

December in the Garden



First of all, winter officially starts on December 21st, but your area could get an early frost. Do you have gardenias, hibiscus, potato vine? Those in pots should be moved to a sheltered location like closer to your house or onto a protected deck during frosty nights. It also works to throw a frost blanket or sheet over them, as long as you carefully remove the blankie in the morning to help them recover from the shock of cold. Delicate plants are better protected outdoors, instead of moving them to the garage or indoors, which could give them too much warmth. I also use a moisture meter if we have had no rain. Be vigilant that plants get the moisture they need to survive our unpredictable weather. Especially check plants growing under eaves, where rain cannot reach.

Even though current wisdom is to prune fruit trees in October, or even earlier for apricot trees, you can still prune fruit trees, except for apricots, which can be damaged by moisture getting into the cuts. Is your fruit tree too tall? Pick a height and stick to it by lopping and topping the branches that shoot straight up. Use a dormant oil spray during our short winter for peach leaf curl and codling moth in apple, pear, and quince trees, as well as diseases on roses. Remember to spray the ground beneath the drip line. Rake up and destroy any fallen leaves and fruit to prevent overwintering of disease. And speaking of fruit trees, in October I had to call the tree pruner to remove some of the persimmons from my Hachiya Persimmon tree because I had such huge orange softballs hanging from the tree that I was afraid the tree would split in half in a rainy wind storm. We got the last fruit off that tree today – last count, 227!! I put three buckets of the fruit out in front of my house and they were **all gone by 4PM.**

I plan to prune my hydrangeas in December, to remove dead wood and to improve the shape of the bushes.

I like more flowers so I prune more drastically than others would prune, going below doglegs, and lopping off spindly branches. Do you need to replace or add to your rose collection? Bare root roses and fruit trees are in stock at the nurseries. However, since Reagan's and Roger Reynold's nurseries are both gone,



I need to find replacement roses on the Internet. Even in catalogues, buying “bare root” makes roses and fruit trees much cheaper than those in containers. Soak the roots in a bucket of water for up to 24 hours to replenish lost moisture before planting them.

Camellia sasanqua and early flowering Camellia japonica should be blooming now.

If they aren't, give them each some acid fertilizer to encourage them. I don't think it is too late. *C. sasanqua* is a great choice for winter color, either in container or as a color spot for winter cheer. They tolerate more sun than *C. japonica*s. And don't forget cyclamen and hellebores to brighten the winter days. Cyclamen belong in a sunnier location than hellebores, that need partial to deep shade.

Plant spring-blooming bulbs now. Always give a handful of bone meal, covered with soil, to each hole, and soak the area after planting. And did you dig up your dahlias? The tubers could rot if we have heavy rains over winter. Also, clumps left in the ground over three years become impossible to divide and they produce shorter or less gorgeous flowers. For now, cut your stalks down to 6” above ground to let them dry up. Hollow stalks are vulnerable to rain. According to **Sharleen Fiddaman**, cover the tops of the hollow stems with a plastic drink cup. After a hard frost, or probably by now, it is safe to dig up the clumps. Do so carefully; dahlia tubers are thin skinned, with fragile little necks that are easily broken. Lay the tubers in plant trays on the lawn and hose them to get mud off. Sharleen stores them in the garage in peat moss in open plastic bags.



Remember to identify those crowded perennials. Dig around them; pull them out; chop the clump with a shovel. Put one quarter of the clump back in the ground, and bring the rest to the Garden Club meeting in January. I will take them off your hands, fluff them up and have them ready for our next Plant Give Away.

If you do not have the energy or time to do any of the above, please consider **MULCH**, my favorite 5-letter word, for any bare soil area or around your favorite plants. You will reap the benefits in springtime: mulch reduces soil erosion, smothers weeds, holds in moisture. Bored with no plants to talk to? Get those pruning clippers, hoes, shovels sharpened. Palo Alto Hardware has sharpeners available on a regular basis.

Happy Gardening,

Vicki Sullivan
Horticulture Chair