

Eastern Shore Virginia Master Gardeners

January Gardening Tips

By Sharon Wills, Master Gardener

Things I Like About the Shore in January: Following the constellation Orion the Hunter, making its way up the eastern sky, followed by its companion Sirius the Dog Star. Watching all the chickadees, titmice, cardinals, nuthatches, goldfinches and wrens bouncing around the feeders and along the ground. Nestling in with garden catalogs, good books, music, tea. Talking walks through the garden, all bundled up, imagining what will be planted in the spring. Looking at the fabulous sunset light on the marshes in Wachapreague. Enjoying the ability to walk to the Roseland theatre for movies.

Perennials, Annuals and Bulbs

Hens and Chicks · a pot of Hens and Chicks (*Sempervivum spp.*) can liven up winter patios. These hardy succulents can remain outdoors year round and are especially prolific when placed in clay strawberry pots. Winter color can range from green to a pink or purple cast.

Start seeds · Start ageratum, baby's breath, begonia, statice, pansy, sweet pea and snapdragon seed indoors this month or next. Provide plenty of light.

Heaving plants – with all the temperature changes we've had, take a look at your plants – if they are heaving out of the soil, heel them back in and recover them.

Fruits, Nuts

Plant a sour cherry tree - Sour cherry is a good fruit for the home garden. The trees are relatively small, and insects and diseases usually are not a serious problem.

'Montmorency' is a highly recommended sour cherry variety. It pollinates itself, so it can be planted alone. It requires very little pruning and will produce good crops with little care other than bird netting. A sour cherry pie is one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

Grapes - Prune grapes in January or February. If this job is left too late in the season, bleeding from cut ends will occur.

Fertilize pecan trees – Use 4 pounds of 10-10-10 per inch of trunk diameter. Spread it around past the drip line in a circle about 1 1/2 times the height of the tree. Additional minor elements such as, zinc, manganese or boron are also needed for good production.

Herbs

Plant a ginger root · For an interesting ornamental plant and a culinary addition, buy a plump, unshriveled, ginger root at the grocery store and plant it in a light, sandy soil just under the surface in a 6- to 8-inch pot. Place it in a warm, sunny window and keep damp

until shoots appear. Water more frequently and fertilize monthly with high-phosphorus fertilizer. Harvest your crop in about eight months saving a piece to replant.

Interior Gardening

Pot in a Pot - Research shows that a pot-in-a-pot set-up for irrigating houseplants is better than capillary action through water wicks. By using a small, unglazed clay pot placed inside a larger, glazed clay pot (with no hole!) with a water reservoir in between, plants are better irrigated, and have higher visual quality, greater plant leaf area, and improved root growth.

Mealy bugs - Mealy bugs on your houseplants can be killed by touching them with a cotton swab dipped in alcohol.

Dusty leaves - Wipe dust from broad-leaf plants at regular intervals using a cloth dampened with clear water (not a Swiffer!).

Lawns

Lawn Corners · For easier lawn maintenance, eliminate the hard to mow spaces. Now that some of your shrubbery has lost leaves, go look at your lawn. Use a hoe to round off acute angles in beds and borders. Combine single trees or shrubs into a large planting connected with ground covers. Put birdbaths in flowerbeds or surround them with ground covers. Also you might want to carve out a few inches of lawn away from flowerbeds to avoid future yelling.

Lawn damage – don't walk on frozen grass.

Tools and Equipment

Germmy Tools · Sterilize your tools, pots, and anything you use around your plants. Use one part household bleach to nine parts water. Soak for about 15 minutes, rise, and let dry. This will eliminate the germ rascals that might live through the winter.

Red Handles – If you have some time this winter, paint the handles of garden tools red or orange. This will make the tools easier to locate next summer when you lay them down in the garden or put them in the weed basket.

