

Winter Garden Chores

As we enjoy the milder months in our county, many of us have put thoughts of the garden and landscape aside, but we're missing a great opportunity to get ahead and enjoy some productive time outside with minimal bug bites. Winter is a great time to get a head start on the gardening season as well as give your tools and equipment some much needed TLC.

Now is the time to prune – most things. Prune non-flowering and summer flowering trees and shrubs, as well as fruit trees, during winter dormancy. Prune to maintain a desired shape or size, or to remove dead or damaged wood. Pruning promotes vigorous growth, flowering and fruiting by increasing light penetration. Many spring flowering plants such as azaleas set their blooms in the fall, so winter pruning will deny you a bloom. Spring flowering plants are best pruned after bloom. It's best to prune by making thinning cuts, taking limbs back to a crotch. Cut just outside of the bark ridge and bark collar that can be seen as a swelling where two limbs join. Pruning too close to the trunk or leaving a stub invites insects, disease and rot. With larger limbs that require a saw it is best to make a series of three cuts starting with a notch on the underside of the branch in order to reduce the chance of the weight of the branch causing a tear or split.

Late fall to early spring is the best time to transplant shrubs less than three feet tall and deciduous trees less than an inch in diameter. Transplant when the ground is not too moist and keep as many roots intact as possible. Take as much of the original root ball as possible to reduce transplant shock. Another tip to reducing transplant shock is to dig the new holes before digging up the plant to be moved – reducing time out of the ground with roots being exposed to the elements. Planting holes should be twice as wide as the root ball and have several inches of loose soil at the bottom. Be careful not to plant too deep. Trees should have the root flare exposed and should never look like a telephone pole sticking out of the ground. Water and mulch plants once transplanting is completed, keeping mulch off of the trunk and limbs.

Winter is the perfect time to clean and inspect tools and equipment. Remove dirt, grease, plant material and other debris. Apply lubricating oil to any working parts on pruning shears or saws and sharpen the blades. Lubricate pivot points and springs. Check for loose screws and nuts and tighten as needed. If tool handles are beginning to turn gray or crack, sand them and apply outdoor varnish to prolong their life. Wheelbarrows and wagons should be cleaned, wheels greased and paint touched up with spray paint to prevent rusting. Change the oil in four-cycle engines and remove gasoline. Remove the oil-gas mixture in two-cycle engines by running the engine with the choke open. Avoid storing gas over the winter as old gasoline doesn't ignite as easily and puts strain on the machine. Replace worn spark plugs and any other worn or damaged parts. Sharpen cutting edges and wipe down with an oily rag. Disconnect and drain any unneeded hoses, storing them inside to prolong their life. Store liquid pesticides in a location where they won't freeze. Some garden pesticides have a water base which can freeze and damage the container leading to leaks when temperatures warm.

In addition to the tasks above now is a great time to get on top of those weeds and prepare for the spring by getting a soil test. Soil tests prevent money wasted and pollution to our waterways from unnecessary soil amendments. Soil tests are \$7 a sample through our office. If you have questions or like more information on any of these topics please reach out to me at jkwarren@uga.edu. Happy winter gardening!