

December Gardening

By Teresa Gaffner, Master Gardener

December has arrived and the garden is settling in for a well-deserved rest. Garden chores this month are all about cleaning the yard, the flower and vegetable beds and getting ready for winter. If you haven't mulched your garden beds yet-it's not too late to do so. Late winter/early spring pruning is just around the corner, and you can spend some time brushing up on your basic pruning skills by checking out this in-depth and easy to understand publication from the University of Tennessee. <https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2023/10/PB1619.pdf>.

If you would rather stay active in the garden this winter, there are few activities and new gardening skills you can learn.

Consider setting up your winter garden to help local wildlife and the visitors passing through to warmer locales. It can be as easy as leaving leaf litter on the lawn or piling it into corners of your yard for warm shelter during the colder months. Seed heads left on flowering plants are a good food source for birds and small mammals. There are also the traditional feeders and water sources that will attract local birds. There are many organizations who would love to know what kind and how many of each bird are visiting your feeders. Cornell University's (CU) Feeders Watch, CU's Great Backyard Bird Count and the Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Count are just a few of the seasonal citizen scientist bird counts you can be a part of.

There is a lot of information on how to turn your backyard into a wildlife sanctuary. You will need to provide food, water, cover, and places to raise young. See "Creating an Urban Backyard Wildlife Habitat" at <https://www.johnson.k-state.edu/docs/lawn-and-garden/in-house-publications/gardening-wildlife/Creating%20an%20Urban%20Backyard%20Wildlife%20Habitat%20REV%202022.pdf>

Another good resource is "Backyard Wildlife Habitats" at [https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/426/426-070/SPES-247%20\(2\).pdf](https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/426/426-070/SPES-247%20(2).pdf).

Winter sowing is a recent gardening trend that is gaining in popularity because it's easy, fun to do, saves money and gives you a leg up on the spring planting season. All you need are some empty gallon milk jugs or other plastic containers that allow in enough light, good potting soil and viable seeds. You are basically creating mini greenhouses to provide seeds an environment to start to grow outside in the winter. The University of Maryland has a great visual guide to get you started.

"All the Dirt on Winter Sowing" - University of Maryland Extension
<https://extension.umd.edu/sites/extension.umd.edu/files/2021-12/All%20the%20Dirt%20on%20Winter%20Sowing%20Power%20Point.pdf>.

Some native plant seeds need special considerations such as exposure to cold (called vernalization) and scarification of individual seeds. Scarification is a method of making the seed coat better able to absorb water, usually by scratching with a file or sandpaper, nicking with a knife, or sometimes using hot water. One informative article about which seeds require these

techniques and how to do them is: “Scarification and Vernalization” at <https://agsci.oregonstate.edu/mes/sustainable-wildflower-seed-production/scarification-and-vernalization>. Another good resource is “Overcoming Seed Dormancy: Trees and Shrubs” at <https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/overcoming-seed-dormancy-trees-and-shrubs>.

Finally, there is always good shopping to be had in December but not everyone thinks about visiting their local garden nursery for inspiration. Right now, all types of holiday themed plants and grow kits are available. Everything from bulbs, herb topiaries, fresh evergreen wreaths, poinsettias to seasonal flowering plants are available. Birding supplies, gardening books and tools are also great gifts for the gardener or naturalist in your life. If you do plan on purchasing holiday plants for yourself or as a gift, please check out the links at the end of this article for some sound advice on purchasing and maintaining your holiday plants.

“Care of Holiday and Gift Plants”

<https://extension.uga.edu/publications/detail.html?number=C951&title=care-of-holiday-and-gift-plants#:~:text=Keep%20the%20plant%20in%20high,to%20fall%20below%2060%20degrees>

NEW CLASS: The next University of Tennessee Master Gardener class at the Sullivan County Extension Office located at 140 Spurgeon Ln, Blountville, TN. starts on **January 30, 2024** and continues every Tuesday for 14 weeks from **10AM – 12noon.**

Call the Extension Office for information and application form.

423-574-1919

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.