

Gardening Notes for January

January always begins with the festivities surrounding the Holiday Season, but reality soon returns as gardeners face short and often cloudy days, cold temperatures and a sleeping garden. Looking on the positive side, we now have the leisure of working in the Garden when our time or the weather suits our schedule, since the garden is in a state of suspended animation so to speak. In addition, the days are getting longer! Continue to make notes in your journal on the temperatures, snowfall or rain amounts along with the sightings of visiting birds. Hopefully, you are able to write your notes with a winter beverage by the warm glow of a fire. Here's to a wonderful New Year to come!

Things to do:

Vegetables

- Plain your vegetable and annual gardens! As seed catalogues continue to appear almost daily in the mailbox and several times a day in your emails, keep your designs handy so you do not mistakenly buy more seed than is needed.
- As you plan your garden, don't forget to rotate your crop families. For example, try to avoid planting peppers this year where tomatoes grew last season, since they are both in the Solanaceous family and often have an affinity for the same minor nutrients or are susceptible to similar diseases!
- A recent study from the University of Kansas published in *Nature Communications* (December 2023) documents how vegetable yield is increased through increasing the diversity of crops in a vegetable garden. Through alternating rows of vegetables and rotating crops, the pathogens decline, improving yields!
- Order your seeds early, as gardening remains – fortunately, I might add – a popular activity and certain varieties will sell out quickly!
- If this is the first time you are planning a vegetable garden, think small to start. A 10'x12' or similar sized area is perfect for a start, as is a dozen or so containers if you are restricted to a patio. Also consider starting with easy vegetables, such as Zucchini, Bush Beans, Beets or Lettuce. Containers can also be highly ornamental, as seen above with a container of lettuce at Chanticleer Gardens, Wayne PA.



- If you are growing vegetables in containers, larger plants like Tomatoes or Eggplants should be restricted to one plant per #7 or 24" container while numerous lettuce or carrot plants can fill such a container.
- Tomatoes are great but, are best when staked so make certain you also order 6-8' stakes and twine. As a reminder, indeterminate tomatoes that produce fruit as

they continue to grow can reach 6' tall, so it is important to plant a leafy crop like lettuce on the East or North side of tomatoes that will tolerate partial shade or place the tomatoes at the Northern end of the garden if possible.

Determinant tomatoes grow to a set height of 3-4' and yield their fruit all at once.

- Resist the urge to order plants or seed of too many tomatoes. Four plants are often sufficient!



Garden

- Study the winter bones of the garden. During the calm of winter, give thought to what improvements would provide more interest, such as colorful Red Stemmed Dogwoods and Willows, or the blooms of Winter Witch Hazels such as *Hamamelis x intermedia 'Jelena'* pictured above. Paperbush (*Edgeworthia chrysanthia*) is also a fun addition for the fuzzy buds all winter (pictured at right) followed by yellow blooms in March.



It does need a protected location to flourish in zone 6/7, as it has at the Frelinghuysen Arb!

- Also, take note of views that need to be screened with a few evergreens or new views that should be revealed! Consider these views not just from outdoor walks or patios, but from inside your home where you will mostly be viewing the winter garden.
- Take care of your tools! Sharpen, clean, oil and otherwise repair saws and pruners. Sharpen the cutting edge of spades and lawnmower blades, repair the handles of shovels and wheelbarrows or any other



tool placed on the ‘to be fixed’ pile. Compose a list of tools to purchase that are beyond repair.

- Start to evaluate pruning needs. Typically, most pruning is completed in January through late March, with the heaviest pruning reserved for February through March. January is the time to evaluate plants for heavy cuts, and to begin structural work, shaping and thinning of small trees and shrubs. All rubbing branches (as seen above) or soon to become rubbing branches should be corrected by removing the less dominant stem. All suckers (vigorous shoots originating from the roots) should be removed and water sprouts (vigorous shoots originating from branches) should be thinned rather than removed entirely. Resist pruning Maples, even small dead branches until late June or later to eliminate excessive bleeding as will occur with spring removal!
- Cut some branches of winter blooming Witch Hazels (*Hamamelis x intermedia* hybrids) such as ‘Jelena’, Winter Sweet (*Chimonanthus praecox*) as seen at right in February at Frelinghuysen Arb, Winter Jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*) or Flowering Apricot (*Prunus mume*) to force and enjoy indoors. If you do not have any of these plants, consider adding some this spring!
- Study your shade trees for potential problems as well. This is a great time to consult with a tree service to tend to these problems and the woodchips produced from the trimmed branches makes for a great mulch or a surface for woodland paths.
- If snow is absent, start cutting back Hellebore Hybrids (*Helleborus x hybridus*) foliage towards the end of January. It is easier to remove the foliage when the buds have yet to appear plus some foliage typically turns brown or is damaged by bloom time. The foliage of Christmas Rose (*Helleborus niger*), such as the cultivar ‘Joseph Lemper’ (pictured below) often remains green throughout the winter and nicely complements the flowers. ‘Joseph Lemper’ often starts to produce blooms in late December. Straight *Helleborus niger* is pictured in the concluding image and blooms in March most years.
- For those coalescent Hellebores that bloom on the stems of the previous year, such as *Helleborus foetidus*, do not cut back the foliage, as you will be removing the flower buds

