

## HOME GARDENING NEWSLETTER – December (Hampton Roads Area, VA)

Summer is finally over and it's time to enjoy your family, home and surroundings. Don't let the holiday shopping stress you out ... take time to play outside in your winter gardens. There are many winter blooming plants (perennial and annuals). Look around and if you have nothing in bloom then you may want to consider some late fall and winter blooming plants such as some sansanqua camellias, hellebores, winter roses, pansies, etc. Now is a great time to plant bulbs early spring bloomers. On average this month, it will be a high of 52 degrees and a low of 35 degrees and Hampton Roads will get 9 days of rain averaging 3.23 inches.

**Cool Season Grasses (Fescue):** You should have completed your fall three step feeding plan. If you did, your lawn should be green and lush, and you're cutting it about once a week. It's still not too late to fertilize a cool season lawn. Fescue grasses still grow as long as the ground is not frozen.

Cutting height: 2 ½ inch minimum. 4 inch optimum. pH: 5.5 – 6.5

**Warm Season Grasses (Bermuda, Centipede, Zoysia, St. Augustine):** Fertilizers ... only for Bermuda grass apply a 0-0-60 Potassium (K) fertilizer application to improve winter hardiness. The 3<sup>rd</sup> number on fertilizers is Potassium (K). Potassium is for plant vigor. Apply 1 lbs of Potassium per 1,000 square feet of lawn. A 10 lbs bag of 0-0-60 will is enough to cover 6,000 square feet of lawn.

Remove leaves from warm season lawns. Some leaves can be mulched into the lawn but if you have a large amount of leaves it is recommended to mulch cut and bag the leaves and then apply them as winter mulch to your gardens or used in a compost pile, providing the leaves did not come from a diseased tree or shrub. Diseased leaves should be discarded.

Cutting Heights: Bermuda ½" to 1", Centipede and Zoysia cut at 1". St. Augustine 2-3 inches. pH: Bermuda & Zoysia 6.0 to 7.0; St Augustine 6.5 to 7.5; and Centipede 4.5 to 5.5.

**Weed Control:** Through early December, if necessary, treat your lawn for winter annual weeds (buttercup, henbit, chickweed, dandelions, etc). You will be applying a broad leaf weed control product containing (2,4-D), Mecoprop (MCP), and Dicamba, except for St. Augustine and Centipede lawns. **St. Augustine and Centipede are very sensitive to 2,4-D.** Look for a product designed for these sensitive warm season turf grasses. Read the label and application instructions carefully before use. These weed controllers are systemic, which means the product is absorbed through the leaf structure and not the roots. The weeds have to be present before you apply the weed controller.

**Lime:** Lime only if a soil test indicted your pH is low. Do not lime for 'liming' sake. See September month's edition about liming guidelines.

**Tips for the Month: Holiday Plants:**

So, you have been given a holiday plant or you have decided to make your home more colorful by adding the holiday greenery. Either way, you need to know what to do once you have these plants in your home. Listed below are some popular plants and what you need to know about them.

### **Poinsettia: (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*)**

The poinsettia has gotten some bad press. It is not poisonous although many people think so. They are available in many varieties having different colors and shapes. Generally, the poinsettias purchased for holidays are considered **disposable**. What you see as the color on a poinsettia is actually the bracts and not flowers. You should look for well-shaped compact plants with uniform bract color. Once you get one home, this is how to deal with it.

- Place this plant in a sunny location, protected from drafts or chills
- Make sure the soil is well-drained soil, but keep the soil moist, not wet.
- Leaves will drop eventually, so when they do cut the plant back to two buds on the stem and reduce watering. Keep the plant in a cool place to rest.
- In late spring, after danger of frost, you can place the plant outside in a sunny location.
- If you want to use the plant next Christmas, cut it back in the summer. If you don't you will find the plants become rather large and leggy and are not attractive for inside use.
- You can take cuttings in late summer, when you cut them back. You want to make sure the pieces you are trying to root have at least 4 joints.
- To make a poinsettia bloom again, they need long nights so you should do the following.
- Starting in October put them in a closet each night **for 14 hours of darkness**.
- They should be getting no more than 10 hours of sunlight daily during this time
- You continue this for 10 weeks. Then place the plants under regular house conditions and you should get bract color for Christmas.

### **Christmas Cactus: (*Schlumbergera bridgessi*)**

These are not typical cacti; in nature, they actually live in trees like orchids. They like rich porous soil and fertilizer while in their growth and flowering stages.

- Allow soil to dry out before watering.
- To keep them blooming longer, reduce watering and keep in full sun at around 70 degrees room temperature.
- If you want to make one bloom, they need long nights and cool night temperatures, so place them in 12-14 hours of darkness, 50-55 degree temperatures during the month of November.
- If the buds drop and stems shrivel, you have probably kept the plant too dry and the roots have been damaged.

