

Gardening Notes for December

The hustle and bustle of the Holiday Season is finally upon us! Autumn continued to provide ample moisture for new plantings, although November was drier than the previous months. The temperatures of November were seasonal, allowing plants to prepare for winter to come. Although there are ample distractions this month, 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 with notes on the weather and how plants are performing. Wishing everyone a very Happy and Joyous 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, 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 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 month's end or until prolonged subfreezing temperatures are predicted to keep any leaves that are still blowing about from getting into the pond.
- Terra cotta pots are best stored indoors during the winter to prevent cracking or damage. Plastic and fiberglass containers or window boxes are best 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 such as Yew, Pine, Hemlock, Juniper, Southern Magnolia, Holly, False Cypress or Cherry Laurel can be pruned from the garden to decorate the containers. Some red stemmed dogwoods provide great vertical accents, as seen at right!



- 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 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 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, Camellias 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 plantings 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 who dined under the cover of Pachysandra groundcover.
- 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 also harm Owls that 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 self-sow, the seed heads should be removed. If shredded wood or bark mulch is used around



the edges, the bed will appear like a normally mulched bed come summer! It is a far more carbon neutral approach than mulching the entire bed and it looks great!

- Having mentioned cutting perennials back in December wherever possible leave the stems and seed heads of Black-Eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia*), Cup Flower (*Silphium*) and 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. 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 the previous 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 basement.
- Finish removing Gladiolus corms. The image below 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 stored peat moss. I prefer hanging the onion bags to 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 you wish to 're-awaken' them!
- 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 and into the rhizome 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. Raking can dislodge the rhizomes.



- 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 above.

- If you grow *Eucomis* (Pineapple Lily) selections in containers, it is best to allow them to get significantly frosted, as seen at right. Remove the wilted foliage 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!



- 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.
- From those end of season sales, 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. 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 inside the home. They will provide nice early color for the kitchen table in March or for outdoor containers in March, April and 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 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 beds).
- 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 photographed below.



- Take inventory of potting soil, seed starting materials, gardening tools or even some 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 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 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 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 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.

- 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' picture above) is a great, long-lived plant perfect for the Holidays. Another great houseplant to gift is *Stromanthe thalia* 'Triostar' (picture above), featuring red, white and green variegated foliage and is very adaptable to indoor culture. There are also many other great houseplant selections that will last and be enjoyed for many Holidays to come!



Bruce Crawford

Manager of Horticulture, Morris County Parks Commission