

## Gardening Notes for December

The hustle and bustle of the Holiday Season is finally upon us but fortunately, there is always a little time to squeeze in a few gardening chores! Without doubt, this has been a very dry fall and recently installed plants will still need extra attention. Early December is the time to finish the last of the autumn chores before the sub-freezing temperatures of winter arrive in earnest. As time permits between baking and shopping, continue your ledgers, recording the weather and how your plants are performing.

### Things to do:

#### Turf

- Finish removing leaves from lawn areas, although with the drought of this autumn, most leaves dropped early. If possible, shred the leaves with a lawn mower and add them to perennial or shrub beds as mulch. It is a far more carbon neutral approach than having them hauled away and the shredded leaf pieces that remain in the turf are actually beneficial for the grass.
- Winterize lawn mowers and other gas-powered equipment that will not be used this winter. This entails cleaning or replacing all filters, cleaning the sparkplug, draining and adding new oil along with sharpening any blades. The oil can be recycled at local garages or auto parts stores. In addition, you should either run the engine dry of gas or amend the fuel with an additive that will prevent it from becoming more viscous and potentially blocking fuel lines in the future.

#### Garden

- Many homeowners think the fallen leaves look unattractive and every leaf should be removed from beds. Whether shredded or whole, those leaves are very important to our biosphere and should be used as mulch wherever possible and not removed from your garden.
- For small scale leaf shredding, a friend mentioned she fills a metal garbage can with leaves and use a string trimmer to shred them into mulch.
- Terra cotta pots are best cleaned of fertilizer salts and stored indoors during the winter to prevent cracking or damage.
- Plastic and fiberglass containers or window boxes can be used for winter decoration, as they can best tolerate winter's chill. If you keep fiberglass containers just for winter décor, the pots can be filled with mulch or woodchips vs. potting soils to keep expenses lower. Evergreen boughs of Yew, Pine, Hemlock, Juniper, Southern Magnolia, Holly, False Cypress or Cherry Laurel to name a few can be pruned from the garden to decorate the containers. Some red stemmed dogwoods provide great vertical accents, as seen at right! Cut stems of red-stemmed



willow are also great to add and often produce roots over winter, making new plants for your garden in the process!

- For larger pots, consider adding living plants of red stemmed Dogwoods (*Cornus sericea* or *Cornus sanguinea*) or Willow (*Salix alba* 'Britzensis' or *Salix* x 'Swizzlestick') for their glowing red stems. The dancing stems of *Salix* x 'Swizzlestick' are pictured at right. All are hardy to zone 4-5 and can easily endure winter's chill in a container. Come spring, the plants can be removed and added to strategic locations within your garden where the winter interest will be appreciated.
- If you have recently planted an evergreen, make certain that the soil remains moist in case we have several weeks without a significant rainfall. A 2-4" layer of mulch over the roots will certainly help to retain the moisture and will moderate the depth to which the soil will freeze, improving the plant's ability to absorb water.
- If you have water features with ponds, keep the leaf nets over the pond at least through month's end or until prolonged subfreezing temperatures are predicted. This will keep any leaves that are still blowing about from getting into the pond. Beach Balls keep the net out of the water while bricks work well to secure the edges, as seen above right.
- Rhododendrons, Holly, Camellias and other broadleaf evergreen shrubs that were planted this fall will benefit from an application of an anti-desiccant spray to help prevent leaf moisture loss. Apply according to directions during periods when the temperatures are above freezing for several hours and continue during winter as temperatures permit.
- Finish cutting back those perennials which have collapsed to the ground. This is especially true for plantings around the base of newly planted trees. The debris can act as a veil for hungry mice who enjoy dining on the tree bark throughout the winter. Several years back, I witnessed a mature Ginkgo tree killed by mice who girdled the trunk under the cover of Pachysandra!
- If you are troubled by hungry mice girdling stems (we have issues with Lilacs at Willowood Arboretum), try sprinkling coffee grounds around the base of the plant as a repellent. Using poison can harm Owls and other predators who often dine on the mice.





