

February Tips: To-Dos, What to Plant, and How to Control Pests and Diseases

1. To-do

Composting -

Composting is a good way to repurpose yard and kitchen waste, and it provides a free method to feed plants and improve soil structure. Want to learn about how to compost? Take a class at the University of California Cooperative Extension Composting Education Program http://cesantaclara.ucanr.edu/Home_Composting_Education/

As the weather warms up, compost piles dry out faster. Keep compost piles as damp as a wrung-out sponge to keep organisms alive and working on decomposing yard waste.

Turning the pile to incorporate more oxygen also supports life in the compost pile.



Worm Composting -

Worm composting also called vermiculture or vermi-composting is a convenient way to decompose kitchen waste and provide nutrient-rich soil amendments for your vegetable garden.

Cut Back and Divide Perennials -

Winter is a good time to cut back perennials and bunch grasses. Perennials such as hummingbird sage and most kinds of hummingbird fuchsia can be cut back all the way to the ground. Perennials like daylilies and chrysanthemums can be divided during this time.

Bunch grasses such as purple needle grass (the official California state grass), Idaho fescue and deer grass, and some perennials like Douglas iris, alum root, seaside daisy and yerba buena, can be propagated by division this time of year.

Dormancy and Chill Hours -

The positive side of cold weather is that fruit trees native to colder climates, such as cherries and blueberries, may get the chill hours they need to produce good fruit. Going dormant saves energy which can then go into fruit development. No need to protect them on cold nights. Knowing the native habitat of your plants will guide you in caring for them. Mimicking the success of nature leads to greater success in your own garden.

Fertilizing Fruit Trees -

As fruit starts to develop, trees and vines use nutrients to help with this energy-intensive task. This is a good time to plan a strategy for fertilizing your trees.

In the first year, a very light application of nitrogen (N) is desirable for most soils. Do not make first year applications before six to eight inches of new growth occurs. Split applications are safest, one or two months apart, so one application might be made this month.

After the first year: research indicates that summer fertilizer applications (August to mid-September) are more efficient than late winter (traditional) applications.

Fully mature fruit trees may not need fertilizing

Frost Dates and Avoiding Frost Damage -

The last frost date for Santa Clara County is March 15. First and last frost dates are important (but approximate) dates for gardeners to remember. Last frost date—after this date you wouldn't expect any more frosts. It's generally used as a milestone when planting outdoors, or pruning frost sensitive plants (such as citrus where you don't want to stimulate delicate new growth until danger of frost is past).

Note that microclimates in the county, and unusual weather conditions make these approximate dates.

When there's a threat of frost, make sure your frost-tender plants are well-watered. Soil that is damp can hold more heat than soil that is dry. According to the UC publication on the Principles of Frost Protection, "when the soil is wet ... more heat is stored during daylight for release during the night."

Frosts or a hard freeze can kill tender plants and can damage citrus, especially young plants so protection is a good idea on those cold, clear winter nights. Place stakes around tender plants and cover with clear plastic or fabric such as a sheet or old drapery. Don't let the material touch the foliage.



Wrap larger plants with strings of Christmas tree lights (incandescent bulbs not LED bulbs) or position a 100–150 watt spotlight in the center of the tree and cover the plant with a sheet. Turn the lights on at night.

If plants are potted, then move them to a sheltered area such as a porch, under the eaves on the south side of the house or even under a tree. Be sure to uncover them during the day. Moving them indoors to a cool room would be good if possible.

If you have plant damage from frost, wait until spring to prune. Early pruning can lead to further dieback along stems and branches because the dead material helps protect the plant from further damage.

Fruit Tree Grafting -

When pruning dormant fruit trees, you may want to save cuttings (scions) for later grafting onto other fruit trees. Grafting is a technique that allows you to have multiple varieties of

compatible fruit on one tree and is a great space saver. Fruit trees can have new varieties grafted to them when they are dormant in January and February.

Growing Vegetables in Containers -

Container grown vegetables can be decorative as well as good to eat. Almost any vegetable can be grown in a container if given the proper care. Eggplant, peppers, tomatoes, lettuce, onions, carrots, cucumbers and herbs do well.

One of the biggest problems is that containers dry out very fast and nutrients wash away. Both are solvable. Do not use clay pots, which dry out quickly. Plastic, composite or wooden half-barrels are good, but avoid dark colors that can absorb heat. Vegetables like a roomy container.

There must be drainage holes in the bottom but it is not recommended that you put pebbles or broken crockery in the bottom. Use a good commercial potting mix, not planter or planting mix. Group the containers together so they will shade one another.