### **Amaryllis: (*Hippeastrum spp.*)**

This is a bulb plant typically used at Easter, however they are gaining ground for the Christmas holidays

- You usually purchase them in the bulb form, but they can be purchased in any stage of development.
- Place in a warm, sunny location and do not fertilize until after flowering.
- The soil should be kept on the dry side.
- It usually takes 4 weeks from bulb to flowering.
- The plant will be more compact and healthier if kept in tropical conditions, high light, and warm temperatures.

### Gloxinias: (*Sinningia speciosa*)

- These are close relatives of African violets and so should be treated as such.
- Look for 3 to 5 open flowers with about the same amount of buds coming along on compact plants with rich green leaves.
- Once home, keep the plants on the moist side, but not wet. Just like African violets, you should avoid getting water on the leaves. Keep them in a warm area free of drafts.
- The plant does not like direct sunlight (high-intensity light).
- If it is too dark or allowed to wilt, the plant will drop its buds.

### Kalanchoe, Ornamental Peppers & Cherries

- These are very durable plants and can bloom for at least 1 month in the home
- Kalanchoe are closely related to jade plants, they like it warm and dry.
- When choosing a Kalanchoe, look for lots of color and little or no dead flowers
- The Kalanchoe should have average approximately 3-5 clusters of flowers on a six-inch plant.
- Ornamental Peppers & Cherries are easily maintained, but are not for homes where prying little hands may want to pick the fruit & eat it.

### Other general gardening tips for this month:

- You still have time to make herb vinegars from chives, shallots, garlic, or any herbs on your windowsill for the holidays. Use approximately four ounces of fresh herbs to one quart of wine vinegar. Allow the herbs to infuse for at least two weeks.
- The use of fruit in wreaths, such as frequently seen in Colonial Williamsburg, was inspired by Luce della Robbia, a 15th century sculptor who carved garlands of fruit and nuts in his work. Fruit can be tied in place using a pliable, 18-weight florist wire that is first inserted through the fruit, then through the straw base. A wooden base with nails to secure fruit is also used. In cold weather that is above freezing, fruit will last for seven to eight days before it needs replacing (unless the birds decide to feast on your decor).
- Yews, junipers, holly, boxwood, broad-leaf evergreens, and many deciduous trees and shrubs can be propagated this month. Insert evergreen cuttings in vermiculite or sand in a cool greenhouse. Tie bundles of deciduous cuttings together, and bury in sand in a cold frame. Remove in early spring and, plant in a nursery bed. Small cuttings can also be used for holiday wreaths.
- The scent of bayberry candles is derived from the Northern bayberry *Myrica pensylvanica*, a salt-tolerant, semi-evergreen shrub well adapted to the Tidewater area. A

male and female should be planted together to ensure production of the ornamental berries.

- Never allow the reservoir of your Christmas tree holder to go dry as an air lock can form in the trunk that can keep the tree from absorbing water again. Christmas trees absorb between 2 pints and 1 gallon of water per day, so a tree stand that holds at least 1 gallon of water is recommended. Make sure to check the water level daily and supply fresh water as needed.
- For hours of window side enjoyment, trim a tree for the birds. Tie on dried fruit, suet, and peanut butter-covered pinecones rolled in birdseed. After Christmas, your tree can be moved outside and redecorated for the birds. Anchor the tree in a bucket full of damp sand. Leave on strings of popcorn and cranberries, and add strings of peanuts (in the shell). Apples, oranges, leftover breads and cakes, even peanut butter cookies can be hung on the boughs, but don't use any foods containing chocolate as it is poisonous to some small animals. For best results, push the edible ornaments well into the tree. Things that swing might scare birds.
- Be careful when using deicing salts around driveways and walks this winter; salt is toxic to many flowers, trees, shrubs, and lawn grasses. Sand, sawdust, or a combination of these work well for deicing walks and will not injure plants.
- Sunflower seeds will attract desirable birds, such as chickadees, tufted titmouses, finches, cardinals, and grosbeaks, to your feeder. Goldfinches and woodpeckers are attracted to suet.
- Keep mistletoe out of the reach of children and pets, as the berries are poisonous.
- If stored bulbs begin to shrivel, they are too dry. Place them in a container with potting medium, peat moss, or sawdust to stop the loss of water.
- Ask Santa for a special plant or garden tool for yourself. Begin a collection of your favorite perennials, and request a new plant every year. If you garden indoors, start a collection of succulents that can be added to yearly.
- Drain the fuel tank and run the lawn mower or tiller engine dry before putting the machine away for the winter.
- Check belts and spark plugs and buy replacements, change the oil, sharpen the blades or tines, and clean off dirt and plant debris so equipment will be ready to go when you need it next spring.
- Clean and sharpen lawn and garden tools, and store them in a dry storage area. A light coating of oil on exposed metal surfaces will prevent rusting.

