

## February Is Garden Shape-Up Time

Gaye Mara, Fairfax County Master Gardener

At this time of year some of us stand in front of a mirror and resolve to get in shape for swimsuit season. I gave up on that a long time ago. Now I just focus on getting my garden in shape for the growing season.

Here's my to-do list for February, with the outdoor items to be ticked off when the weather permits, the indoor ones when it doesn't, and the field trips for fun and new ideas:

### **Outdoors:**

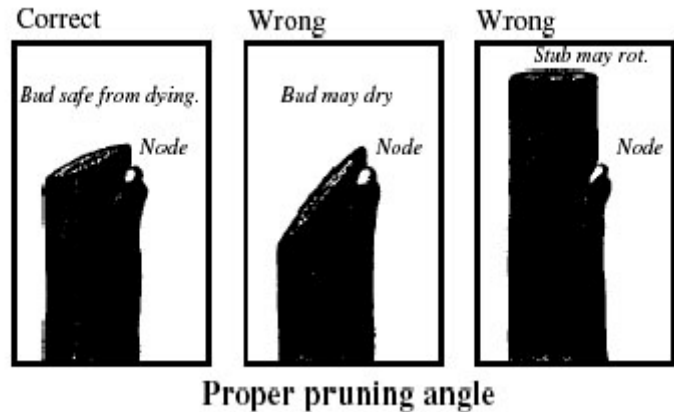
- Clear dead plant material out of the garden**, including dead top growth and soggy piles of fallen tree leaves; they can harbor pests and diseases. Leave mulch in place until next month to protect plant roots against late freezes.
- Cut back the dead stalks of ornamental grasses** now before the new ones shoot up and complicate the task. One of my master gardener colleagues advises, for tall grasses that tend to flop over, leaving the dead stalks up to 3 feet long to provide extra support. If the cut stalks have attractive flower plumes, enjoy them indoors in a tall vase.
- Check perennials and smaller shrubs for "heaving"**(roots forced up out of the soil when the ground freezes). Replant any that have heaved and cover the surrounding soil with a 2" layer of organic mulch to help stabilize the soil temperature. (I like composted leaf mulch for perennials and Virginia pine and fines, a fine pine bark mulch, for shrubs; both are available at local garden centers.)
- During a warmer spell, water well any plants in dried-out soil** (such as under the eaves of your house where rain and snow haven't reached).
- Overseed bare spots in the lawn**, ideally just before a snowfall, which will insulate the seed and keep it moist for sprouting. You can also scatter grass seed on top of the snow.
- If lawnmower blades are dull, beat the rush** and get them sharpened now (dull blades mangle the grass and make it vulnerable to diseases).
- Check and adjust the pH of lawn and garden soil** in preparation for the growing season (various plants have specific acidity requirements and if soil acidity is too high or too low, they will be sickly). You can buy a soil acidity meter at a good nursery or hardware store. Or, for a modest fee, you can send a soil sample to the Soil Lab at Virginia Tech and get a more complete analysis and recommendations (download instructions for how to collect and submit a soil sample at the Virginia Cooperative Extension web site, <http://www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/compost/452->

[129/452-129.pdf](#)).

- Plant bare-root (dormant) trees and shrubs.** (Wait until March to plant bare-root perennials.)

- Prune the following trees and shrubs now**, to open up overly dense growth that blocks light and air and harbors pests and diseases, or to remove dead or diseased branches, weak spindly growth, or crossed rubbing branches:

- arborvitae
- boxwood
- butterfly bush
- crape myrtle
- euonymus
- hibiscus/rose of sharon
- summer-blooming hydrangea
- juniper
- nandina
- privet (*Ligustrum*)
- rose
- summer-blooming spirea
- yew



- Also remove with proper pruning cuts any branches of other woody plants that were broken in winter storms. (Wait to prune spring-flowering trees and shrubs until after they bloom, or you will remove this spring's buds.)

- See the above illustration from *A Guide to Successful Pruning, Pruning Shrubs* (Virginia Cooperative Extension Publication No. 430-459, December 2002), and download the full publication, to learn how to make pruning cuts. This and other useful publications on pruning are available at the Virginia Cooperative Extension web site, [www.ext.vt.edu](http://www.ext.vt.edu), under "Resources > Home Gardening > Trees, Shrubs and Groundcovers." The collection includes detailed pruning instructions and calendars that chart the best times to prune all types of evergreen and deciduous trees and shrubs.