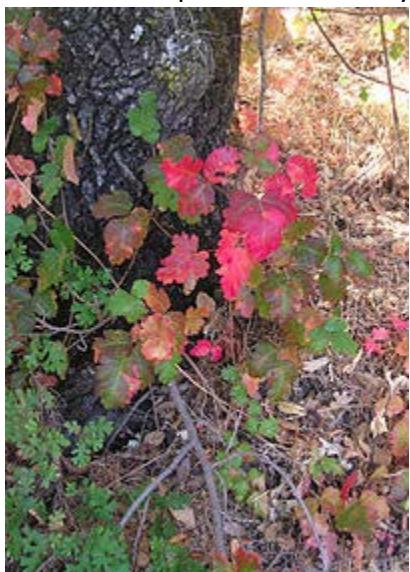
House Plant Care -

You may notice your house plants leaning towards the windows. A good way to keep the growth uniform is to rotate them a quarter turn every time you water. And don't water so much that you're seeing lots of yellow leaves and gnats.

Overgrown Shrubs -

If your shrubs have become too large for their allotted space, you may be able to resize them rather than replace them. Many woody shrubs can be cut back to within a few inches of the

ground. These include Buddleia (butterfly bush), Artemisia (wormwood), and Salvia leucantha (Mexican sage). Maybe worth a try before replacing the plant.



Poison Oak -

Poison oak is a California native plant that provides shelter and food for many native birds and other creatures. The downside is that at least 75% of us develop allergic contact dermatitis to the plant. Unwanted poison oak can be pulled or dug up by allergy-resistant friends, remove plants in early spring or late fall when the soil is moist and it is easier to dislodge rootstocks.

A complete list of management options, including herbicide control, is contained in the UC Pest Note on Poison Oak. **Under no circumstances should poison oak be burned.**

Save the Worms -

Worms aerate the soil with their tunneling, break down organic material such as fallen leaves and make the nutrients available to plants, and they excrete nice rich fertilizer in the process. They help create a sustainable system in your garden and do a lot of your garden chores for you. If you see them on the sidewalk during heavy rains, rescue them and take them to a safe place in your yard.

Winter Fruit Tree Pruning -

According to UC's Backyard Orchard website, "the optimum time of year to prune fruit trees is the dormant season, December, January (best) and until the middle of February." Apricots are the exception for pruning in January; they should be pruned in the summer after harvest. If you properly prune and care for fruit trees you will get the highest yield of fruit. A good rule of thumb is to prune plum, pluot, apple, and pear trees 15-20%; and peaches 50%.

Do not prune apricot and cherry trees in winter because they are susceptible to Eutypa dieback. The best time to prune them is late August before the rainy season starts. While you're outside pruning, remember to pick up any rotting fruit on the ground at the same time.



Prune Apple Trees -

Once your apple tree loses its leaves, it's time to think about pruning. Apple trees produce fruit terminally on spurs located on wood 2 yrs. to 8 yrs. old. Weak and unproductive branches should be thinned out to allow the sunlight into the tree for good spur development. Older spurs can be rejuvenated by cutting back, especially following a light crop year. Tree height is maintained by cutting

back upper branches to shorter laterals. Excessive pruning of a bearing tree can negatively affect its vigor and fruit.

Prune Roses-

January/February are good times to prune roses. A basic guide is to keep 3-6 strong, healthy, outside canes per plant and leave 3-5 buds on each cane. Cut on the diagonal $\frac{1}{4}$ inch above an outward-facing bud. More information is available at UC Pest Note on Roses: Cultural Practices. The San Jose Heritage Rose Garden offers free hands-on pruning classes every Saturday in January and February.

Prune Deciduous Trees-

Deciduous trees can be pruned anytime during their dormant season (in winter). Prune deciduous species, such as Western spice bush, creek dogwood, Western mock orange, red-bud, maples and deciduous oaks.

Pruning Tips:

Make your cuts with care in order to direct the growth for next year. To have an open tree with good air circulation, make cuts above outward-facing nodes. Choose nodes where you want new growth and make a cut about a quarter inch above, refer to the image below.

Pruning Tools –

Keep them clean and sharp. Remember to keep your pruners and loppers sharp. Good pruners use bypass blades rather than anvil type. Anvils have only one cutting blade and one flat blade which can result in "smashing" the plant material. Sterilize the pruners or loppers between each plant and after cutting off any diseased plant material. Use a 10% bleach solution (1 part bleach, 9 parts water) or disinfectant bathroom cleaner.

Pruning Large Limbs -

When cutting large limbs, take special care to prevent ripping of the limbs and trunk since a clean cut heals faster. Use a three-cut method for branches larger than 1" diameter. Step 1: make a cut halfway through the

Under side of the branch, a little past where you want the final cut. Step 2: move the saw to the top of the branch, a little further out on the branch, and cut the branch off. Step 3: make the final pruning cut close to the connecting branch or trunk, just outside the bark collar.

Winter Irrigation -

Depending on the fall weather and rain frequency you will likely set your sprinklers to water less frequently or even turn them off for a while. It's still important to check outdoor plants to make sure they have enough water. While they need less water when it's cool, it's important to make sure they don't dry out. If you have a lawn and rains haven't come, irrigate the lawn once or twice this month.

If it has been raining, the soil may be saturated so be careful if you have to walk on it so as not to compact it. Also if soil is waterlogged, vital space for air that is needed for plants and worms and excess water can drown beneficial soil organisms and contribute to rotting roots.

