

DECEMBER TO DO LIST

- Please note, most of the information shared here was obtained from Research-based sources (see contributors acknowledgements below), and from individuals who are considered very knowledgeable on a particular subject. While some little tidbits here may be of interest, they should be taken "with-a-grain-of-salt".

(compiled by MG Brian D. Townsend)

1st WEEK:

First week typically for freezes!!! Keep in mind, when monitoring severe weather conditions, "radiational-cooling" type freezes causes different reactions to plants than a "wind-blown" freeze. And with the chilly nights comes the hot chocolate; and did you know that chocolate comes from cocoa beans, but the aroma of chocolate also comes from chocolate mint (*TGS*). - *me*

The ritual of taking down the hummingbird feeder is more folklore than science. Leaving them up, in fact, would benefit both native and migratory hummingbirds, according to a state & local birders. Keep your feeder about 1/4 full and change about once a week (inspect on cold mornings to make sure it's not frozen). A red feeder (avoid using red dye in solution) is enough to attract the birds, although red flowering plants such as the shrimp plant close by will help even more.⁴⁴

Remove, by hand, the MISTLETOE on mesquites and other shade trees in the landscape if you want to reduce stress on the tree and encourage long life.

Pruning can be done on trees that need it (if temperatures are above seasonal average, wait a couple of weeks), including shade trees, evergreens, summer-flowering shrubs and vines, fruit trees and grapes.

It is a good time to plant shrubs and trees. If planting shrubs, cut the tops back 1/3 to 1/2 to compensate for root lost in digging and replanting. Shrubs that provide winter berries for birds include pyracantha, ligustrum, holly and nandina.

Pansies planted now will provide color all winter (*Violas*, also called Johnny-jump-ups, are perfect border plants for pansy beds - *EO*). They do best in full sun.

Apply SNAIL & SLUG bait or beer traps to protect pansies, bluebonnets, chives, day lilies and other plants for which the creatures have a fondness.

Refrigerate or freeze pecans to extend their usable life. Shelled pecans last about 2 months (4 months left in the shell) at room temperature, 12 months refrigerated and 24 months frozen.

Expect the leaves of red oak, bur oak, fruit trees, mulberry, pecan, hackberry, redbud, ornamental pear, cedar elm, sycamore and other species to lose their green color and drop.

Mow your leaves and let them decompose on the lawn or use them for mulch or compost.

Be prepared to cover tomato cages with blankets and plastic (never let plastic touch the leaves during a freeze, separate with a sheet or blanket) when the first freeze is predicted.

You often can get 2 or 3 weeks of good weather if tomatoes make it through the first freeze.

Use monofilament fish line at shoulder level for deer to create an effective barrier for the plant-eating animals. - *CF*

Water shrubs and trees if they are suffering from prolonged dry weather.

Use berries from nandina and holly for natural holiday color indoors.

Cut back lantana and salvia after the tops freeze. - *EO*

Move plumerias into your garage or storage area for the winter. Remove leaves from stems and either remove the plant from the soil or just move the plant, pot and all. Do not water through winter.

Select Christmas trees early. You can care for the tree better than the tree lot can. Tap the tree on the ground to check for freshness. Few needles will fall off a fresh tree.

After you get the tree home, cut about 1/2 inch off of the base and place the tree in a bucket of water to allow it to absorb water before placing it in the stand. Keep water in the stand reservoir to prevent the tree from drying out too quickly (You can spray with an antitranspirant. - *EO*). - *LR*

Watch for JAPANESE BEETLES on roses and other plants, use *Orthene* (4 tbs. per gal. of spray) or organic products such as Green Light's "*Rose Defense*".

