santa - for a special plant or garden tool for yourself. Begin a collection of your favorite perennials, and request a new plant every year. If you garden indoors, start a collection of succulents or orchids that can be added to yearly.

For an Indoor gardener - a set of plastic-lined wicker baskets or ceramic cache pots, a stocking filled with houseplant goodies, a gift certificate to a favorite plant shop or a calendar with a plant or flower theme.

Housewarming gifts – give a garden or landscape book to a friend with a new home.

Gifts from your garden – such as dried flowers, grapevine wreaths, pickles, and preserves, can be very economical but highly prized. You're limited only by your imagination.

Be unconventional – offer perennial divisions, seedlings, and shrub volunteers as gifts to your gardening friends. If you have seed from a treasured vegetable variety that you know comes back the same year after year, share some with an equally treasured friend. Write I.O.U.s for perennials that you will be dividing in spring so the recipient can plan ahead for the best location

ROSES

By Chuck Belensky, Master Gardener and Rosarian

Roses are very hardy; some will continue blooming into December on the Eastern Shore. Enjoy them on the bush or as cut flowers. By the end of the month, however, it's a good idea to cut back long stems on any bushes but climbers to three or four feet in length in order to keep them from whipping in the wind which can loosen the roots. Don't be concerned about proper pruning procedures at this point, just cut; actual "pruning" will be done in early spring.

If you have been disappointed in a particular rose bush due to disease tendencies, or whatever, you may want to consider "shovel pruning" it at this time. The new catalogs are starting to arrive, and local nurseries will surely have many enticing new varieties in the spring.

**From December to March, there are for many of us three gardens -
the garden outdoors,
the garden of pots and bowls in the house,
and the garden of the mind's eye.
- Katherine S. White**