2. What to plant

Bare Root Plants -

Bare root plants are sold without any soil clinging to the roots making them easier and less expensive to transport; they'll do just fine in the garden as long as you don't let them dry out before planting. Because you can see the roots and can control how they're placed in the soil, it helps reduce the chances for root girdling problems later. Buy and plant early in the month while roots are still fresh.

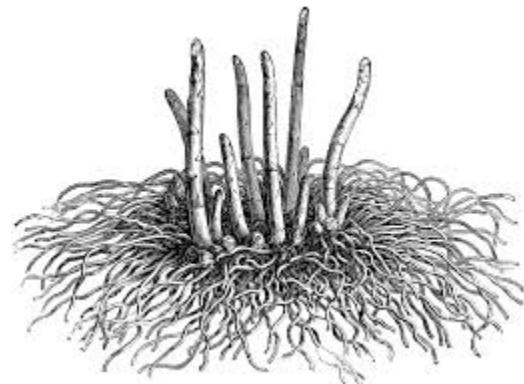
The bare roots should be soaked from an hour to overnight (large plants) in a bucket of water before planting. Trim roots of broken, dead or spongy bits and carefully pull the roots apart. Dig

a hole that is fairly shallow and wide. Spread the roots out sideways and have the crown of the plant several inches above the soil level. This is necessary as the plant will settle down over time. Water in well but wait to fertilize until you see new shoots growing. Be sure to water regularly if the rains are sparse. Staking may not be necessary.

Trees aren't the only plants that are sold bare root. You can also plant bare root asparagus, artichokes, rhubarb, berries, kiwifruit, horseradish, rhubarb, grapes, roses, strawberries, and iris in January.

Blueberries -

Blueberries in stores often come from cooler climates like Oregon and Maine, yet there are many varieties that do very well in our area. Blueberries need a more acidic soil than is typically found in our area, so the soil needs to be amended with sulfur (preferably) or peat (less sustainable). Annual post-harvest pruning will stimulate new growth and increase yield.



Plant Asparagus Crowns -

Asparagus crowns can be planted now. Dig a trench eight to twelve inches deep, mix in fertilizer at the bottom and cover with two inches of soil. Set the roots in the trench about 18 inches apart, and cover with two inches of soil. Gradually fill in the trench as the plants start to grow. Asparagus is a perennial vegetable that will produce for several years. It's best to wait until the second year to harvest to let a strong root system develop for long term production.

Starting Pepper Seedlings -

The hottest varieties of peppers need a long growing season for the pods to ripen. You can give them a head start by starting them indoors from seed as early as January. The outdoor soil is too cold for the seeds to germinate, so you can start them in a warm area indoors and even put them on a heating mat designed specifically for seed starting.

Trees for Patios and Small Spaces -

Non-aggressive root systems, no messy fruit, small size, relatively free from pests and attractiveness are some of the things to look for. Some examples are Japanese Maple, Chinese Pistachio (male), White or Pink Hybrid Crape Myrtle, Tollenson's Weeping Juniper, Flax-leaved Paperbark, Strawberry tree and Canadian Redbud.

3. Pests and Diseases

Citrus Fruit Damage -

Your oranges are ready to pick when they turn a nice bright orange. The ones on the sunny side of the tree generally ripen first. If you don't get to them first, there are critters that will let you know when they are ripe.

Snails leave little holes in the outside peel, rats hollow out the fruit, and squirrels carry them off, often leaving partly eaten fruit on a nearby fence.

Eutypa Dieback on Apricot Trees -

The sudden dieback of individual branches during mid to late summer can lead to dry brown leaves that may remain on the branches until the following winter. This is due to a fungal parasite caused by airborne spores that enter fresh pruning wounds. Cankers develop around



an infected wound and eventually kill the branch. Death can take months or even years. The danger of spreading is highest in the fall during early rains and again in the spring. Prune apricot trees in July or August before fall rains begin.

Gray Mold (Botrytis) -

Botrytis is gray or brownish fuzzy mold that can attack a wide variety of plants. It likes flower petals, ripening fruits and vegetables, as well as leaves and stems. The spores are spread through the air. It is most severe when there's high humidity and may start forming on decaying matter. According to the UC Pest Note on Botrytis Blight, it is important to remove debris and prunings from the ground. You may even have to pick up flowers daily. Avoid overhead watering.

Snails and Slugs -

Snails and slugs are patrolling your garden right now looking for new growth. A preferred non-toxic method for dealing with them is to handpick early in the morning, or at night by flashlight. They can be saved for your friends with chickens, or crushed in place. If you do use snail bait, those made with iron phosphate are not toxic to pets and wildlife and they work well enough.

Weed Management -

Whichever variation of "One year's seeds makes seven years' weeds" you prefer, the truth remains: a key part of weed control is not letting them go to seed. For best results, work on removing weeds before they go to seed, and when the ground is moist. Hand pulling and hoeing are effective methods for killing many common weed.