

The December Garden: Preparing for Winter, Looking Ahead to Spring

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In December, it's time to prepare the lawn and garden for winter, and for spring as well.

A good **garden clean-up** – clearing away dead plant material and old mulch -- will also remove insects, their eggs, and fungal spores that would otherwise contentedly overwinter in the garden and merrily reproduce come spring. So arm yourself with rake, pruning shears, and yard waste bags (use the biodegradable paper bags if you can find them), and sally forth.

Here are some good tips for the job, courtesy of Virginia Cooperative Extension:

- If it's wet or snowy, rubber gloves are waterproof and will keep your hands warmer than cloth ones. If it's especially cold, wear your cloth gloves under the rubber ones.
- After frost has killed the tops of your perennials, cut most of them back to about 3 inches above the ground. Cut stems of peonies and hollyhocks to soil level to discourage peony botrytis blight and hollyhock rust from returning. (I like to leave ornamental grasses standing until spring if they are still attractive.)
- Clean up rose beds by raking up and discarding fallen leaves. Secure any long canes to protect them from damage in winter winds, but wait until spring to prune.
- Rake up and discard all dead stems and leaves and old mulch. (You can chance putting them in the compost pile, but my view is, Better safe than sorry.)
- Pull out support stakes, cages, etc., and thoroughly clean off dirt and plant material before storing them.
- Cut off suckers at the base of lilacs, forsythia, and crape myrtle.
- Check over your trees and shrubs for bagworm capsules and tent caterpillar egg masses, and remove them.
- Also check trees and shrubs for scale insects (euonymus is especially susceptible). Spray them with horticultural oil (dormant oil) to smother them.
- Also check your yard and garden for gypsy moth egg masses. VCE advises, "Look for tan, fuzzy patches that look like a piece of camel-hair coat, 1 inch long and ½ inch wide, attached to trees, rocks, fences, lawn furniture, wood piles, and buildings. If you find any, scrape them off and kill them in a jar of alcohol or bleach."

- Include house gutters in your inspection tour, and remove any leaves and twigs that are clogging them. This will spare you the ordeal of ice dams oozing up under the roof shingles and then melting and leaking inside the house. (Ask my husband about our first winter here, when he perched on a ladder in the freezing cold and poured kettle after kettle of boiling water into the gutter to melt the ice and remove the clog!)

Now that deciduous shrubs have dropped their leaves and you can clearly see their “bones,” this is also a good time for **renewal pruning** of any that are overgrown or scraggly:

- First, remove all diseased and broken stems. (See the pruning guides on the VCE web site for the right way to make pruning cuts: <http://ext.vt.edu/Resources> > Home Gardening > Trees, Shrubs and Groundcovers > Shrubs.)
- Next, remove up to one-third of the remaining stems, starting with the oldest and tallest.
- If the shrub is still too tall, shorten the remaining stems by cutting them back to a side bud or branch.
- Repeat this process next year and the following, and young, healthy stems will have replaced all the old, scraggly ones.

Some **protection and continuing care** will also be needed over the winter:

- If a soil pH test shows that your lawn needs lime, apply it now so late rains and winter snows will wash it into the soil. Then it will be all set for spring seeding.
- Keep all your perennials and evergreens well watered until the ground freezes. They lose moisture all winter, and when the ground is frozen they can't take up enough water to make up the loss. Also water on warm winter days if the soil is dry.
- Protect young deciduous trees from sunscald by wrapping the trunks with burlap, or just by leaning a board against the south side of the trunk. (Strong sunshine when the winter sun is low in the sky heats up the bark during the day; then rapid freezing after nightfall can crack it open.)
- After the ground freezes, protect the roots of azaleas, rhododendrons, camellias, and laurels with a 3” layer of fine organic mulch such as pine needles or shredded leaves or bark. (VCE notes that winter mulches should not be dense and heavy; they serve a different purpose than spring and summer mulches.)
- Mulch perennials as well, to protect them from drying out or freezing and heaving, with a layer of loose, light-weight mulch. Small leaves or evergreen boughs (including recycled branches from your holiday tree or wreaths) work nicely.

Speaking of **holiday trees**:

If you plan to buy a live evergreen and plant it outside after the holidays:

- Pick a tree that does well in our area (our winters are too cold for some tender species, and our summers too hot and humid for some hardy ones). Good choices for Virginia are white pine (*Pinus strobus*), Norway spruce (*Picea abies*), and blue spruce (*Picea pungens*).
- Dig the planting hole now before the ground freezes, and fill it with straw or dried leaves or grass clippings. Save the soil from the hole in your garage or basement; mix it with the soil that came with the tree when you plant.
- While the tree is indoors, keep it cool and well watered.

If you buy a cut tree:

- Balsam or Douglas fir, pine, or spruce are recommended by VCE. Hemlocks are not a good choice because they shed their needles quickly when brought indoors.
- Use a tree stand that holds at least 1 gallon of water, and keep it filled. If it goes dry, the trunk can form an air lock that will prevent it from absorbing any more water.
- Let the tree adjust gradually to indoor temperatures by letting it spend its first night in your garage or basement.
- Conifers drop their old needles throughout the winter, so if some brown needles drop when you first bring the tree in, this is probably natural and nothing to worry about.
- Keep the tree away from heat sources such as fireplaces, heating vents, radiators, etc., which will quickly dry out the foliage.
- In spite of your best efforts, a cut tree will dry out quickly indoors. Dispose of it when the foliage fades or water consumption slows, before it becomes a fire hazard.