- Spray horticultural oil** on any shrubs with suspected insect infestation to coat and smother the eggs and hatchlings. If, for example, you have euonymus, there's a good chance you also have euonymus scale (dark crusty patches on the bark); spider mites are common on spruces.

- Plant seeds of cool weather vegetable crops** (for example, lettuce and arugula, snow and sugar snap peas, broccoli, parsley, radishes, onion sets for scallions) in a sunny spot with good soil, anytime from the end of February into March. Leaf lettuces are especially nice – they make a pretty border plant, and you can harvest just the outer leaves as you need them and leave the rest of the plant in place to

produce new leaves until hot weather makes it “bolt” (send up a flowering stalk, at which point the leaves become tough and bitter). Plant the seeds extra thickly, and use the thinned-out tender seedlings as mesclun for salad.

- Enjoy the early, dainty blooms** of species crocus, snowdrops, and winter aconite, and look forward to spring!

#### ***Indoors:***

- Give houseplants a long, thorough flushing with tepid water** under the spray attachment in the kitchen sink (smaller plants) or the shower (larger plants) to wash accumulated salts out of the soil, dislodge insect pests, and refresh the foliage. Allow them several hours to drain and dry before putting them back in place.
- After flushing, **start fertilizing houseplants** again, as well as any tender plants you brought in for the winter. February’s lengthening days will start new growth.
- Unless your indoor air is well humidified, **mist indoor plants** other than cactuses regularly with tepid water.
- Plant indoors now the seeds of slow-growing garden plants** such as alyssum, coleus, dusty miller, geranium, impatiens, marigold, petunia, phlox, portulaca, salvia, vinca, and verbena. Give them 12-16 hours a day of light under a good fluorescent light set. A good, full-service nursery or mail-order garden supplier will have small light kits; more substantial fixtures are available from supply houses for commercial growers. Get good instructions for starting seeds indoors at the Virginia Cooperative Extension web site, <http://www.ext.vt.edu/departments/envirohort/factsheets2/indoor/feb87pr5.html>.
- Order bulbs, perennials, and shrubs for spring planting.** Good bulbs and tubers for our area are caladiums for shade; for sunnier spots, consider cannas, dahlias, and lilies. Asiatic, Trumpet, and Oriental lilies bloom in that order; in combination, they will give you gorgeous blooms from June through August.
- Explore the Virginia Cooperative Extension web site** at [www.ext.vt.edu](http://www.ext.vt.edu). VCE provides wonderful resources for home gardeners as well as farmers and other professional growers. This article has mentioned just a few of them. Among other activities, VCE coordinates the Master Gardener programs throughout our State, and makes available the results of horticultural research at our two land-grant universities, Virginia Tech in Blacksburg and Virginia State in Petersburg. That research teaches us the best plants to grow in our region and the best ways to grow them.

#### ***February field trips:***

- Maymont’s annual Flower & Garden Show in Richmond ([www.maymont.org](http://www.maymont.org)). While

you're at it, visit Maymont's 33-room mansion, 40-acre wildlife park, children's farm, and arboretum.

- The annual EcoSavvy Gardening Symposium at Green Spring Gardens Park in Alexandria ([www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/gsgp/](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/gsgp/)).
- The conservatory at the U.S. Botanic Garden ([www.usbg.gov](http://www.usbg.gov)), 100 Maryland Avenue, S.W. on Capitol Hill. All that green and flowering vegetation and moist air are restorative, and you will get spectacular ideas for indoor plants.
- To see outdoor plants that are attractive in winter** and grow well in our area, also visit:
  - The U.S. Botanic Garden's Bartholdi Park and National Garden on Capitol Hill ([www.usbg.gov](http://www.usbg.gov)) (this is where I first saw the winter beauty of red-twigged dogwood, *Cornus stolonifera*),
  - Green Spring Gardens Park in Alexandria ([www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/gsgp/](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/gsgp/)), and
  - Meadowlark Gardens in Vienna ([www.meadowlarkgardens.org/](http://www.meadowlarkgardens.org/)).