

Tips for the Landscape and Garden

Tips adapted from Bob Westerfield, State Consumer Horticulturist for the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service, and Walter Reeves, Retired Extension agent for DeKalb County and Saturday Morning Gardening Show Host on WSB Radio.



When choosing a cut Christmas tree, gently pull a branch through your fingers. Few, if any, green needles should come off in your hand. Be sure to make a fresh cut off the end of the trunk and get the tree into water within 20 minutes so the pores in the trunk will continue to take up water and keep the tree fresh longer. Keep the tree watered so it does not dry out and become a fire hazard.

Rake the last of the fall leaves from your lawn. If you leave a pile of wet, matted leaves now, you will have big dead spots next spring.

A Ficus plant that loses leaves is reacting to insufficient light or a drafty site. Try to move it to a better place in your house. Bright, indirect light is best. Keep away from heat vents and opening doors.

Store garden tools neatly for the winter –do not pile them in a heap. Sharpen shovels and hoes as needed. Spray/rub metal surfaces with a lubricant like WD-40 to thwart rust.

Poke holes in the foil wrapping on pots of holiday plants and set them in individual saucers. Otherwise, accumulated water in the wrapping will cause root rot.

Fruit trees can be pruned at any time during the winter provided the temperature is above 45F.

Store water hoses where you will not be tempted to move them when they are frozen. A hard-frozen hose is brittle; leaks result if it is flexed when cold.

Bird feeders bring lots of colorful activity to a yard in cold weather. Most bird experts recommend black oil sunflower seed for general feeding. Thistle seed and suet cakes will attract new species of birds to your yard.

Do not leave your lawn mower out in the weather. Water can get in the gas tank and prevent starting next spring. It is best to drain the tank completely or run the mower until it is out of gas. Store under cover. Sharpen the mower blade now so you are ready for spring mowing.

Remove faded blooms from amaryllis stalks but allow the leaves to remain. Water only when the soil feels dry. In spring you can move the plant out into the garden where it gets indirect light.

Keep holiday plants in the coolest indoor spot possible. Otherwise, the flowers and leaves will drop prematurely.

Yews, juniper, holly, boxwood, broad-leaf evergreens, and many deciduous trees and shrubs can be propagated this month. Insert evergreen cuttings in vermiculite or sand in a cool greenhouse. Tie bundles of deciduous cuttings together and bury in sand in a cold frame. Remove in early spring and plant in a nursery bed.

Remove the brown canes of raspberry and blackberry plants. Tie green canes to your trellis wire for next year's crop.

Sprinkle pine straw over bulb foliage that has emerged too soon. The green leaves will not be hurt by the cold, but the straw will help hide them.

Continue to fertilize pansies, snapdragons, ornamental kale, cabbage and other annuals with fertilizer that contains "nitrate nitrogen," which helps your plants grow and bloom in cold soil.

Plant woody vines like Carolina jessamine, wisteria, and cross vine now. Make sure to place them next to a sturdy arbor and loosely tie the young vine to it with twine.

Houseplants do not need many nutrients in the winter. Use houseplant fertilizer at half strength. Do not water unless the soil feels dry one inch deep.

Purchase pots of paper white narcissus, African violet, or gloxinia for your office and home to bring color and a touch of perfume to the air.

Wreaths made from cut greenery will last much longer if kept cold, so plan to use them outdoors. Bring them inside for short periods on special occasions.

It is a good time to assess the 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 evergreens with deciduous plants that would let sun in during winter but cast cooling shade in summer.

As soon as seed flats and flowerpots containing annuals are finished, wash and sterilize them before storing. A 4 to 1 ratio of water and Bleach will prepare them for their winter nap. Dip trays and pots, let dry, and store away from extreme temperatures.

Take a final walk through your garden to make sure all tasks have been completed. Is the mulching, pruning, new plantings, moving existing plants, final clean up all taken care of?

As you clean and store your tools, review what you have and make a list of tools you would like to acquire then share your wish list with a loved one.

Organize your order for plants and seeds in December and January, while the supply is plentiful.

Bermuda sod can be installed in winter if it is available. Be sure to keep sod watered for the rest of the winter so it does not dry out before it roots.

If using fireplace ashes on the lawn, do not spread more than ten pounds / 1000 sq. ft. every six months. The ashes act like lime. Do NOT use around blue hydrangeas unless you want to turn them pink.

Maybe you had seeds left over from last growing season. Check for seed viability by placing some in damp paper towels and observing the germination percentage. If the percentage is low, you will need to order more of that variety.

Winter is a great time to plan next year's garden. Measure beds and take note of existing plants and where you need something new. Check on-line for garden map sites. How much vegetable space will you realistically be able to plant and care for next year? What area needs more drought tolerant plants? What area stays too wet? Does a previously shady spot get too much sun now that a tree has been taken down? Check seed and plant catalogs for these items as you organize orders for the next growing season.

Enjoy dreaming and making plans for your garden. This is a great time to document last year's garden. Organize pictures with notes of successes and failures. Amend planting plans if you have them or create a general map of the garden. Next season's tasks will be upon you sooner than you think.

Now it is time to sit back and relax and look over those seed and plant catalogs you have been getting in the mail.

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