Great Texas Garden Tips - Cut back fall blooming perennials now (bulbs cut back only as leaves brown). This tidies up the plantings and helps to get them ready for new growth next spring. *) If scale insects are a problem with any planting, now is the time to apply dormant oil according to label. Dormant oil should always be applied after plants reach dormancy and before new spring growth occurs. *) While several gardening activities are at a slower pace, plan to build the gazebo, pergola, trellis, or lattice now. Also, they could make terrific holiday gifts for yourself, your spouse, your friends, or other loved ones. All these structures work well for growing some great native Texas vines. *) If you fertilized your cool/cold season annuals only at planting, it is time to fertilize again according to label directions to help keep them healthy, actively growing, and blooming well. *) December is spring bulb, corm, rhizome, and tuber planting time in Texas to have a show of color from these plant selections next spring. *) Have the soil tested in your vegetable garden, rose garden, perennial garden, lawn, or any other special area in your landscape this month. The results of the tests will offer recommendations to help you achieve the most results from your gardening activities. - *DGDG*

First hints of "**Mountain Cedar Mating**" season should be here! Watch weather forecasts, we need a good freeze in the hill country to really cut loose with the pollen. **Flu** season is upon us also, one the best preventative measures you can take to avoid catching it is- (drum roll) washing your hands "frequently". - *me*

Prepare Your Backyard Now for Winter Feeding! Most birds establish their feeding territories in the early fall. Here are some steps you can take to make your yard a favorite dining spot for the birds. 1) Clean all feeders. 2) Remove seed hulls from under feeders (use in compost). 3) Check stability of pole (chain or other support) and mounting hardware. 4) Tighten screws in feeders (check shields, undercounted seed trays and other attachments). 5) Add different types of feeders (such as hanging feeders (bowl w/baffle feeder, tube feeder, Audubon feeder, house hopper type feeder, and window feeder); ground or tray type feeder; suet feeder; nectar feeder). 6) Stock up on seed and suet. 7) Be prepared to empty concrete birdbaths during freezing weather and replace with a plastic dish (Add a birdbath heater to nonporous birdbaths to keep an open supply of water for the birds when temperatures drop). 8) Clean out nesting boxes and leave up for roosting. 9) Put up roosting boxes to attract owls, flickers or bluebirds. 10) Add a squirrel feeding station (They're not birds, but they are fun to watch and will help keep them from gorging at the bird feeders!)

In Our Rose Garden: If you get freezing weather, this will slow down your bushes (and this is good!) A longer winter rest period will make them just that much more vigorous come next spring. There are some things to do to prepare our roses for the upcoming winter. **A) Watering-** (Supposedly with an "El Nino" winter, they predict we will receive better than average rainfall, an "El Nina" winter will provide less than average rainfall.) Remember that even though our bushes might not be growing vigorously above ground, their roots are growing and picking up all kinds of nourishment. So we need to provide moisture for the roots to absorb and store this spring energy. (If El Nino doesn't come through, please remember that our beloved S.A.W.S. is now determining your next year's sewer charge based on water usage between *Nov. 15th through Mar. 15th*. Water wisely!) **B) Spraying-** It's important to keep our bushes disease free going into the winter. A November freeze and cold will help harden off our bushes, but you should continue some sort of spraying program using *Triforine* or (formerly) *Funginex* (?) at 1Tbsp. or other organic sprays or dusting. Be sure and treat both the top and bottom of the foliage. **C) Winter Conditioning-** Before you lay your winter mulch down, scatter gypsum liberally through your rose beds. Use about 2 cups sprinkled around each bush. This will help loosen up your soil and also provide for better soil aeration. Then lay down at least 2" of your favorite composting materials. **D) A Winter Pest-** Yes, there is a winter pest in South Texas to look out for. If our weather turns out to be moist and cold as some winters that have come through (if you don't like Texas weather, wait 10 mins. it will change), SPIDERMITES will be held to a minimum. But if we have cycles of dry and warm weather, which South Texas is famous for, the devilish little spidermite will thrive. Check for the following: If you see some foliage at the bottom of the bush beginning to yellow, check the bottom side of the leaves for a fine white webbing with a salt & pepper looking effect. If left unchecked, the mite infestation will move up the bush gradually. Either spray with *Ferti-lome Red Spider Mite Spray w/ pyrethrin*s (always follow label directions), or water wash the affected bush with a hard spray (bottomside of foliage) for nine days at three-day intervals. **E) Culling Out and Transplanting-** Continue to dig up varieties that didn't perform for you, *but remember that your discards could be someone else's treasure!* You could start the new rose year off in January and February by bringing you "discards" to the meetings, and maybe they will find a home in a new garden. When digging up a bush this time of year you can dig a complete root ball and transfer it directly into its new home or bare root it. If you bare root your bush, there will be some bush shock. We prefer to do the bareroot method on a rose bush where we suspect it could have root gall. In some cases if the gall is not severe, the root containing the gall can be cut off (always disinfect pruners each time, after cutting questionable plant material) and the bush replanted. If the gall is widespread, it is better to discard the bush. **F) Spray Materials-** If you have any spray materials left over from this season, it would be a good idea to store them in a place where the temperatures won't fluctuate too much. Most liquid spray materials don't carry over well from one season to another. Avid and Rubigan don't carry over well while we have been somewhat successful with Funginex and Triforine. The best advice to follow is to buy fresh liquid sprays for the new growing season. Powder spray materials such as Maneb, Dithane, Vendex, Orthene, etc. will carry over well if stored properly and kept moisture free. Many of these powder spray materials can have a shelf life of 3 years or more.

