

Horticulture Tips

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Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service
Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources
Department of Horticulture & Landscape Architecture
Oklahoma State University

GARDEN TIPS FOR DECEMBER!

David Hillock, Consumer Horticulturist

Lawn & Turf

- Remove leaves from cool-season grasses or mow with a mulching mower. ([HLA-6420](#))
- Continue mowing cool-season lawns on a regular basis. ([HLA-6420](#))
- Continue to control broadleaf weeds in well-established warm- or cool-season lawns with a post-emergent broadleaf weed killer. ([HLA-6421](#))

Tree & Shrubs

- Select a freshly cut Christmas tree. Make a new cut prior to placing in tree stand. Add water daily.
- Live Christmas trees are a wise investment, as they become permanent additions to the landscape after the holidays.
- Light prunings of evergreens can be used for holiday decorations. Be careful with sap that can mar surfaces.

Flowers

- Apply winter mulch to protect rose bush bud unions and other perennials. Wait until after several early freezes or you will give insects a good place to winter.
- Poinsettias must have at least six hours of bright, indirect light daily. Keep plants away from drafts. ([HLA-6413](#))
- Watch for and control pests on indoor houseplants. ([HLA-6411](#))
- Make sure indoor plants are receiving enough light or set up an indoor fluorescent plant light. ([HLA-6411](#))

Fruits & Nuts

- Cover strawberry plants with a mulch about 3-4 inches thick if plants are prone to winter injury. ([HLA-6214](#))
- Wait to prune fruit trees until late February or March. ([HLA-6228](#))

General

- Keep all plants watered during dry conditions even though some may be dormant. Irrigate all plantings at least 24 hours before hard-freezing weather if soil is dry. ([HLA-6404](#))

- Order gardening supplies for next season.
- Now is a great time to design and make structural improvements in your garden and landscape. ([HLA-6425](#), [HLA-6440](#), [HLA-6441](#))
- Send for mail-order catalogs if you are not already on their mailing lists.
- Christmas gift ideas for the gardener might include tools, garden books, magazine subscriptions or membership to The Botanic Garden at OSU. (<http://botanicgarden.okstate.edu>).
- Clean and fill bird feeders.
- Till garden plots without a cover crop to further expose garden pests to harsh winter conditions.
- Visit your county extension office to obtain gardening fact sheets for the new gardening season.
- Join a horticulture, plant or urban forestry society and support community “greening” or “beautification” projects.
- Review your garden records so you can correct past mistakes. Purchase a new gardening journal or calendar to keep the New Year’s gardening records.

GARDEN TIPS FOR JANUARY!

- If precipitation has been deficient (1” of snow = ~ 1/10” of water), water lawns, trees, and shrubs, especially broadleaf and narrowleaf evergreens. Double check moisture in protected or raised planters.
- Check on supplies of pesticides. Secure a copy of current recommendations and post them in a convenient place. Dilution and quantity tables are also useful.
- Check that gardening tools and equipment are in good repair—sharpen, paint, and repair mowers, edgers, sprayers, and dusters.
- Inspect your irrigation system and replace worn or broken parts. ([HLA-6615](#))
- Control overwintering insects on deciduous trees or shrubs with dormant oil sprays applied when the temperature is above 40°F in late fall and winter. Do not use “dormant” oils on evergreens. ([EPP-7306](#))
- A product containing glyphosate plus a postemergent broadleaf herbicide can be used on dormant bermudagrass in January or February when temperatures are above 50°F for winter weed control. ([HLA-6421](#))

Oklahoma Grown Christmas Trees

David Hillock

The best way to ensure that you are getting a fresh Christmas tree is to buy one directly from one of the many Christmas tree farms in Oklahoma. Each one offers a different experience, but one that is always a fun and memorable one for the family. Some of the farms offer more than just Christmas trees – wreaths, garland, table decorations and gifts may be available too. To make the experience more memorable, some also offer free hot cider, hot chocolate, coloring books and candy canes as well as children’s activities.

