

HOME GARDENING NEWSLETTER – December (Hampton Roads Area, VA)

It's cold out there ... last year it was dry and warm and this year we seem to be more in line with expected weather. On average this month, it will be a high of 52 degrees and a low of 35 degrees and Hampton Roads will get 9 days of rain averaging 3.23 inches.

Cool Season Grasses (Fescue, Bluegrass, Ryegrass): You should have completed your fall three step feeding plan. If you did, your lawn should be green and lush, and you're cutting it about once a week. It's still not too late to fertilize a cool season lawn. Fescue grasses still grow as long as the ground is not frozen.

If you have a weed problem, spot treat weeds with a broad leaf weed killer containing 2,4-d, dicamba, and/or mecoprop (MCP) when the temperature is over 50°. It is not recommended to treat an entire lawn when it's cold as some broad leaf weed killers can damage fescue lawns in winter. You may need to reapply the weed killer 10 to 14 days later if you have hard to control weeds such as clover and others. If you recently reseeded your lawn (in November), read the label of the product before applying any weed killer. Some products cannot be applied to recently seeded lawns.

Cutting Heights: 2" to 4".

Warm Season Grasses (Bermuda, Centipede, Zoysia, St. Augustine): Fertilizers ... only for Bermuda grass apply a 0-0-60 Potassium (K) fertilizer application to improve winter hardiness. The 3rd number on fertilizers is Potassium (K). Potassium is for plant vigor. Apply 1 lbs of Potassium per 1,000 square feet of lawn. A 10 lbs bag of 0-0-60 will is enough to cover 6,000 square feet of lawn.

If necessary, treat your lawn for winter annual weeds (buttercup, henbit, chickweed, dandelions, etc). You will be applying a broad leaf weed control product containing (2,4-D), mecoprop (MCP), and dicamba, except for St. Augustine lawns. St. Augustine is very sensitive to most broad leaf weed killers. Read the label and application instructions carefully before use. These weed controllers are systemic, which means it is absorbed through the leaf structure and not the roots. The weeds have to be present before you apply the weed controller.

Remove leaves from warm season lawns. Some leaves can be mulched into the lawn but if you have a large amount of leaves it is recommended to mulch cut and bag the leaves and then apply them as a winter mulch to your gardens or used in a compost pile, providing the leaves did not come from a diseased tree or shrub. Diseased leaves should be discarded.

Lime: Lime only if a soil test indicted your pH is low. Do not lime for 'liming' sake. See September month's edition about liming guidelines. The optimum soil pH for each type of turfgrass is as follows: Bermuda (6.0-7.0), Centipede (4.5-5.5), St Augustine (6.5-7.5), Zoysia (6.0-7.0) and Fescue (5.5-6.5).

Tips for the Month: Holiday Plants:

So, you have been given a holiday plant or you have decided to make your home more colorful by adding the holiday greenery. Either way, you need to know what to do once you have these plants in your home. Listed below are some popular plants and what you need to know about them.

Poinsettia: (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*)

The poinsettia has gotten some bad press. It is not poisonous although many people think so. They are available in many varieties having different colors and shapes. Generally, the poinsettias purchased for holidays are considered **disposable**. What you see as the color on a poinsettia is actually the bracts and not flowers. You should look for well-shaped compact plants with uniform bract color. Once you get one home, this is how to deal with it.

- Place this plant in a sunny location, protected from drafts or chills
- Make sure the soil is well-drained soil, but keep the soil moist, not wet.
- Leaves will drop eventually, so when they do cut the plant back to two buds on the stem and reduce watering. Keep the plant in a cool place to rest.
- In late spring, after danger of frost, you can place the plant outside in a sunny location.
- If you want to use the plant next Christmas, cut it back in the summer. If you don't you will find the plants become rather large and leggy and are not attractive for inside use.
- You can take cuttings in late summer, when you cut them back. You want to make sure the pieces you are trying to root have at least 4 joints.
- To make a poinsettia bloom again, they need long nights so you should do the following.
- Starting in October put them in a closet each night **for 14 hours of darkness**.
- They should be getting no more than 10 hours of sunlight daily during this time
- You continue this for 10 weeks. Then place the plants under regular house conditions and you should get bract color for Christmas.

Christmas Cactus: (*Schlumbergera bridgessi*)

These are not typical cacti; in nature, they actually live in trees like orchids. They like rich porous soil and fertilizer while in their growth and flowering stages.

- Allow soil to dry out before watering.
- To keep them blooming longer, reduce watering and keep in full sun at around 70 degrees room temperature.
- If you want to make one bloom, they need long nights and cool night temperatures, so place them in 12-14 hours of darkness, 50-55 degree temperatures during the month of November.
- If the buds drop and stems shrivel, you have probably kept the plant too dry and the roots have been damaged.

