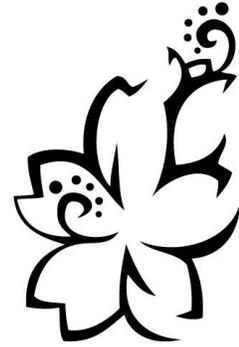
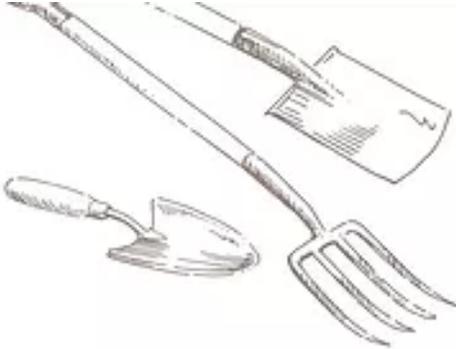


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December Gardening Tips



December marks the beginning of our true winter here in Southern California. The days grow cooler and shorter, shadows are longer and plant growth comes to a near halt until sometime in February. Normally, December fulfills its winter role with cold and rain, although it can sometimes bring a Santa Ana not unlike the one we had recently that makes you swear that August has returned! So, whenever the weather brings hot drying winds be prepared to hand-water your plants.

If you are too busy to give your garden much attention this month, you're in luck as most plants will do quite well with little help from you. If you prepared for winter in the fall, sit back, relax, and enjoy the holidays. If you still haven't finished your fall gardening tasks, don't worry...the fall planting window hasn't quite closed just yet.

If you can find the time, working in the garden this month is wonderful. The weather is cooler and when the soil dries a little following a hypothetical rain shower, it's perfect for digging. However, be careful not to go to work too quickly after a rain because working a wet soil can physically harm it. Grab a fistful and squeeze it lightly: if it crumbles when you loosen your grip it's just right; if it stays in a tight ball it's still too wet.

New Plantings

Plant **Azaleas** and **Camellias** this month. They are best planted while in bloom which is helpful because you can see what colors you are adding to your garden.

Sasanqua Camellia is in bloom right now. Although the flowers are smaller than and not as long-lasting as the camellia japonica, the plant blooms profusely and can take more sun.

Cool-Season Vegetables: Between harvests you can still plant cool-season vegetables such as broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, celery, kale, kohlrabi, mustard, lettuce and other greens, and root crops like beets, carrots, radishes and turnips. Planting asparagus at different depths will provide a longer harvest. The shallow asparagus will send up its spears early in the season and the deeper crowns will bear later.

Cool-Season Flowers: Bright colors make for a festive front yard. If you live in a mild coastal zone there is no need to wait for spring; you can still fill in those bare spots with flowers. Poinsettias, cyclamen, alyssum, holly, evergreens with lights and living wreaths of succulents make for living cheer and color.

Wildflowers: Sow wildflowers. A generous definition of "wildflower" would be any annual or perennial that reseeds itself. Under this definition: fall cosmos, gaillardia, annual gypsophila, foxglove, larkspur, nasturtiums, violas and viper's bugloss (*Echium vulgare*). Their display can last into early summer.

Garden Maintenance

Native Plants: This is the growing season for California Natives so if the weather is extended-dry, water these plants. Native plants can also be pruned now, and they can still be planted.

Cymbidiums: Some cymbidiums start to bloom in December although most bloom between February and March. Continue to feed the plants for bloom (low nitrogen fertilizer) until the buds open.

Fruit Trees: Dormant spray deciduous fruit trees. Dormant sprays such as horticultural oils or lime-sulfur are applied after a deciduous plant has gone dormant and dropped its leaves. Dormant sprays are used to control overwintering mites and insects such as scale.

Peaches: If your peach or nectarine had leaf curl (puckered, yellow and red leaves) this year spray it with lime sulfur at full leaf fall. If you sprayed your peach trees in November wait till January for the second treatment. Do not use this spray on apricot trees - use copper instead. Start pruning now. The plants are as dormant as they will get here in California. Most all deciduous plants (those that lose their leaves in winter) do best pruned in the winter.

Don't fertilize or water **roses** this month. They need to harden off for winter. In desert areas you may want to give them an occasional drink if you think they need it. In areas where frosts are just an occasional thing, keep plantings well-watered so whenever a freeze threatens plants are more likely to survive. A well-hydrated plant is better-equipped to recover than a dehydrated plant. If a plant is damaged by frost resist the urge to prune the damaged parts. They may well protect the rest of the plant during any subsequent frost.

Move your **cacti and succulent** dishes and potted trees under cover for protection from cold and rain. For overnight protection when frost threatens, cover bougainvillea, fuchsia, hibiscus, and other sub-tropicals with large cardboard boxes or drape old sheets or tarps on stakes over them.

Stimulate **wisteria** by cutting it back now. Cut back the long thin branches that appeared this season alongside or entangled with the older wood. Leave two or three buds at the base of the branch.

Feed **shrubs** and **trees** that will bloom in January and February. If azalea and gardenia foliage is light or yellowish-green, water with a solution of chelated iron.

If you plan to decorate a live Christmas tree indoors and then move or plant it outdoors afterwards, choose a smaller size of tree as it will adapt better than a more mature one.

Prune conifers and broad-leafed **evergreens** to shape, then use trimmings for holiday decorations. Branches that hold their shape well indoors include incense cedar, fir, laurel, magnolia, oleander, pine, pittosporum, podocarpus and viburnum. The red berries from cotoneaster, nandina, and pyracantha always serve as a bright accent.

Living plants for **indoor color** include African violets, azaleas, begonias, Christmas cactus, Christmas (Jerusalem) cherry, cyclamen, and kalanchoe, as well as the ever-dependable chrysanthemum and poinsettia. Be sure to give living plants bright indirect light, keep them cool and out of drafts and water them just enough to keep the potting mix barely moist. Cacti and succulents are also good choices, but they will need direct sunlight and very little water.

Don't worry that your **houseplants** don't seem too vibrant right now--they're going dormant just like plants outdoors. Plants need this rest so stop feeding them and water them less frequently. Also, be sure they're not getting blasted with hot air from a heater vent or fireplace. Plants close to windows may get too much cold air at night so move them or provide a shield between them and the window. The most comfortable temperature range for indoor plants is 65-75 degrees. Remember, if you are comfortable chances are your plant is too.

Continue to water your over-wintering outdoor plants unless the rains keep the soil moist. Irrigation should be reduced, not stopped, as plant photosynthesis slows down and cold weather dries plants out.