The Oklahoma Christmas Tree Association web site, www.okchristmastrees.com, provides a list of farms currently selling Christmas trees as well as other information; currently there are 15 locations listed on the website. These Oklahoma grown trees are beautiful, fresh, green Christmas trees which were carefully planted and nurtured for years specifically for you this Christmas.

Once you get your live tree home, it should be placed in water as soon as possible so it won't dry out. A tree purchased from a Choose & Cut farm should be placed in water as soon as you get home. Do not let the stump dry out or you will have to make a fresh cut. A new tree will take up quite a bit of water the first few days so be sure to check the container or tree stand frequently and keep it full of water. Never let your tree get dry or it quickly becomes a hazard.

Mistletoe

David Hillock

Mistletoe is a familiar plant this time of year. The mistletoe that we use for decorations (*Phoradendron* spp.) is native to North America and Oklahoma. The mistletoe of European folklore is actually in the same family, but a different genus (*Viscum album*) than the North American mistletoe. The customs associated with European mistletoe were transferred to the North American mistletoe with the settlers.

Mistletoe is a partial parasite. It can make its own food through photosynthesis, but it also sends roots down into the vascular tissue of the host tree to obtain water and nutrients. Mistletoe is spread by birds. They eat the seeds, which are then deposited on branches in the bird droppings. The seeds then sprout and send rootlets down during the winter; large populations of mistletoe can severely stunt the growth of the tree and even kill it over time. If mistletoe is a problem, there is a product that can help get rid of it. Florel Brand Fruit Eliminator by Monterey Lawn and Garden Products helps suppress mistletoe and can be sprayed on the mistletoe any time after the leaves have fallen from the host trees through midwinter. This product can also be used in the spring to eliminate nuisance fruit such as sweetgum balls, unwanted apples, crabapples, cottonwood, flowering pear, and other plants.

Tilling the Garden in Winter

David Hillock

Most would not think about tilling a garden plot, for vegetables or annuals, during the winter months. However, this is an excellent time to amend garden soils. Working the soil can be done in the spring too, but usually you are dealing with cold, wet soils then. It is wise to avoid working in wet soils because it destroys the soil structure. Of course, working in a dry soil can be difficult too, so it is best to work in a moist soil. If the soil is dry, water it several days before you plan to till it.

Applying two to four inches of organic matter such as leaf material, preferably chopped up or shredded, will help improve soil conditions as the organic material continues to break down through the winter months. In addition to improving soil tilth, tilling the garden during winter can expose overwintering pests such as insects to the freezing temperatures and reduce the potential for problems next spring.

Feeding Birds

David Hillock

It's time to remember our fine, feathered friends for the winter months. If you already have birdfeeders, it's a good time to clean them. Wash them in soapy water, then rinse in a 10% bleach solution and allow to dry completely.

It's important to match your birdfeeders to the type of bird you want to attract. Smaller birds such as chickadee, tufted titmouse, and finches prefer the tube feeders. Larger birds such as cardinals and blue jays prefer hopper or platform feeders, and birds such as the morning dove eat seed on the ground. Just as people prefer different types of food, birds prefer different types of food. Thistle and black oil sunflowers are good for smaller birds, cardinals like sunflowers of all types and millet is good for ground feeding birds. A good general bird feeding mix is white proso millet and black oil sunflower. Suet is good for woodpeckers and nuthatches.

Water is also an important feature, not only for the birds to drink, but also to keep them clean as clean feathers insulate better from the cold weather. If you have a birdbath heater, be sure that it will shut off automatically when the water reaches about 40°F, so it doesn't get too warm. It is also important to keep the water and the birdbath clean. For more information on attracting birds to the landscape see the OSU Extension Fact Sheet [HLA-6435](#) – Landscaping and Gardening for Birds.

