

Gardening Notes for December

The hustle and bustle of the Holiday Season is finally upon us! The fall provided ample moisture, minimizing worries of watering newly installed plants this winter. Although there were frosts in the north, the temperatures remained reasonably warm, sparing many tender plants. The chilly temps and sunshine providing good conditions for great fall color too. This is the time to properly prepare the garden for winter as autumn truly bids us farewell and the sub-freezing temperatures of winter are just around the corner. As time permits between baking and ‘online’ shopping, continue your ledgers with notes on the weather and how plants are performing. Wishing everyone a very Happy and Merry Holiday Season!

Things to do:

Turf

- Finish removing leaves from lawn areas. If possible, shred the leaves with the lawn mower and add them to perennial or annual beds as mulch. The shredded leaves 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 the filters and amending the fuel with an additive that will prevent it from becoming more viscous and potentially blocking fuel lines come spring.

Garden

- Many homeowners think the fallen leaves look unattractive and should be removed from beds around the home. 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.
- If you have water features or ponds, keep the leaf nets over the pond at least through months’ end or until prolonged subfreezing temperatures are predicted to keep any leaves that are still blowing about from getting into the pond.
- Decorate those plastic and fiberglass containers or window boxes that tolerate winter’s chill. The soil in the pots can be dumped out and replaced with simple mulch or woodchips, which will help terra cotta containers endure frosts better. Evergreen boughs such as Yew, Pine, Hemlock, Juniper, Southern Magnolia, Holly or Cherry Laurel can be pruned from the garden to decorate winter containers. For large pots, add 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 above. You



could also add a few sprigs of white painted birch stems, which many Garden Centers carry for winter containers! Come spring, the containers of living plants can be removed and added to strategic locations within your garden.

- If you have recently planted an evergreen, make certain that the soil remains moist in case we have several weeks without another rainfall. A 3-4" 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.
- Rhododendrons, Holly and other broadleaf evergreen shrubs that have been planted this fall will benefit from an application of an anti-desiccant spray. Apply during periods when the temperatures are above freezing for several hours and continue to reapply as temperatures permit through the winter according to directions.
- Finish cutting back those perennials which have collapsed to the ground. This is especially true for plants around the base of newly planted trees. The debris can act as a veil for hungry mice during the winter who enjoy eating the tree bark throughout the winter. Several years back, I witnessed a mature Ginkgo tree killed by girdling mice, hidden by a cover of *Pachysandra*.
- Instead of dragging the cut herbaceous material 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. If shredded wood mulch is used around the edges, the bed will appear like a normally mulched bed – a far more carbon neutral approach than mulching the entire bed!
- By the same token and wherever possible, leave the stems and seed heads of Black-Eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia*), Cup Flower (*Silphium*) and Purple Cone Flower (*Echinacea*) standing for the winter, since the seeds provide food for the birds while the hollow stems yield habitat for beneficial insects!
- Equally as important, allow hollow stemmed shrubs such as our native Hydrangea (*Hydrangea arborescens*) and Elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*) to remain standing through the winter and refrain from cutting off dead wood where possible. As Doug Tallamy points out, the hollow stems serve as a winter home for our beneficial insects as well as a location to lay eggs in the season to come.
- Finish digging up the last of the Canna and Banana tubers, letting the soil dry so it can be knocked off once brought into the garage and then wrapped and stored in a cool basement.
- Finish remove Gladiolus corms. The image at right is *Gladiolus murielae*, formerly *Acidanthera bicolor*, 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 stored in potting soil. I prefer hanging the onion bags to deter mice. Plants do best in a cool lightly heated garage or a cool unheated basement, as both have higher humidity than the corms prefer.



- Finish gathering seed from various annuals that are not hybrids as they will come true from seed. Dry and place in labeled packets for sowing come spring!
- 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 come May.



- As I found out this past year, Bearded Iris are not the only Iris to be a subject of borer damage. Our native Crested Iris (*Iris cristata*) has far smaller rhizomes, but I have found borers. In the case of Crested Iris ('Powder Blue Giant pictured at right), the foliage detaches readily from the rhizome and can easily be removed by running your fingers through the plant.
- I have also found out it is beneficial to remove the foliage from most all Iris for the winter. They may not be as subject to the Iris Borer, since they do not possess large rhizomes, but 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.



- Consider edging bedlines if the ground is not frozen and time avails, as it will be one less item to consider come the spring! In general, it is easier to dig in the fall since the soil is 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.
- 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. Water when the soil appears dry. As the shoots begin to appear in mid to late February, place them in a sunny but cool window. They will provide nice early color to the kitchen table in March or for outdoor containers in March, April and May.
- For Tea Roses and other grafted roses, mulch the graft union with soil, leaves or shredded bark 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 due to 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 the annual beds (not vegetable or perennial).
- Evaluate the Garden to see if it is in need of any additional December flowering or fruiting cheer! Plants like *Mahonia x 'Charity'* (pictured above in late November), Climbing Aster (*Symphotrichum carolinianum*) and Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) are presently in full bud or bloom and Winterberry Holly (*Ilex verticillata*) is full of glorious red, yellow or orange fruit depending upon the cultivar! *Ilex verticillata* 'Winter Gold' is photographed below.
- Take inventory of potting soil, seed starting materials and gardening tools. If some of your inventory is in need of replacement or updating, they might make good Holiday gifts should you be that person who already has everything!



Vegetables

- Shredded leaves can be spread as mulch for vegetable gardens if there was not sufficient time to sow a cover crop as it adds organic matter back into the soil.
- 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 family of plants in the same location will add to a buildup of insects or diseases in the soil. This is termed crop rotation.

Houseplants

- Continue to adjust houseplants that prefer less direct sunlight as the sun continues to dip lower in the sky and reaches further into the room.
- 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.
- 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. This month, (December 2022) the Plant



of the Month article features *Sansevieria* – or as I should say, a plant formerly named *Sansevieria* – that has a number of very attractive white, chartreuse and silver variegated forms (‘Hahnii Jade Dwarf Marginated’ picture above). Another great houseplant to gift is *Stromanthe thalia* ‘Triostar’, featuring red, white and green variegated foliage and is very adaptable to indoor culture. There are many other great selections as well that will last and be enjoyed for years to come!



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