A YEAR IN THE ROSE GARDEN: by A.J."Pop" Warner

1. Continue spraying with fungicide until the first hard frost. If blackspot is present, one of

the *Manebs* added to *Funginex* will clear it up. Be sure to spray the canes, for that is where the disease over-winters.

2. If the mulch has worn thin, add to it. A heavy mulch helps maintain an even temperature and tends to prevent premature growth in mid-winter and spring.

3. Be prepared to pile some form of mulch high around tender varieties in the event that a hard cold snap occurs before the plants go dormant. Some varieties that require special attention are ELEGANT BEAUTY, COLOR MAGIC and TANNSINNROH (JOYFULNESS).

Although we do not need to take the elaborate precautions some of our northern neighbors do, it is well to be aware that some varieties need at least minimal protection.

4. Complete the new bed you meant to start in August and should have done in Sept., Oct., or Nov. Don't do like some folks who buy bushes with only a vague idea where to put them.

5. Plant some seeds from rose hips. The odds of the resulting roses being real good are not great, but they are a whole lot better than winning a magazine sweepstakes. Plant them out of doors this month.

6. Stick some Multiflora or DR. HUEY cuttings for budding next spring.

7. Stick some HT and Mini cuttings. If they still have leaves, so much the better.

8. Lift bushes that have sunk too low and are no longer thriving. Go around the bush with a spading fork and gently lift up, working soil under them. Stake to keep loosened bushes from being blown over, but do not prune. Many say it is a good idea to strip the leaves after this operation. Water well, once, then mist every day that it doesn't rain for next week or so. (See Jan. chapters)

9. Bushes can be moved from now through January and February with the same precautions as in lifting.

10. Give away good bushes, which you don't want for one reason or another. Your "dogs" may become someone's "pets".

11. Divide Miniatures that have grown too thick and are no longer flourishing.

12. Keep beds looking neat by pulling off faded petals of end-of-season roses. Some say leaving the hips promotes dormancy, but this writer has seen no indication that this is true.

13. Keep weeds pulled. If we can keep the chickweed out now, there will be a lot less next spring.

14. Continue to cut and use roses as long as they are pretty. We often have to peel petals on December roses, but they can still be nice. Most years we have an arrangement in the house at Christmas. No harm is done cutting roses from large, well-established bushes.

15. If some bushes have grown overly tall and are in danger of being blown over, they can be topped somewhat and should be staked.

16. High potash fertilizer is supposed to make bushes more winter hardy, but remember that is you have been using a "balanced" fertilizer, such as 10-10-10 or 13-13-13; there is already more than ample potash in the soil. More than enough of anything is usually too much.