Amaryllis: (*Hippeastrum spp.*)

This is a bulb plant typically used at Easter, however they are gaining ground for the Christmas holidays

- You usually purchase them in the bulb form, but they can be purchased in any stage of development.
- Place in a warm, sunny location and do not fertilize until after flowering.
- The soil should be kept on the dry side.
- It usually takes 4 weeks from bulb to flowering.
- The plant will be more compact and healthier if kept in tropical conditions, high light, and warm temperatures.

Gloxinias: (Sinningia speciosa)

- These are close relatives of African violets and so should be treated as such.
- Look for 3 to 5 open flowers with about the same amount of buds coming along on compact plants with rich green leaves.
- Once home, keep the plants on the moist side, but not wet. Just like African violets, you should avoid getting water on the leaves. Keep them in a warm area free of drafts.
- The plant does not like direct sunlight (high-intensity light).
- If it is too dark or allowed to wilt, the plant will drop its buds.

Kalanchoe, Ornamental Peppers & Cherries

- These are very durable plants and can bloom for at least 1 month in the home
- Kalanchoe are closely related to jade plants, they like it warm and dry.
- When choosing a Kalanchoe, look for lots of color and little or no dead flowers
- The Kalanchoe should have average approximately 3-5 clusters of flowers on a six-inch plant.
- Ornamental Peppers & Cherries are easily maintained, but are not for homes where prying little hands may want to pick the fruit & eat it.

Other general gardening tips for this month:

- You still have time to make herb vinegars from chives, shallots, garlic, or any herbs on your windowsill for the holidays. Use approximately four ounces of fresh herbs to one quart of wine vinegar. Allow the herbs to infuse for at least two weeks.
- The use of fruit in wreaths, such as frequently seen in Colonial Williamsburg, was inspired by Luce della Robbia, a 15th century sculptor who carved garlands of fruit and nuts in his work. Fruit can be tied in place using a pliable, 18-weight florist wire that is first inserted through the fruit, then through the straw base. A wooden base with nails to secure fruit is also used. In cold weather that is above freezing, fruit will last for seven to eight days before it needs replacing (unless the birds decide to feast on your decor).
- Yews, junipers, 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. Small cuttings can also be used for holiday wreaths.

- The scent of bayberry candles is derived from the Northern bayberry *Myrica pensylvanica*, a salt-tolerant, semi-evergreen shrub well adapted to the Tidewater area. A male and female should be planted together to ensure production of the ornamental berries.
- Never allow the reservoir of your Christmas tree holder to go dry as an air lock can form in the trunk that can keep the tree from absorbing water again. Christmas trees absorb between 2 pints and 1 gallon of water per day, so a tree stand that holds at least 1 gallon of water is recommended. Make sure to check the water level daily and supply fresh water as needed.
- For hours of window side enjoyment, trim a tree for the birds. Tie on dried fruit, suet, and peanut butter-covered pinecones rolled in birdseed. After Christmas, your tree can be moved outside and redecorated for the birds. Anchor the tree in a bucket full of damp sand. Leave on strings of popcorn and cranberries, and add strings of peanuts (in the shell). Apples, oranges, leftover breads and cakes, even peanut butter cookies can be hung on the boughs, but don't use any foods containing chocolate as it is poisonous to some small animals. For best results, push the edible ornaments well into the tree. Things that swing might scare birds.
- Be careful when using deicing salts around driveways and walks this winter; salt is toxic to many flowers, trees, shrubs, and lawn grasses. Sand, sawdust, or a combination of these work well for deicing walks and will not injure plants.
- Sunflower seeds will attract desirable birds, such as chickadees, tufted titmouses, finches, cardinals, and grosbeaks, to your feeder. Goldfinches and woodpeckers are attracted to suet.
- Keep mistletoe out of the reach of children and pets, as the berries are poisonous.
- If stored bulbs begin to shrivel, they are too dry. Place them in a container with potting medium, peat moss, or sawdust to stop the loss of water.
- Ask Santa for a special plant or garden tool for yourself. Begin a collection of your favorite perennials, and request a new plant every year. If you garden indoors, start a collection of succulents that can be added to yearly.
- Drain the fuel tank and run the lawn mower or tiller engine dry before putting the machine away for the winter.
- Check belts and spark plugs and buy replacements, change the oil, sharpen the blades or tines, and clean off dirt and plant debris so equipment will be ready to go when you need it next spring.
- Clean and sharpen lawn and garden tools, and store them in a dry storage area. A light coating of oil on exposed metal surfaces will prevent rusting.

