



Winter TLC for the garden and landscape

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Happy New Year!



Cold tolerant pansies (above) and yellow forsythia (bottom) give color to the winter landscape. (Photographs by Timothy Daly, Gwinnett County Extension Agriculture and Natural Resources Agent)

Your winter garden and landscape will benefit many times over from the hours you spend preparing for spring. Winter in metro-Atlanta is a time when our geographic area, known to gardeners as Zone 7b, often experiences freezing temperatures, followed by a few days of balmy, spring like weather. As you work in your garden preparing for spring blooms, you may discover overlooked tender plants. It is not too late to protect fragile plants from frigid days and nights.

Perhaps the most obvious yard preparation is cleaning up. Now is a good time to pick up limbs, sticks and bracken that have fallen from winter winds. You may have raked your leaves by the bushel in autumn but now find yourself contending with even more. Gather the leaves as you work your way through your landscape to give a vista of a well-tended yard and garden.

Prune roses and crepe myrtles during the winter months before spring begins since the blooms are produced on the new season's growth. Prune spring-flowering plants, such as clematis, honeysuckle, forsythia, azaleas, hydrangeas, and most viburnums after they have bloomed because the flower buds are formed on the wood from the previous year. Cutting them before flowering will remove most of the buds, thus, there will be very few blossoms. Mark your calendar to prune forsythia and early blooming bushes after their spring bloom has finished or no later than the Fourth of July. Our long springs and summers can allow early flowering plants to have a second bloom if pruned promptly after the initial flowering is complete.

The recent drought, which plagued our flora, kept many gardeners from pursuing their annual fall cleanup. The concern was the fear that the plants would suffer even more stress if pruned then, than if delayed until the drought had passed. Now is the time to prune those plants kept waiting. If you didn't cut back your iris, be sure to do so, to about 3-5 inches. All nutrition from their leaves has been harvested to the tuber, bulb or corm. Cutting away the dead leaves will nourish the dormant bulb and allow air to circulate, thus, help it to avoid disease while boosting vigorous bloom and growth.

When gardening in winter, remember to dress in layers covering your head, feet and hands. Even on the coldest of days, you will end up removing layers of clothing as your body warms up from your gardening activities. So my fellow gardeners, bundle up and enjoy the winter stewardship of your plants.



Winter weathered iris leaves (top) cut back to 3-5 inches (middle) to yield spring blossoms (bottom). (Middle photograph by Forrest Cordes, Atlanta gardener; top and bottom by Virginia Houghtaling, Gwinnett County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer).



Starting your herb plants from seeds

Cold weather is upon us and summer gardens are sleeping for the winter. Are you missing that dirt under your fingernails? Don't despair fellow gardeners, there is hope. Winter months are a great time to plan next spring's garden and start your plants indoors. Starting your own seeds allows for a wider variety and a bigger range of plants than are available in the local stores, and what gardener doesn't enjoy participating in nature's rebirth. Seed starting gives you that opportunity to experiment with and add to the variety in your garden.

Starting seeds indoors is simple and fun. Seeds can be started in almost any type of container, from egg cartons to milk jugs. Use pots you saved from last summer, or make your own from old newspaper or plastic bottles. Ready-made trays with dirt pods and heaters are available for very little money and provide a lot of growing space. Remember to poke drain holes in any container you use to allow for good drainage.

All-purpose potting soil, or seed-starting soil is usually the best to use. Do not use garden soil unless you sterilize it first as you could introduce pests and disease to your new seedlings. To sterilize soil, bake it at 170-180 degrees in your oven for two hours.

A fluorescent light fixture with a full spectrum grow lamp bulb is the best lighting, but I have been known to use a goose neck desk lamp over some seeds that seem to require extra light and heat to germinate. Pieces of cardboard covered with aluminum foil make good reflectors to place around your plants and help avoid the leaning problem.

Barely cover seeds, or in some cases, don't cover at all. Use warm water until seeds have sprouted, then use water at room temperature for the seedlings. Some seeds require a cold period to germinate. The refrigerator works well for that process. Putting hard to germinate seeds in warm wet paper towels often brings good results as well.

Many perennial herbs can be started as early as December, but most garden plants should not be started until February or March. Most seed packages will give you times and directions for starting the seeds indoors. Peppers and tomatoes are self-pollinating and grow easily in the house. Choose dwarf varieties, or ones that require longer growing seasons, such as pimento peppers. Start some borage, a herbaceous plant with bright blue flowers and hairy leaves, to plant in among your tomatoes to make them sweeter, or some chicory plants to make your own coffee substitute this summer.

My advice on indoor seed starting is to be creative, stretch your imagination, break all the growing rules, try new and fun plants, and have a great gardening winter.

Timely tips for winter gardening

- If the weather threatens a hard freeze, cover your pansies to minimize damage.
- Be sure your houseplants are adequately watered as indoor heating systems can cause them to dry out.
- Do not apply any fertilizer to your lawn. Since the grass is not actively growing, the fertilizer will not be absorbed.
- If you see daffodils beginning to emerge, do not worry as they are cold hardy and will not be affected by freezing temperatures.
- Lightly prune crepe myrtles and remove branches that are crossing each other, growing inward, or are damaged. Do not severely prune the trees as this practice can cause harm.
- Trees and shrubs can be planted throughout the winter months. The top parts are dormant, but the roots will grow and help the plants become established. Planting in winter will help them to be less vulnerable to heat and drought stress the following summer.

Written by Timothy Daly, Gwinnett County Extension Agriculture and Natural Resources Agent



Seeds can be started in almost any type of container, such as egg cartons or ready-made trays. (Photograph by Ann Thompson, Gwinnett Master Gardener Extension Volunteer).

Beat winter blahs with blooms

Written by Deborah Humphries, Gwinnett County Master Gardener
Extension Volunteer

Flowers brighten the dullest of days. Bring joy indoors to your home and others by forcing spring bulbs to bloom a bit early. Begin by selecting the very best bulbs to ensure beautiful flowers. You can even choose the appropriate level of difficulty for yourself.

Paperwhites and Amaryllis are very simple to force, requiring no chill time. Simply keep the bulbs in a closed paper bag in a cool, dry, dark, pest-free location (closet, basement, or garage) until two to three weeks before you want them to bloom. Then plant the bulbs in potting soil, leaving the tips exposed, or set them on top of rocks in a vase filled with water (keeping water level just below bulbs) and place in a warm sunny location.

Chill times for hyacinths, tulips, crocus, daffodils, and others can be found online. These bulbs should be chilled for the specified time between 35 and 45 degrees in a refrigerator, basement, or garage before potting and placing in a sunny location. You may opt to plant them and keep the planting chilled. Keep away from fruit when stored in a refrigerator.

Frugal gardeners can find a plethora of whimsical and classic containers at thrift stores, flea markets, and yard sales. Clean them with 10% bleach solution. To save on the bulbs themselves, look for store discounts on spring blooming bulbs after optimal planting time has passed, still selecting the highest quality bulbs.



Tulips yield extraordinary color indoors in the winter and later in the spring landscape.



Paperwhites are simple to force into bloom as they require no chill time. (Photograph by Deborah Humphries, Gwinnett County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer)



For an order form, please visit
www.gwinnettextension.com or
call 678.377.4010.

The Gwinnett Extension office is offering varieties of blueberries, blackberries, raspberries, figs, pomegranates, Goji berries, Native Azaleas, and other landscape plants for their annual sale. Pecan trees and the big Titan blueberry have also been added to the list.

We will be accepting pre-paid orders now through March 7.
There is always room for one more plant!



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