

Ask a Master Gardener

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Garden Activities During the Winter

Q. I start to get cabin fever once the cold months of the year arrive. What can I do to survive until spring arrives and I can again get out in the garden? James N.

A. Weather can always throw up all sorts of challenges to a gardener, but you don't need to sit inside all of January and February. We are so fortunate here in Georgia to have some fairly pleasant winter days. Don't remain inactive just because the landscape seems to have taken a long sleep.

Winter is one of the best times to really take a look at your landscape and garden areas. Put on a coat, hat, and gloves, and really take a look during this calmer time of year. Does the vegetable garden need to be cleaned of dead plants, empty containers, and staking? Examine the rest of your landscape. The leaves are down and one can truly see the organization and bones of your site. Does it reflect harmony with differing heights and forms or is it a hodgepodge of shrubs and trees that seems to be just a jumble of elements? Note which shrubs and trees have striking winter bark. Now is the time to evaluate and make a to-do list. Decide where a shrub or tree would fill in a space. Perhaps a defined bed or border will lend a bit of harmony and prominence to some of your especially loved shrubs or trees.

Many of our mornings are frosty, but are followed by bright sunshine which provides an opportunity to do strenuous garden work. Whatever you can do now, whether laying out a new bed or tidying old beds and the garden site, it will be much easier than waiting for the heat of late spring and summer that comes all too quickly here in Georgia. As you work on the sunny days, remember to leave some of the faded seed heads of perennials to add some interest and texture to the winter landscape. Ornamental grasses and perennials such as Echinacea (coneflower) and Rudbeckia (black-eyed-susan) have beautiful seed heads that will be transformed into a crystal display when covered with frost. Remove them by the end of February when spring bulbs will begin their spring emergence.

If you haven't taken had a soil sample as yet, it is not too late. Although the best time to take a soil sample for testing is in the fall when the soil is fairly dry, you can still do this very important task during the winter. The soil will most likely be wet, so you will need to spread the sample on newspaper until it is dry. For a small fee, The University of Georgia Testing and Plant Analysis Laboratory will run the test and provide information about the fertility of your soil. After you receive the results of the test, you will still have time to add any amendments in time for spring and summer planting. Soil sample bags are available at the county extension office and instructions for preparing a good sample are available at: <http://extension.uga.edu/publications/detail.cfm?number=C896>.

There will be days when the weather will not cooperate and you will need to stay inside. This is the time to look through seed catalogs and plan your vegetable garden. I urge you to start a gardening journal. It does not have to be fancy. You can use a computer program, an inexpensive binder or composition book, or a ready-made garden journal. Keep track of planting dates, location, and variety planted. Record what varieties did well, and which were not worth the effort. Rainfall amounts and temperatures along with first and last frost dates will be helpful to note for future reference. Although there are average first and frost dates published by the Department of Agriculture, these can vary within a zone depending on a microclimate that you might have right in your yard. Keeping track of what happens in your landscape will help you plan for your particular space.

For more information or answers to any other gardening questions, contact a Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546, via e-mail at ccmg@uga.edu, or visit our office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.