Other Fruits and Vegetable Gardening Tips for this month:

- Fruit trees can be pruned at any time during the winter provided the temperature is above 45F.
- Mice chew off the bark of fruit trees at ground level or below and often completely girdle a tree causing it to die. To reduce this damage, keep mulch pulled away from the base of

the tree and examine mulch frequently for the presence of mice. Leave a bare circle, one foot wide, around fruit tree trunks when spreading mulch so the mice won't nest there.

- The Jerusalem artichoke, a perennial sunflower, is a native of the Great Plains. The Italians gave it a name that meant "turning to the sun" which the English thought sounded like Jerusalem. In some supermarkets today, they are marketed as "sun chokes."

Don't forget to visit <http://www.chesapeake.va.us/services/depart/agricul/master-gard.html>.

DECEMBER PRUNING CALENDAR: Changes from previous month underlined. The below pruning calendar applies to all of Virginia and was compiled by Virginia Tech. Shrubs and trees have 'Best time to Prune' months, 'Do not Prune' months, or timing is not critical months. Those plants listed below are the "best time to prune" or 'do not prune'. If a tree or shrub is not listed, then timing is not critical this month. The best time to prune is based upon optimizing flowers or fruits and reducing summer/winter stresses. Deadheading or removing spent flowers on flowering shrubs is OK all growing season, for plants such as Rose, Crepe Myrtle, Butterfly bushes, etc. Pruning to remove diseased or dead branches is necessary when you see them. Contact your extension agent if you need more detailed information about any specific plant. REMEMBER to keep your pruning equipment sharp. Make sure you clean them each time you prune with a 9 part water to 1 part bleach solution to prevent the spread of plant disease.

Shrubs: Abelia, Arborvitae, Beautyberry, Cherrylaurel, Clethra, Cotoneaster, Eleagnus (thorny), Euonymus (evergreen/deciduous), Holly (deciduous), Juniper, Osmanthus Holly, Photinia, Mugo Pine, Privet (*Ligustrum*), Potentilla, Smoke Tree, Sumac, and Yew.

Do Not Prune: Flowering Almond, Aucuba, Azalea, Barberry, Bayberry, Beautybush, Broom (*Cytisus*), Butterfly Bush, Camellia japonica (spring bloomer), Camellia sansanqua (fall bloomers), Chastetree, Crape Myrtle, Daphne, Deutzia, Forsythia, Fothergilla, Gardenia, Harry Lauder (Walking Stick), Hibiscus (incl: Rose of Sharon & Althea), Holly (evergreen), Honeysuckle, Hydrangea, Hypericum (St. Johnswort), Indian Hawthorne, Jasmine (winter), Kerria, Leucothoe, Lilac, Mahonia (Orange Grapeholly), Mockorange, Mountain Laurel, Nandina, Pearlbush, Pieris, Pittosporum, Pyracantha, Quince, Rhododendron, Rose, Serviceberry, Spirea, Sweetshrub, Viburnum, Weigela, Pussy Willow, and Witch hazel.

Evergreen Trees: (Seldom need pruning. Most evergreen trees are pruned during the winter months.) Arborvitae, Atlas Cedar, Deodar Cedar, Chamaecyparis, Fir, Holly, Juniper, Leyland Cypress, Southern Magnolia, and Live Oak

Do Not Prune: None.

Deciduous Trees: Alder, Birch, Elm, Goldenrain Tree, Maple, Oak, Poplar, Sophora, Sourwood, and Stewartia.

Do Not Prune : (except to correct damage): Buckeye, Flowering Cherry, Crabapple, Crape Myrtle, Dogwood, Fringe Tree, Hawthorn, Horsechestnut, Magnolia, Flowering (Peach, Pear or Plum), Redbud, or Serviceberry.

Mark your calendar: (open to everyone and free unless indicated)

Jan 20-22: Mid Atlantic Short Course Horticulture Conference at the Ramada Ocean Front in Virginia Beach. There is a fee to attend these courses. However, volunteers are needed to help moderate each course. Moderators get free admission to the conference. For more information about moderator duties, contact Lynnette Swanson at lswanson@vt.edu.

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If you have any questions, you can call or visit the Virginia Cooperative Extension **Chesapeake Master Gardener Answer line**. They are located in the Agriculture Building at City Hall (same building as planetarium) or call them at **382-6348** between 9 – 1 (M-F) or send e-mail to gardener@agri.city.chesapeake.va.us any time or day. If you do not live in Chesapeake, you can contact your local Extension Office.

Hampton	727-1401	James City	564-2170
Newport News	591-4838	Norfolk	683-2816
Portsmouth	393-5314	Suffolk	923-2050
Virginia Beach	427-4769	York County	890-4940

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*"We hope you find this gardening newsletter helpful."
Happy Gardening !!!*