Tool Cleanup and Sharpening

David Hillock

This is a good time to clean and sharpen tools before storing them for the winter. A little time now will ensure that they are ready to go as soon as it warms up in the spring. Shovels and hoes can be cleaned, sharpened at a 45-70-degree angle and coated with oil to prevent rust. If the tool has a wooden handle, it can be coated with a layer of boiled linseed oil to keep it weatherproof. Tools such as pruners, loppers and saws should be sharpened professionally unless you have the proper equipment to sharpen them.

As mowers are put away for the season, one of the more important maintenance practices suggested is to sharpen that blade! Studies have shown that some of the problems we have with weakened lawns may not be due to environmental stresses but can be directly linked with failure to keep the mower blade sharp. A dull mower blade rips the grass, instead of cutting it cleanly. The ripping action makes a long, slow healing wound that makes disease invasion more

pervasive. It can also lead to extensive tip dieback of the grass blade itself that reduces the effective photosynthetic area left to the grass following a cut.

Mower blades should be sharpened on a regular basis, and there is no better time to do it than as that mower is stored for the winter. This ensures that the first cut is a good “sharp” one!

Poinsettia Care

David Hillock

Newer cultivars of poinsettia, in addition to being very showy, have excellent keeping quality and stronger stems than older cultivars. When buying your poinsettia, choose a plant with well-expanded, well-colored bracts. Foliage should be medium to dark green with uniform coloring. Flowers should be present in the center of the bracts.

After you purchase your plant, do not expose it to chilling temperatures or cold drafts of air. If the temperature outdoors is below 50°F do not carry an unwrapped plant from the retail shop to your car. In the home or other place of display, avoid cold drafts and excessive heat from heating ducts, TV sets or large incandescent lamps. Temperatures of 70°F or below (down to 55°F) are desirable to retain best bract color. Large plants can be placed on the floor if light is adequate.

Light plays an important role in retention of leaves on the plant. Place the plant in an area where it receives at least six to eight hours of direct natural or artificial light. A minimum of 75 foot candles is desirable where possible. This would be similar to the minimum light intensity required for good desk lighting in an office. Incandescent lights such as those found in most homes will give a truer, brighter bract color than most types of fluorescent light.

Poinsettias can be displayed with other houseplants. The adjacent plants raise the humidity and allow poinsettias to last longer. Also, the regular houseplants can be spruced up for the holidays.

Many commercial growers use non-soil mixes of sphagnum peat, pine bark, vermiculite, perlite, or similar ingredients. When plants are grown in such non-soil mixes, it is sometimes difficult to decide when the plant needs water. If there is no heavy component (sand or soil) in the mix and a plastic pot is used, the pot can be lifted to determine its weight. If the plant is heavy, there is usually plenty of moisture in the pot; if it is lightweight, the medium is dry and a thorough watering should be given. Moisture needs can also be assessed by feeling the growing medium in the pot. Water when the top of the growing medium is starting to feel dry, but do not allow too much drying. Slight wilting of the plant is not harmful, but avoid severe wilting, which will cause leaves to drop.

Water the plant thoroughly. Make sure a small amount of water drips through the drainage holes of the container. If the plant is wrapped with decorative foil, punch a hole in the foil beneath the pot to allow excess water to escape. The plant should be placed on a saucer to prevent damage to the furniture or carpet.

Do not water the plant too frequently when the soil or growing mix is already wet or this may result in roots suffocating from lack of oxygen, causing the leaves to wilt, yellow, and drop.

Recent research has shown that poinsettias are not poisonous, but the plants are intended solely for ornamental purposes. Some people are allergic to the milky sap and may develop a rash when exposed to the sap. Avoid breaking the leaves and stems, as this will release the sap. It is wise to keep any houseplant out of the reach of small children and pets.