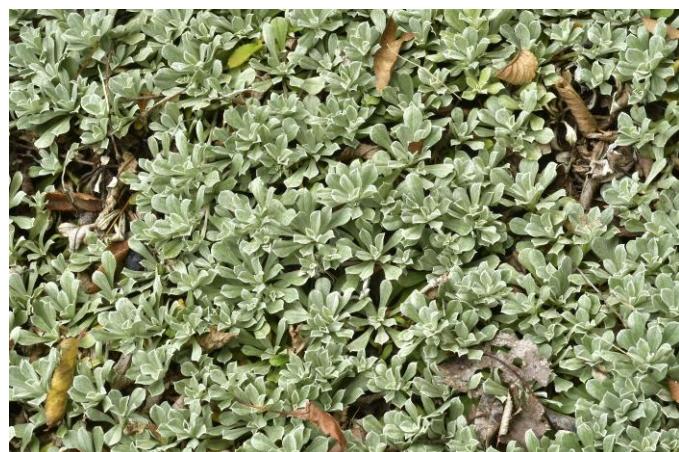


in the process.

- If your Hellebores have started to break bud early due to a warm spell, consider laying evergreen boughs of pine or even the boughs from discarded Christmas trees over the plants, providing protection during future cold nights and dissecting winds.
Helleborus niger ‘Joseph Lemper’ would be a great candidate for some boughs!
- Remove last year’s foliage from Cut Leaf Japanese Maples (*Acer palmatum* var. *dissectum*) that has accumulated on top of the plant’s branches as seen at right. The foliage allows snow to accumulate on top of the plant, resulting in possible breakage of the brittle branches.
- When we receive snow, remove heavy amounts from hedges and tightly grown plants to prevent limb breakage!
- As temperatures drop, check any potted plants that you have in a lightly heated garage or basement for watering needs. Keep them on the dry side so they do not begin to push vigorous growth or start to decay. Plants like *Eucomis* (Pineapple Lily) or Agave are just fine without any water for the entire winter.
- If you are forcing bulbs for the breakfast table or for outdoor containers in a cool to cold garage, make certain they do not become excessively dry and check frequently for mice. For those bulbs or corms desired by our four-legged enemies, consider putting hardware cloth over the containers.
- You may also wish to invest in a min-max thermometer, which records the coldest and hottest temperatures. This will allow you to understand just how cold the garage, basement or root cellar is becoming on those cold winter nights.
- For more tender plants overwintered in a lightly heated garage or basement, put them on a table to keep them off the floor where the coldest air will settle. The Bromeliad *Billbergia nutans* ‘Variegata’ (pictured at right) has happily overwintered for the past 7 winters in a dimly light garage that drops to 38-41 degrees and is watered lightly every 6-8 weeks. In fact, it actually survives better than the plant brought indoors into a cool room and placed by a window!



- If you have *Colocasia* or *Alocasia* tubers (Elephant Ears) stored in peat, potting soil mix or shredded mulch for the winter, lightly water the mix periodically (around once a month) to prevent desiccation of the tuber. Or, if they were left in their containers and the foliage is still up, water them lightly every couple of weeks. Check for spider mites, especially in the case of any *Alocasia* that you may have brought into the living spaces of your home to serve as house plants during the winter. If you do have spider mites, wash the leaves thoroughly with regular tap water – obviously, this is more easily accomplished if you can bring the plant outside on a warmer day. If the temperatures remain cold, you can simply wipe down the leaves and stems with a moist rag or wash the plant in your shower.
- Set-up and fill bird feeders. Place them near windows so the visiting birds can be appreciated and allow you to learn who is visiting your garden!
- If you have bird feeders, consider planting *Echinacea purpurea* (Purple Cone Flower) or *Silphium perfoliatum* (Cup Flower) if your garden is in full sun. When left standing during the winter, the seed of the dried flower heads naturally attracts and feeds various birds.
- Repair fences! During the growing season, there is often vines or perennials growing adjacent to fences and prevent access during the growing season.
- If your garden has a strong emphasis on annuals, January is the month for sketching out the combinations of annuals and tropicals that will work well and ordering them from your local garden center or through catalogues.
- Reread your journal from the past year. Take note of some of the major problems you encountered in 2025 (or even 2024 and 2023) that can be resolved in 2026. Some of these problems may have included starting seed too early or planting vegetable plants too closely together.
- Trees like Persian Ironwood (*Parrotia persica*) as seen at right and Chinese Dogwood (*Cornus kousa*) are actively exfoliating bark in January, which is normal and not to worry. Personally, I find exfoliating bark a thing of beauty, although not all people agree!
- Check on low growing plants like Pussy Toes (*Antennaria alpina* is pictured at right) for blowing leaves from other