### ***Herb Gardening Tips for this month:***

#### **Holiday Herbs by Diane Relf**

There are many plants that are traditionally used to decorate during the holiday season -- holly, spruce, fir, mistletoe -- but how did these plants get to be "traditions"? Why were they used in the first place? Some of them came to be associated with the holidays for their uses as decoration or flavoring, since holly with its red berries is one of the only colorful plants in the winter, and sage and juniper berries were often used to season the roast goose or turkey. But most of them were originally used because they symbolized a quality or emotion important to the spirit of the holidays. We have forgotten many of these symbolic meanings over the years, but

there is renewed interest in recovering our holiday "roots." I have found a few interesting references to the use of herbs in the holiday season.

Costmary, or alecost, leaves were used to add spice to holiday ale, or wassail, in old Europe. Ivy and bay laurel were long used, along with other greens, to help celebrate winter solstice in early Europe, ivy symbolizing friendship and bay laurel associated with Apollo, god of light, as a reminder that the long winter would soon melt into spring.

Everyone, of course, is familiar with the legend of the three kings and their gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Frankincense pods and myrrh gum are both scented plant materials that could be classified as herbs, and are becoming available today through potpourri material dealers. They could be used to make a "potpourri of three kings," blending these two with gold yarrow. Yarrow also has significance in the Christmas tradition in its own right, as it is sometimes called carpenter's weed (for its purported folk-healing powers against cuts) and associated with Joseph the carpenter, the earthly father of Jesus.

Rosemary has one of the nicest of the Christmas legends. It is said that the flowers of rosemary were originally white, but the Virgin Mary laid her blue cloak upon the fragrant branches one day, and the flowers took on the soft, clear-blue color of that sacred garment. Until the 20th century, rosemary was a very popular Christmas evergreen, right up there with holly and mistletoe. A gilded rosemary sprig was a treasured gift. Why it fell out of use is a mystery, but it is starting to make a comeback with the use of rosemary in holiday wreaths and rosemary topiaries as small Christmas trees. Perhaps the use of rosemary, which symbolizes remembrance, can help us, in these commercialized times, to remember the meanings of our winter holidays.

### **Other Fruits and Vegetable Gardening Tips for this month:**

- Fruit trees can be pruned at any time during the winter provided the temperature is above 45F.
- Mice chew off the bark of fruit trees at ground level or below and often completely girdle a tree causing it to die. To reduce this damage, keep mulch pulled away from the base of the tree and examine mulch frequently for the presence of mice. Leave a bare circle, one foot wide, around fruit tree trunks when spreading mulch so the mice won't nest there.
- The Jerusalem artichoke, a perennial sunflower, is a native of the Great Plains. The Italians gave it a name that meant "turning to the sun" which the English thought sounded like Jerusalem. In some supermarkets today, they are marketed as "sun chokes."

Don't forget to visit ....

<http://www.chesapeake.va.us/services/depart/agricul/master-gard.html> (Chesapeake MG Programs)

<http://www.vbmg.org> (Virginia Beach MG Programs)

[www.ext.vt.edu/resources](http://www.ext.vt.edu/resources) (Virginia Tech Gardening Information)

<http://www.virginiazoo.org/horticulture/> (Virginia Zoo Horticulture)

<http://norfolkbotanicalgarden.org> (Norfolk Botanical Garden)

<http://www.yorkcounty.gov/vce> (York County MG Programs)  
<http://jccwmg.org/> (James City County/Williamsburg Master Gardeners)  
<http://members.cox.net/fhcgarden/> (Fred Heutte Center Information)

**DECEMBER PRUNING CALENDAR:** Changes from previous month underlined. The below pruning calendar applies to all of Virginia and was compiled by Virginia Tech. Shrubs and trees have 'Best time to Prune' months, 'Do not Prune' months, or timing is not critical months. Those plants listed below are the "best time to prune" or 'do not prune'. If a tree or shrub is not listed, then timing is not critical this month. The best time to prune is based upon optimizing flowers or fruits and reducing summer/winter stresses. Deadheading or removing spent flowers on flowering shrubs is OK all growing season, for plants such as Rose, Crepe Myrtle, Butterfly bushes, etc. Pruning to remove diseased or dead branches is necessary when you see them. Contact your local extension agent if you need more detailed information about any specific plant. REMEMBER to keep your pruning equipment sharp. Make sure you clean them each time you prune with 9 parts water to 1 part bleach solution or the same ratio water to antiseptic mouthwash to prevent the spread of plant disease.