- Instead of dragging the herbaceous material you just cut back to the compost pile, you may wish to simply cut the foliage and stems of perennials into small pieces, leaving the cut debris in the bed as mulch (as seen at right). For plants like Aster and Goldenrod that readily self-sow, the seed heads should be removed to prevent unwanted seedlings. If



- shredded wood or bark mulch is spread around the edges of the bed, the area will appear like a normally mulched bed come summer! It is a far more carbon neutral approach than mulching the entire bed with shredded wood and it looks great!
- Having just mentioned cutting back perennials in December, wherever possible leave the stems and seed heads of Black-Eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia*), Cup Flower (*Silphium*), Purple Cone Flower (*Echinacea*) and other stiff stemmed perennials standing for the winter. The seeds provide food for various birds while the hollow stems offer winter habitat for beneficial insects!
  - Equally as important as retaining hollow stemmed standing perennials is allowing hollow stemmed shrubs to remain standing. Plants such as our native Hydrangea (*Hydrangea arborescens*) and Elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*) should remain standing through the winter. Also refrain from cutting off dead wood where possible from hollow stemmed plants. As Doug Tallamy points out, the hollow stems serve as a winter home for our beneficial insects and provide a protective location for eggs that were laid last summer and fall.
  - Finish digging up the last of the Canna and Banana tubers. Let the soil dry so it can be knocked off once brought into the garage and then wrap and store in newspaper or in dry potting soil in a cool, dark basement or lightly heated garage.

- Finish removing Gladiolus corms. The image at right is of *Gladiolus murielae* (formerly *Acidanthera bicolor*), commonly called the Absinthian Gladiolus. Cut the tops off from the corms and store the dried and cleaned corms in either onion bags hung from a rope or store in peat moss. I prefer hanging the onion bags to help deter mice.



The corms do best in a cool, lightly heated garage or a cool unheated basement, as both have higher humidity that the corms prefer. If the ‘Glads’ were grown in a clay pot, they can be left in the pots and stored for the winter in the garage or basement. Do not water until the following spring when it's time to once again ‘re-awaken’ them!

- Finish gathering seed from annuals that are not hybrids as they will come true from seed. Dry, place in labeled packets and store in the fridge for spring sowing.
- Remove the old foliage from Bearded Iris (*Iris germanica*) that is now shriveled, brown and laying on the ground. These leaves harbor potential egg masses from the Iris Borer that were laid by the adult moth and are poised to hatch and enter through the flower stem and into the rhizome come May.

- As I have discovered, Bearded Iris is not the only Iris to be the subject of borer damage. Our native Crested Iris (*Iris cristata*) has far smaller rhizomes, but I have found embedded borers. In this case ('Powder Blue Giant' is pictured at right), the foliage with any eggs detaches readily



- from the rhizome and can easily be removed by running your fingers through the creeping rhizomes. You can gingerly use a leaf rake as well.

- I have also found it beneficial to remove the foliage from most all Iris before winter. They may not be as subject to the Iris Borer, since they do not possess large rhizomes, but the previous season's foliage provides an ideal cover for winter roaming mice. The root systems of all Iris make a tasty winter's snack! *Iris tectorum* (Japanese Roof Iris) is pictured at right in November.



- Consider edging bed-lines if the ground is not frozen and time avails, as it will be one less chore come spring and the garden will look tidy all winter! In general, it is easier to dig in the fall since the soil is often not as damp. Do not dig the edge of the bed too deep, as lawnmower wheels are likely to fall into the trench and scalp the lawn.

- If you grow *Eucomis* (Pineapple Lily) selections in containers, it is best to allow them to get significantly frosted, as seen at right in mid-November. Remove the wilted foliage (as seen below right) and move the plants into a lightly heated garage or unheated basement. Resist the urge to water throughout the winter. Come





late April, bring the pots back outside and start to water and fertilize. Like magic, the plants will once again begin to grow and bloom, although some are more eager to start growth than others! After 10 years the plants will benefit from up-potting into a slightly larger pot, which can be completed now, before storing them for the winter or come spring.