17. Now is a good time to check the pH and add lime (or for those of us in Bexar Co.; sulfur) if needed. Ground dolomite limestone (granular sulfur for us) is best because it acts slowly, lasts a long time, does not over alkalize the soil and adds magnesium. 4 to 10 lbs. per 100 sq.ft. of bed should take care of soil with pH 5 to 6. The coarser the grind, the longer it will last and a mixture of fine to coarse usually will take care of liming needs for years.

18. Gypsum gives some benefit in helping wash out sodium salts and in providing sulfur.

Since it leaches down through the bed at only about an inch a year, it is best used in

preparing a new bed or reworking an old one. It has no effect whatsoever on the pH and will not take the place of liming.

19. Keep potted roses watered. Roses in beds probably will need no water from the hose until next spring. Contrary to what we sometimes read, moderate dryness in winter will do no harm, and may be good. Most of us can drain the watering system and roll up the hose. In fact, it is a good idea to drain any system now that could be damaged by an unexpected freeze.

20. Store the pesticides where they will not be frozen. Consider disposing of remnants that have been around a long time.

21. Put leftover fertilizers in plastic bags and tie tightly. Then you will not have to use a hammer to break them up next March.

22. After the last use, remove the spark plug and squirt some WD-40 in the cylinders of power equipment (put the spark plug back in).

23. Shorten the list of roses wanted to a "must have" list and order ones not readily available.

24. Carefully scan the show results. When we see certain varieties winning over and over, it tells us something exhibitors need to know.

In Our Herb Garden: Now is the time to plant a number of spring-producing herbs, including garlic, dill, cilantro, fennel and parsley (This is a surprise to newcomers to San Antonio, and to newcomers to herb growing, since in other parts of the country these are planted in the spring.) - *EW* * Replenish winter mulch as needed. * Should a freeze warning occur, water plants thoroughly (12 to 24, but no more than 48 hours prior to) to protect roots. * Cut back tender perennials that freeze and need to be trimmed before reemerging in the spring. Examples are Mexican mint marigold, chives, tarragon, lemon verbena and lovage. * Plant seeds of California poppies, nasturtiums and sweet peas. - *HERBS: A Resource Guide for San Antonio*

2nd WEEK:

Keep an eye out for the Geminids Meteor Showers. Check out the dates when it's due. - *THMag*

If temperatures below 24 degrees (32 degrees for some cold-tender plants) are forecasted, provide mulch, then water all landscape plants (especially St. Augustine lawns) deeply, 12 to 24 hours before temperatures fall below freezing.

The best control for WEEDS in the winter lawn (if you forgot to use pre-emergent herbicide) is to mow every 10 to 14 days.

Don't let poinsettias dry out. Place three ice cubes per day on the soil to keep the plants moist.

Many of the hibiscus, plumeria, bougainvillea and other tropicals have quit blooming for the year. They can be moved into freeze-protected storage.

If we get a "killing" freeze, monitor birdfeeders, birdbaths/ water sources and keep adequately supplied.

Postpone cleaning pecans and acorns from your driveway. The doves, grackles and other wildlife love the mast crushed by the cars.

Spinach is available in area nurseries as transplants. It will provide nutritious greens for salads all winter and spring.

Watch pansies and other cool-weather annuals until they become established. Sunny, hot weather (and yes, we can still get hot too) will make them wilt. Water frequently until they

develop a root system.

Fertilize onions, broccoli, cabbage and other cool-weather foliage vegetables with 2 cups of organic fertilizer or 1 cup of slow-release lawn fertilizer per 10 ft. of row. Use half the amount for carrots, beets, turnips and other root crops. - *CF*

Don't prune woody plants, unless they are already dormant. Otherwise, wait until January.

Continue to set out pansies, violas, stock, snapdragons, dianthus and flowering kale. - *EO*

Cut back on fertilizer for indoor plants in winter.