When the weather is hot and dry, try to avoid pruning your plants. If you do, the plant will require extra water. Wait for cooler days if at all possible.

(NOTE: For those of you who live in the more temperate (Hampton Roads) or coastal areas of VA or NC you may want to hold off pruning any Shrubs and Trees marked with an \* until January or February as these plants produce flowers on new seasons growth. Coastal areas tend to get some sustained warm days in winter and the plants can be 'tricked' into thinking spring is here only to be hit with a frost and kill some of the new flower buds.)

**Shrubs:** Abelia, Arborvitae, Beautyberry, Cherrylaurel, Clethra, Cotoneaster, Eleagnus (thorny), Euonymus (evergreen/deciduous), Holly (deciduous), Juniper, Osmanthus, Holly, Photinia, Mugo Pine, Privet (*Ligustrum*), Potentilla, Smoke Tree, Sumac, and Yew.

**Do Not Prune:** Flowering Almond, Aucuba, Azalea, Barberry, Bayberry, Beautybush, Broom (*Cytisus*), Butterfly Bush, Camellia japonica (spring bloomer), Camellia sansanqua (fall bloomers), Chastetree, Crape Myrtle, Daphne, Deutzia, Forsythia, Fothergilla, Gardenia, Harry Lauder (Walking Stick), Hibiscus (incl: Rose of Sharon & Althea), Holly (evergreen), Honeysuckle, Hydrangea, Hypericum (St. Johnswort), Indian Hawthorne, Jasmine (winter), Kerria, Leucothoe, Lilac, Mahonia (Orange Grapeholly), Mockorange, Mountain Laurel, Nandina, Pearlbush, Pieris, Pittosporum, Pyracantha, Quince, Rhododendron, Rose, Serviceberry, Spirea, Sweetshrub, Viburnum, Weigela, Pussy Willow, and Witch hazel.

**Evergreen Trees:** (Seldom need pruning. Most evergreen trees are pruned during the winter months.) Arborvitae, Atlas Cedar, Deodar Cedar, Chamaecyparis, Fir, Holly, Juniper, Leyland Cypress, Southern Magnolia, and Live Oak

**Do Not Prune:** None.

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**Deciduous Trees:** Alder, Birch, Elm, Goldenrain Tree, Maple, Oak, Poplar, Sophora, Sourwood, and Stewartia.

**Do Not Prune:** (except to correct damage): Buckeye, Flowering Cherry, Crabapple, Crape Myrtle, Dogwood, Fringe Tree, Hawthorn, Horsechestnut, Magnolia, Flowering (Peach, Pear or Plum), Redbud, or Serviceberry.

**Mark your calendar:** (open to everyone and free unless indicated)

**December 5 (Sunday): Tidewater Community College Horticulture Club Poinsettia Sale** from 1 PM to 4 PM. Chesapeake Campus Greenhouses at Cedar Road. Sale will continue Monday and Tuesday (11AM – to 1 PM and 4:30 PM to 7:30PM) if supplies last. Call 822-5090 for more information.

**December 4 and 5: “An Old Norfolk Christmas”** Arts and Craft Show at the Fred Heutte Center 1000 Botetourt Gardens, Norfolk, VA. For more information visit [http://members.cox.net/fhcgarden/old\\_norfolk\\_christmas\\_2004.htm](http://members.cox.net/fhcgarden/old_norfolk_christmas_2004.htm) or call (757) 441-2513.

**December 14 (Tuesday):** 7 PM. 2004 Trees are Priceless Series. – **Tree Use in the Landscape.** – trees to use for shade, flowers, screens, wet areas, etc. presented by Dr. Bonnie Appleton, author and Professor, Virginia Tech. from 7-9 p.m. in the Holly Room of the Norfolk Botanical Garden (NBG), Azalea Garden Road, Norfolk. To register contact Betty Ann Galway at 441-5830 (ext 336).

**January 21 – 23: Virginia Flower and Garden Show** (admission). International Gardens. Virginia Beach Pavilion for more information visit <http://www.vafgs.org/> or call 757-853-0057.

**January 31 - February 3: Mid Atlantic Horticulture Short Course** at the Ramada Plaza Resort Conference Center. For more information call (757) 423-4734 or visit. [www.mahsc.org](http://www.mahsc.org).

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Portsmouth:	393-5314	Suffolk:	923-2050	Virginia Beach:	427-4769
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**“We hope you find this gardening newsletter helpful.”**  
**Happy Gardening !!!**