Make seedling pots - Make your own biodegradable seedling pots from newspapers. For a 3-inch pot, cut a three-layer-thick section of newspaper into a 9-inch square. Divide the paper into nine equal squares, either with a pen or by folding layers into thirds, unfolding them and folding into thirds the other way. Make a cut from along one of the fold lines in each of the four corners to the fold that marks the center square. Bend the flaps up, overlap and staple them and the seedling pot is ready. The pots can be planted in the garden when the seedlings are ready to set out.

Wheelbarrow leg wheels · your wheelbarrow can support its own load if you add two small wheels to the rear legs. Anchor a bar to each leg with a "U" screw and bolts. Attach the wheels to the ends of the bar with a bolt and washer on both the outside and inside of the wheel. Modifying a wheelbarrow like this cuts down on the strain of lifting heavy loads by letting you push the wheelbarrow.

Garden Log · Add garden record keeping to the list of New Year's resolutions. Make a note of which varieties of flowers and vegetables do best and which do poorly in your garden, where you need more plants, etc.

Vegetables

Limp chives - To invigorate potted chives, cut them back to 1 inch above soil. Place in the refrigerator for two weeks, then place the pot in a sunny window.

Seed pellets · some mail order seed companies offer pelleted seed of lettuce, carrot, and a few other small-seeded crops. Pelleted seed has a special coating to make them larger. This is especially valuable for children and gardeners with arthritic hands, weak eyesight, or poor coordination. Wide spacing of seed helps eliminate thinning. When using pelleted seed, plant in moist soil and keep it moist because the coating has to dissolve before the seed can germinate.

Mini-seed packet mixes· Gardeners with small plots, who want to try a few of many types of plants, can turn to seed companies offering mini-packets or mixed-seed packets. A number of seed companies provide useful publications free, free with a minimum order, or for a very reasonable price. These educational offerings give concise answers to frequently asked cultural questions or more complete variety descriptions. Also watch for drought tolerant and heat tolerant varieties.

Soup garden · you've heard of salad gardens. How about a gazpacho garden? As part of your garden planning, set aside an area for planting cucumbers, onions, sweet peppers, hot peppers, basil, and, of course, tomatoes, to provide the makings for a delightful, homegrown soup. Spicy salsa ingredients make a great garden, too!

Garden size · Review your vegetable garden plans. Perhaps a smaller garden with fewer weeds and insects will give you more produce.

Trees, Shrubs, Ground Covers

Tree Damage – Bill Shockley, Northampton Cooperative Extension Agent, spoke to us recently about all the questions he is receiving about damaged trees. Bill stated that there is a significant problem with the death of many large and old trees here on the Shore. This is due to several factors: hurricanes weaken the root structure, salt gets into the roots and dries them, then excessive rainfall further weakens the roots and root rot develops. Also, the weakened condition allows borers to attack the trees. If there are borers, the only solution is to cut the tree down and get rid of the tree or burn it – do not keep it on the property because the borers will spread. Clean up all fallen branches.

Kudzu: Kudzu is making inroads on the Shore and people should destroy it whenever they see it.

Remove dead branches · Examine the limb structure of your shade trees. Remove dead, diseased, and storm-damaged branches. If left on the tree, these weakened limbs can cause damage by falling on buildings or passers-by. For large shade trees needing removal of storm-damaged limbs, call an arborist or tree surgeon now to get on their schedule for pruning while the trees and underlying landscape plants are dormant. Remember, trees and shrubs have an economic value. If killed or damaged by ice or accident, they may be covered by homeowner's insurance.

Dormant oil spray · winter is the time to apply dormant oil sprays to kill overwintering mites, aphids, and scale on deciduous trees, fruit trees, roses and shrubs. Spray miscible oils when temperatures are above 40 F, but not within 24 hours of a freeze. Because the oil kills insects by suffocation, avoid spraying on windy days to ensure that all surfaces of the plant are covered. Do not spray fir or spruce trees.

Water evergreens – water your evergreens in early January

Mice damage · Stamp down snow near young trees to discourage mice from nesting under the snow around them and damaging the roots or bark.

