



## From the Bedford VCE Master Gardener HELP DESK

December 2013

*A monthly newsletter column for Bedford Extension Master Gardeners.  
Now available at the BAMGA website for interested gardeners, like you!*

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### DECEMBER GARDENING CHORES

As the year winds down both Mother Nature and calls to the VCE Help Desk take a break. I did a quick check of Help Desk log sheets over the past four years and not a call or request was received. Thus, I thought I would take this opportunity to review “December Gardening Chores.”

#### **Lawn Care:**

It’s pretty simple: Stay off frozen grass. By December it is too late to fertilize; and under normal conditions lawns should have received their final mow. Continue to remove fallen leaves from the lawn and either shred to put into your compost pile(s) or use as mulch in your flower/veggie gardens.

#### **Trees and Pruning:**

Pruning deciduous shrubs and trees is probably the most important task for December. Now that plants have gone dormant and the stems are bare, it is the perfect time to remove crossing branches on trees and shrubs. You can also remove wayward branches on evergreen shrubs. Please remember, however, that for those plants that set blooms for the following year during the current year (azalea, for example), if pruned in the winter they will not have blossoms for the following year.

For detailed and specific information about how and when to prune your plants, please refer to “A Guide to Successful Pruning” series – Shrub Pruning Calendar [pubs #430-462.pdf], Deciduous Tree Pruning Calendar [pubs #430-460.pdf], and Evergreen Tree Pruning Calendar [pubs #430-461.pdf]. Careful attention should be paid as to when to prune plants that bloom.

If you are looking to shape your hedges, it would be best to wait until we get closer to spring. Severe pruning will often force new vegetative growth that is easily killed by freezes and late spring frosts.

#### **Perennials and Herbaceous Plants:**

By December most of the deciduous plants should have been impacted by freezing temperatures. If your perennials have turned into brown clumps of mostly unrecognizable yuck, remove the foliage and add it to your compost pile. If some of your deciduous perennials still have green leaves, consider leaving them alone for a while to allow the plant to continue to photosynthesize and add to its stores for next year.

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If you have had fungal problems on your shrubs, more likely than not the spores are on the fallen leaves. Removing them now should prevent reoccurrences in the spring. Unless your compost gets really hot, it's wiser to bag the diseased leaves to avoid risking spreading the disease around.

As a follow-up from last month's column if you have decided to tidy up your perennial beds and shrubs over winter, remove any fallen leaves from the bases of shrubs to allow for good air circulation around the stems. It should also prevent any unwanted critters (voles) from enjoying shelter near your prized plants.

Ensure that all plants have enough moisture to their roots to survive winter. A light top-dressing of mulch (2" to 4") on your perennial beds will help them over-winter and conserve that moisture. And finally, if the ground hasn't frozen it is *still* not too late to plant hardy spring-flowering bulbs

### **Seeds and Vegetables:**

If you have any leftover seeds store these in a cool and dry place. Some gardeners save their seeds in a jar placed in the refrigerator. A rule of thumb is that seeds should not be saved much longer than three years. If you have vegetables in storage check them for spoilage and disease and remove affected vegetables.

### **Equipment and Miscellaneous:**

December is a good time to inspect, clean and oil all your gardening equipment. Fix or replace any broken equipment. Drain and store your garden hoses for the winter to prevent freezing and bursting. In addition, if you have any uninsulated water spigots going from inside to the outside of your home remember to turn them off from the inside and drain the pipes.

If you are like me, you haven't gotten around to cleaning out the dead annuals in your outside pots. It is especially important to clean out the terra cotta pots so they don't crack with the freezing and thawing of the potting soil. Both the plant and used soil can be put into the compost pile. Store the cleaned pots in a sheltered location, garage, or shed. Encourage or reinvigorate your compost pile in December by giving it a good turn (or two)!

### **Indoor Plants:**

If your house plants are looking a bit 'leggy' try giving each pot a quarter turn to expose a different side to sunshine. Or, consider moving the plant to a different location in the house where it will receive the appropriate amount of sunlight.

Give your house plants extra humidity by grouping plants together. The indoor climate during the winter tends to be dryer as we heat our homes.

Remember to sponge off glossy leaved plants such as Rubber plants and palms. This allows your plants to breathe, especially during that time of year when indoor pollution is at its' height. Plus, doing this in December gives the added benefit of making you feel like you are still gardening.

### **Time To Dream:**

If you started a list of garden things to do or change for 2014, continue to add to it as additional ideas pop into your head. If you haven't already started that list, it is never too late to begin one. And finally, during the busy holiday season make sure to give yourself some time to look through the seed catalogues that will start arriving. It is never too early to start dreaming of and planning for the upcoming year and making a list of new plants to try.

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## REFERENCES:

“Environmental Lawn Care Calendar”; S. Baker; Bedford VCE

[http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/430/430-462/430-462\\_pdf.pdf](http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/430/430-462/430-462_pdf.pdf)

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<http://midatlanticgardening.com/gardening-calendar-december/>

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The answers provided herein were based on specific situations and growing conditions. These recommendations may or may not be appropriate for all circumstances. For specific recommendations for your particular situation please contact your local Cooperative Extension Office.

Bedford County Extension Office: (540) 586-7675 / Email: Help Desk @ [BedfordMG@vt.edu](mailto:BedfordMG@vt.edu)

Websites: [www.BedfordAreaMasterGardeners.org](http://www.BedfordAreaMasterGardeners.org) and <http://offices.ext.vt.edu/bedford/>



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