

January Gardening Guidelines

It's a brand new year that holds great promise for the home gardener. Has there been a gardening or landscaping project you've been dreaming about? Maybe a small vegetable patch to provide fresh tomatoes and greens during the year. Or, perhaps the addition of a water garden. Or, maybe installing that automatic sprinkler system to protect your landscape investment. What about expanding your outdoor living space with deck or patio? This is the year to make it happen! Make a resolution to do something new or different in your yard this year. You'll be glad you did.

There are lots of gardening opportunities in January and here are a few items guaranteed to keep you busy in the yard!

TRANSPLANTING. If you are considering moving a plant from one spot to another in the landscape, now is the time. Most plants move best when they are fully dormant after prolonged exposure to cold temperatures. Small and young plants are the easiest to move successfully since they suffer less shock and recover from root loss faster.

Evergreen plants must have soil retained around the root system, so dig as large a soil ball as you can handle. Drag heavy soil balls on a tarp to their new location rather than straining your back by lifting. Remember to selectively remove some top growth to compensate for the inevitable loss of some of the roots. Once the plant is moved, water it thoroughly and apply a few inches of mulch over the root area.

SOIL PREPARATION. Although roses will not be blooming for several months, now is the time to prepare the soil for a new bed of roses, or any other landscape plant. Advanced preparation will allow you to plant when you are ready to buy. Select a sunny spot with well-drained soil. As you dig the soil, work in lots of organic matter like decomposed leaves, compost, soil conditioner, peat moss or well-rotted manure. This will slightly elevate the bed, giving plants better drainage which is especially important if you have heavy clay soil.

PLANTING. January is the time fruit and pecan trees and berry plants are available from local nurseries. Be sure to buy varieties recommended for our area. Check with your county Extension office for a current list of recommended fruit and nut varieties. Purchase and set out plants as soon as they are available. If the plants you purchase are bareroot, plant them immediately. If you cannot set them out right away, cover the roots with moist soil or compost in a shady spot. Keep the roots moist until planting time. Plant grafted trees at the original depth they were grown in the field, determined by the color transition from brown bark to grey on the trunk. The graft union, which makes a slight bend in the trunk, is always above the soil line.

There is no need to wait until springtime to start your landscape projects. January is a great time to set out trees and shrubs. First develop a landscape plan; prepare the soil; then visit a local nursery and beat the spring rush.

VEGETABLES. Get the vegetable garden soil ready now. Cool-season crops like broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage and greens are planted in mid-February, but the soil is often too wet to prepare at that time. Timing is nearly everything in successful spring vegetable production and you don't want to miss the best planting window because you can't get in to work wet garden soil. Add organic matter, fertilizer, manure, lime (if needed) and prepare raised beds if drainage is poor. Raised beds warm up faster in spring, speeding up growth resulting in earlier production.

START TRANSPLANTS. If you want to grow certain varieties of vegetables and flowers, you can't always be certain you'll find your favorites in the garden centers. Adventuresome gardeners enjoy trying new or unusual types and varieties, starting them yourself from seed. Sow seeds of broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower and lettuce now. It is also time to start transplants of petunias, lisianthus and begonias. Tomato, pepper and eggplant seed should be started in late January for transplanting in March. Late January is also the time to start transplants of marigolds, periwinkles and other summer flowers. A cold frame makes starting transplants even easier.

CHECK FOR INSECTS. January and February is a good time to check shrubs, trees and fruit trees for scale insects. Scales appear as small, pale, motionless bumps on the trunk, stems or leaves of plants. If you crush one of these bumps with your fingernail, it will produce a bit of "juice" if it is a scale and is alive. Take a sample to your local nursery for help in identification if you are in doubt. Spray with a horticultural dormant, superior or summer oil when temperatures will not be below 40 degrees F for 24 to 48 hours. Carefully read the label for other precautions and directions for use. Follow recommended rates to avoid damaging plants. A few plants, such as ferns, Japanese maples, hickory, palms and conifers are sensitive to horticultural oils and should not be sprayed. The label will provide you this information.

PRUNING. If your shade trees need pruning, January is a good month to accomplish this task. Remove crowded, damaged, rubbing, dying or dead limbs. Do not leave stubs but rather remove limbs at their point of origin (i.e. at the crotch). Do not top your tree for any reason. Topping weakens trees, greatly shortening their life span and ruins the natural beauty of the tree. This is especially true of crape myrtles!

This is also the time to prune fruit trees. Peaches and plums need about 1/4 to 1/3 of their limbs removed every year. This accomplishes several things: keeps the harvest within reach, thins crowded branches, allowing more light to penetrate developing fruit, and stimulates new growth for the 2006 crop.

MISCELLANEOUS: Birds of all kinds appreciate a constant source of seed, suet and water during the winter. You'll enjoy all the activity in your yard while providing a valuable service for our feathered friends. Just remember that once you start feeding, you should keep it up through the winter.

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