Home security - For added security around the home, plant thorny shrubs on property lines. Some very thorny ones to consider include pyracantha, tri-foliate orange, Rosa rugs, and thorny elaeagnus (Russian olive). These may be planted in late winter.

Pruning · some plants that should be pruned in later winter or early spring are hydrangea, butterfly bush, Rose-of-Sharon, hibiscus and other summer-flowering shrubs that flower on new growth. Prune spring-bloomers, such as azaleas, right after they flower.

Remove old or bad vines · Vines that are strangling trees, such as bittersweet, wisteria, wild grape, poison ivy, Virginia creeper, and Japanese honeysuckle, should be cut off and removed now.

Miscellaneous

Rabid raccoons, foxes and opossums: Bill Shockley of the Northampton Cooperative Extension has alerted us that we should be very, very careful of any of these animals, because it is not always obvious that an animal is rabid. They can look sleek and healthy and still be rabid. If you see any of them out in the daytime, be careful. Be sure to keep shots up for all pets that go outside. Call Animal Control if you see any suspect animals.

Catch up on your garden reading · Take time now to relax and read all of those horticultural magazines and garden books that you put aside during the busy holiday season.

Map your garden · Draw a map of your garden on quad ruled paper and make copies of it. To plan this year's garden, take a clean copy of the map and fill it in. Use the back of the plan to record notes. Keep each year's plan in a three-ring binder for easy cross-checking of varieties, rotations, etc.

Filing Seeds · one way to file seed packets as they come in the mail is to use index card tabs to divide a cardboard 4x6 file box into whatever categories you like, or simply A-Z. As new seeds arrive, place them alphabetically in the proper slot -- tomatoes, carrots, etc. Drop notes into the file to remind you what is on order to avoid duplication. Store in cool, dry location.

Sphagnum moss pole for vines · Make a sphagnum moss pole for vining plants. Use half-inch mesh hardware cloth, and cut a piece 8 to 10 inches wide (depending on the diameter you want for the pole) and as long as desired. Roll the mesh into a cylinder; fasten together with wire; and stuff with moist, long-fiber sphagnum moss. Place it in the soil and train the vine up the pole. To water the vine, moisten the sphagnum. This also helps anchor the plant to the pole.

Cheap sticky stakes · to make economical "sticky stakes" for trapping whiteflies and aphids, cut bright yellow cardboard or plastic, such as recycled detergent bottles or margarine tubs, into strips. Coat with petroleum jelly. Insert into pots or hang near problem areas.

Don't forget the birds - Feed the birds regularly and see that they have water. Birds like suet, fruit, nuts, and breadcrumbs as well as birdseed. They won't even complain if the food is stale.

Seed test · Before ordering your spring seed, do a "rag doll" germination test on those seeds left over from last year's order. Roll 10 or 20 seeds in a damp paper towel. Keep them moist and in a warm location. For most crops, germination of viable seed will occur within a week. If half the seeds germinate and you have enough left to plant twice as many as you usually do, you should get an adequate stand. Otherwise, order more seed. It's a small investment to insure success.

Order catalogs/seeds · Spend a cozy evening in front of the fire going through seed catalogs to decide what you are going to plant in this year's garden. Don't wait until late in the winter to order seed. Many varieties sell out early.

pH - What is pH anyway? The pH scale is a measure of soil acidity and ranges from 1 to 14, 7 is a neutral soil. The majority of ornamental plants, including shrubs, grasses and vegetables, grow best in soils that are slightly acid, with a pH of 6.0 to 6.5. However, azaleas, rhododendrons and blueberries require a more acid soil with a pH of 4.5 to 5.5. To help these acid-lovers, use a fertilizer specific to these plants; you'll notice the difference.

I hope the New Year brings you many new experiences and pleasurable hours of gardening. One of my favorite poets, Rainer Maria Rilke, sums up my feelings of anticipation: "And now let us welcome the New Year, full of things that have never been."