trees accumulating to deeply on these low growers and potentially smothering them.

- Look at where you planted bulbs last fall. Certain bulbs like Tulips are much beloved by mice, chipmunks and other 4-footed creatures looking for a winter's meal. Just as for forcing bulbs, if you are starting to see soil disturbance, consider laying down some chicken wire and pinning it into the soil.
- During warm spells and if we have not had precipitation of late, give newly planted evergreens a deep soaking.
- Use salt judiciously! Roughly the amount of a coffee mug is enough for 20' of driveway. Salt can damage soil structure and harm roots. The dead (defoliated) stems in the Red Maple at right was caused due to excessive salt spread around the roots 8 years prior to the damage becoming apparent in the tree!

- Consider updating your winter containers should you have decorated it in November and the greens are starting to look tired. We get a warm spell and the media used to fill the pot (potting soil, woodchips or mulch) has thawed out enough for you to add new selections. Often your landscape has enough greens that you can borrow to make some updates. In



the container at right at Frelinghuysen Arboretum, a combination of Golden False Cypress, Arborvitae, stems of Winterberry Holly, some branches from a recently removed Cherry Tree and even a large white mushroom at the center provides for an unusual and homegrown woodsy container to get you through the rest of winter!

Houseplants

- By and large, most of your houseplants need to be kept on the dry side during winter, as too much water will cause root or crown decay. This is especially true for your succulents. Put your Poinsettias, Amaryllis or Cyclamen in a sunny southern window and water when the top of the soil becomes dry. Come spring, the Amaryllis and Cyclamen start to go dormant and the watering should be reduced to once a month for the Cyclamen and stopped altogether for the Amaryllis until next fall. For the poinsettia, once the colorful bracts have fallen you are best to simply discard the plant. The plants will need to be given a



sequence of short days/long nights to reinitiate blooming and it is far easier to simply buy a new plant next year!

- Houseplants should be rotated 180 degrees every few weeks so the plants receive equal light on all sides. Otherwise, they will start to bend towards the light and will appear distorted over overtime.
- *Tillandsia* (Air Plants) should be soaked in warm tap water every 18-21 days. More frequently if they are located next to heat ducts. Soak them in the morning, allowing the excess moisture to dry by evening such that CO₂ can pass into the leaf and O₂ to be released through the stomata. Unlike most plants, the stomata of *Tillandsia* open at night and residual moisture on the leaves impedes movement of air. This is particularly true for those plants which are more pubescent, since the hairs help to hold moisture, which is part of their intended function!
- I have come to enjoy placing *Tillandsia* among the leaves of larger house plants, such as the Jade Plant (pictured at right). It provides a great presentation and looks like the Jade Plant or whatever plant you choose as the support is flowering!
- If you feel your plants are suffering from dry air due to heating sources, add saucers of water near your houseplants. They may raise the moisture of the air just enough to help your plants.
- If you have Coleus, succulents or other easy to root annuals in containers, you may wish to start cuttings of new plants in late January, building up your supply for the summer garden. With succulents, you can often place a leaf or a cutting on a table and over a period of several to numerous weeks, it will sprout roots! Leaves of Echeveria (pictured at right) have not only sprouted roots, but a whole new plant rosette!
- Most important – pour yourself a cup of good tea or a glass of wine to celebrate your garden accomplishments in 2025. In NJ, it was another dry autumn, although in 2023 the year proved to be very wet, showcasing how fickle weather can be and the challenges that brings to gardening! Bearing these vagaries in the



weather in mind, personal accomplishments deserve a personal reward and no one knows those accomplishments better than you so give yourself that well needed pat on the back.

- Happy New Year!



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