Keep holiday gift plants moist and ensure good drainage to prolong their life.

Don't forget tulip and hyacinth bulbs in the refrigerator. Plant after they have received six to eight weeks of chilling. - *LR*

MICE can be a real pest in the garden because they like to eat seeds and bulbs. Old-timers used to dip pea and bean seeds in paraffin before planting because the paraffin repelled the pesky rodents. - *TGS*

3rd WEEK:

Never water frozen leaves. Watering will kill, not thaw them.

Pick broccoli, radishes and other winter vegetables when young for highest quality and best production.

Keep your Christmas tree well-watered, out of the sun and away from heat registers, this will help them from drying out making them smell fresh and avoiding a fire hazard.

Don't worry about being a "neatnik" in your lawn. Mow leaves but let them decompose on the lawn. Birds, squirrels and deer will clean up acorns and pecans.

Water St. Augustine grass (in the morning only, to avoid fungus rots - *EO*) if we go without rain for 3 weeks. Zoysia, Bermuda and buffalo grass can go without water all winter if they are completely dormant.

Plant sweet peas in a sunny location with a trellis. The fragrant flowers are great for cutting. - *CF*

Adjust automatic lawn sprinkler systems for less frequent winter watering.

Fertilize indoor plants less from now until March unless growing in a well-lighted area.

Check houseplants for SPIDER MITES, which thrive in dry indoor conditions.

Prolong the life of holiday-season gift plants. Check to see if wrapping on the container has plugged bottom drainage; remove if necessary. Don't overwater. Keep out of drafts from heating vents and opening doorways.

Don't forget tulip and hyacinth bulbs in the refrigerator. Plant after they have received 60 or more days of chilling. - *EO*

Don't murder the good guys! Common garden WASPS are great predators and can help you control garden pests without using toxic sprays. They are capable of making more than two hundred trips from their nest to your garden and will pull caterpillars out of your garden if you let them live. Other beneficial wasps include the ichneumonid wasp which lays eggs in insect pests, including cabbage worms and aphids, and these good wasps don't even sting. - *TGS*

4th WEEK:

Keep poinsettias moist, away from drafts (hot and cold), and place them in a bright room for maximum bloom length. Again, do not overwater, but keep evenly moist.

Plant tulip and hyacinth bulbs now (after their 6-week chilling). Lay chicken wire over the area until leaves emerge to prevent squirrels from eating the bulbs.

Apply manure to your vegetable garden if you didn't plant Elbon (cereal) rye earlier.

Continue to plant spinach, English peas, snap peas and snow peas.

Kalanchoes do not need as much water as poinsettias. The soil can dry to 2 or 3 inches before watering.

Fertilize actively growing cool-weather plants such as pansies and broccoli with a cup of slow-release lawn fertilizer per 100 sq.ft. of garden. Don't overwater pansies. Don't water bluebonnets.

Knock the remaining pecans off your trees with a long cane pole. Be careful not to touch utility wires. - *CF*

Keep birdbaths and birdfeeders well stocked during this season.

After severe icy conditions occur, prune any broken tree branches (paint wounds on oaks immediately), cut back tops of ice-withered perennials, and remove annuals killed by frost.

Deadhead old roses (just under spent bloom). - *EO*

* In updating this collection of useful tips, I have come across several comments, instructions and chemicals that are being replaced with newer techniques and materials. In some cases, I do not want to change what others have written, but I need to bring "them" up-to-date by putting a "(?)" right behind the point in question and maybe adding my two-cents-worth. - *me*

Many thanks to my contributors for sharing their wisdom so I can learn and share it with you.

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DG&DG - Dale Groom & Dan Gill, from Month-by-Month Gardening in Texas

EW - Ed Ware, Master Gardener, Past-President S.A. Herb Society

THMag - Texas Highways Magazine; visit their web site @ www.texashighways.com.

TGS - Texas Gardener Seeds, e-newsletter from Texas Gardener Magazine; visit them @ www.texasgardener.com.

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