- From those with end of season sales addictions, purchase and pot-up daffodils, tulips or minor bulbs into shallow pots and place them in the back of an unheated or minimally heated garage for the winter. Keep soil on the drier side but water when the soil is very dry. As the shoots begin to appear in mid to late February, place them in a sunny but cool window inside the home. They will provide nice early color for the kitchen table in March or for outdoor containers in March and April (May). Add them to the garden once the display is complete!
- For Tea Roses and other grafted roses, mulch the graft union with soil, leaves or mulch after the soil has started to freeze. This will ensure that the named selection that has been budded onto a rootstock will not perish during the winter.
- It is often beneficial to partially prune Tea Roses back to reduce any potential wobbling from winter winds. Complete the pruning come spring.
- If there is access to composted or even fresh horse or cow manure, it can be spread now in annual beds (not vegetable or perennial beds). It is great when spread prior to planting bulbs since the action of planting will work some of the compost into the soil!



- Evaluate the design of the garden to see if it is in need of any additional December flowering or fruiting cheer! Plants like *Mahonia* x 'Charity' (pictured at right in late November), Climbing Aster (*Symphotrichum carolinianum*) and Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) are often in bud or bloom while Winterberry Holly (*Ilex verticillata*) is full of glorious red, yellow or orange fruit depending upon the cultivar! *Ilex verticillata* 'Winter Gold' is the closing image.
- Take inventory of potting soil, seed starting materials, gardening tools or even seeds that you will need in the year to come. If some of your inventory is in need of replacement or updating, they might make great items to place on your Holiday wish list should you be that person who already has everything! One gift that is

very helpful and many gardeners overlook is the soil knife, pictured at right. It is great for weeding and planting bulbs, annuals or plugs. Don't forget to consider a sheath to go with it and a beefy belt to support the sheath and knife! If you are considering soil knives, I recommend one with colorful handles. Wooden handles may look great, but they blend in with the mulch once you put it down.



### Vegetables

- Shredded leaves can be spread as mulch for vegetable gardens if there was not sufficient time to sow a cover crop. It serves to add organic matter into the soil and makes a great mulch for the year to come.
- Finish cleaning out old plants from the vegetable garden and take note of where various plants were located this past year such that they are not planted in the same location next year. Planting the same plant or even members of a plant family in the same location will add to a buildup of insects or diseases and diminish certain micronutrients in the soil. This is termed crop rotation.
- As with general garden tools, this is a great time to review your tools used in the vegetable garden, as well as stakes, twine, netting, labels or anything else that is essential. Once again, they can make great holiday gifts.

### Houseplants

- Continue to adjust and turn houseplants every couple of weeks such that they grow uniformly and not towards the window.
- Cut back on the watering to once every two to three weeks, since the plants often go into a state of dormancy with the shorter days and weaker sun.
- If you have *Tillandsia* (Air Plants), soak them every 4-5 weeks in tepid water during the morning, so they have time to dry by evening.
- As you peruse garden centers this month, searching for the perfect plant to gift a friend or decorate your own home, consider plants that will survive for years rather than a few months.

*Sansevieria*, now *Dracaena* ('Hahnii Jade Dwarf Marginated' pictured at right) is a great, long-lived plant perfect for the Holidays. Another great houseplant to gift is *Stromanthe thalia* 'Triostar' (pictured above), featuring red, white and green variegated foliage. It is very





adaptable to indoor culture and for some reason has not received the fanfare that it is due. If you have college students, consider the afore mentioned Air Plants or *Tillandsia* as Holiday gifts. They are of easy care and are very appealing to burgeoning gardeners. There are also many other great houseplant selections that will last and be enjoyed for many Holidays to come!

#### New Year's Resolution?

- Consider building a compost bin if you don't have one at present. It is amazing how many vegetable scraps are produced from prepping vegetables and making salads that end up in landfills. In addition, it serves as a place to toss frosted plants from the vegetable garden. For me, taking out the scraps for the compost has become a daily part of my chores before leaving for work. The key is to place it where it is easily accessed for inclement days and to ensure a lower portion of the bin can be removed to access the finished compost at the base. It keeps all that waste from going into landfills and is a wonderful New Year's Resolution!

I hope everyone has a very Joyous Holiday Season with a 'Floriferous' New Year to come!



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