Christmas Cactus

David Hillock

Next to poinsettias the Christmas cactus can be a popular houseplant for the holidays. In general they are easy to grow and can live for a long time with the proper care. Native to the tropics they are used to growing in the canopies of trees and receiving moderate amounts of moisture. Thus, a medium light intensity and a soil high in organic matter are suggested. Do not allow the plant to dry out, water when the soil surface begins to feel dry. The plant may be kept drier in autumn. Any houseplant fertilizer may be used according to label directions.

Like poinsettias they have special requirements to get them to bloom. Cool temperatures or long nights are required to induce blooming. The plants bloom when given night temperatures near 55 degrees and day temperatures below 65 degrees. Plants will not flower at temperatures above 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

Flowering is related to day length and night temperatures. No research has supported the rumor that a “dry down” period induces flowering. The temperature range for flower bud development is 55 to 65 degrees for a six-week period. If temperatures remain in this range, they will develop buds regardless of day length. If temperatures get above that range, the plant will need at least 12 to 14 hours of uninterrupted darkness each night. This can be done by placing them in a completely dark room, or covering them for the recommended time, or longer, each night with a dark piece of cloth. Or just keep the plants in total darkness like a closet till buds develop. For holiday blooms this usually means in late September to mid-October.

During flower bud formation, stop fertilizing and only water enough to keep the leaves from becoming shriveled. Once buds do form then you can keep the plant in normal light and temperatures. Keep it evenly moist and fertilize every other week with a diluted fertilizer solution. Bud drop may occur due to over or under watering or being placed in drafty areas.

A Christmas cactus plant will live for a long time in the same pot if proper soil was used originally and if the plant is fertilized and watered regularly. If the plant becomes top-heavy or root bound, move it to a larger pot.

The ideal schedule of a Christmas Cactus:

- January - Flowering.
- February to March - Resting (55 degrees, infrequent watering).

- April to May - Water thoroughly when potting mix begins to dry out.
- June to August - Place outdoors in a shady spot.
- September to October - Plant prepares to flower. Reduce length daylight hours. Keep on the dry side and cool (55 to 65 degrees F) until flower buds form. Then increase water and temperature.
- November to December - Flowering. Water normally. Temperature no less than 55 degrees F.

Ordering and Caring for Seed

Lynn Brandenberger, Extension Specialist

Whether you are a commercial or home gardener, we are nearly at years-end and it is time to reflect on how different crops performed in your garden and what your seed needs will be for the next cropping year. If your vegetable varieties performed well this year and you still have plenty of seed then all you really need to do is take care of that seed so it is ready to plant for next year.

Caring for seed can be summed up in two words: Cool and Dry. Seed should be stored at 40°F or lower and at roughly 10-12% relative humidity. If you have a frost-free refrigerator/freezer you have an ideal place to store seed properly. If you are like me and you still have a non-frost-free freezer where you store your seed, then you will want to protect seed in case the freezer thaws out and water goes everywhere. Here are a few more precautions you should consider taking:

- First, use a permanent marker to record the year that you purchased your seed on the seed packet. This will help you when planning for future seed purchases or it will let you know when you will want to test the germination prior to planting.
- Next, place the seed packet in a resealable plastic bag to protect it from moisture and then if you really want to keep it safe place that into an airtight container.
- Last, place the protected seed in your freezer or refrigerator, either place should work fine.

What about ordering seed? Winter and early spring are great times to order seeds because outside temperatures are low and we don't need to be concerned with seed becoming hot during delivery. I would encourage you to order seeds early in the week so they don't sit outside during the weekend where they might become wet and during warmer months they could become hot enough to also damage the seed. I would hold off ordering until after the holidays to prevent delays from the holiday rush.

Other items you may want to consider purchasing would include containers and growing media if you are planning to grow your own transplants. Along with that you may want to consider kits for growing transplants which can be as simple as a container along with a clear plastic lid or as complex as the container, heating mat, and grow lights. Transplant growing kits are handy if you want to grow your own transplants and may range in cost from less than \$20 to just about any

price you can imagine. The following link to *Oklahoma Gardening* provides a good comparison of different growing systems <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ea7e561-xQs>.

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