

Virginia Cooperative Extension

Knowledge for the Commonwealth



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

This newsletter is geared to the home gardener for the care of plants that grow in the Hampton Roads Area (Eastern Virginia and NE North Carolina). However, the plant information is based upon caring for plants anywhere in the American Horticultural Society Heat Zones 6-8 and the USDA Plant Hardiness Zones 6b – 8a, which includes a major portion of the Continental United States. Below are links to both maps in case you are not sure in which zones you garden.

<http://www.usna.usda.gov/Hardzone/ushzmap.html>

http://www.ahs.org/publications/heat_zone_map.htm#1

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 Sasanqua camellias, hellebores, winter roses, pansies, etc. Now is a great time to plant the bulbs of 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 3rd 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 indicated your pH is low. Do not lime for ‘liming’ sake.

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 full sunlight or a sunny location, protected from drafts or chills. Keep between 65 and 72F.
- 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.
- These days you can now purchase custom-colored poinsettias. These plants have had the flower bracts "painted" different colors or had glitter added to give the plant that extra

sparkle. If these plants are held over to re-bloom next year, the plant will not have that same effect on its flower bracts.

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.

General Gardening Tips for this month:

- To avoid harming near-dormant plants during the winter, do not fertilize, and reduce but not eliminate watering until growth resumes in the spring.
- If outdoor plants dry out during the winter, the foliage can be damaged. Water plants in late summer and fall, especially if rain has been less than normal, and on warm winter days if soil is dry.
- 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.
- 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 cut live 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.
- 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.

- Mums and pansies tend easily to be heaved out of the ground during weather freezes and thaws, causing root damage. Place discarded cut live Christmas tree branches over flower beds to prevent this from happening.
- Use branches from discarded cut live Christmas trees to mulch beds of bulbs.
- Mulch perennial borders after the ground freezes to a depth of a two or three inches. Applying mulch too early increases the chance of harboring destructive field mice that are still on the lookout for comfortable winter quarters.
- Remove snow from evergreen shrubs to prevent suffocation and breaking. Tap the branches gently.

Interior Gardening Tips for this month:

- **Live Christmas Tree Tidbits**
 - 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.
 - When choosing a Christmas tree, be sure it is not too large for the room. Take a tape measure or folding ruler with you so you'll have less trimming to do once you get the tree home.
 - Low indoor humidity in winter can make cut Christmas trees dry out quickly. Before the needles start to drop from the tree, take it down. Don't try to prolong a festive feeling by endangering your home and family with a dried-out, flammable tree.
 - If possible, bring the Christmas tree into a partially heated area, such as a basement or porch, the night before decorating. This will help it adjust gradually to the warmer temperatures in your home. Its branches will relax a little, allowing for picking the "best" side.
 - If your Christmas tree drops a number of brown needles right after you bring it inside, not to worry. Conifers normally drop their 3- to 5 year-old needles throughout the winter and you are getting some of that natural leaf fall in your living room.
 - Place Christmas trees away from fireplaces, radiators, TV sets, and anything else that could dry the needles. Keep your Christmas tree well watered from the time it is brought home until it is discarded.
 - Don't use hemlocks as Christmas trees because they drop their needles almost immediately after they are brought inside. Instead use balsam or Douglas fir, pine, or spruce.
- Keep **mistletoe** out of the reach of children and pets, as the **berries are poisonous**.
- Bulb forcing can be started as late as mid-winter. Plant tulip bulbs with the tops just above the soil line and the flat side of the bulb toward side of the pot. Plant daffodils with the bulb tops even with the soil line. Hyacinth bulbs should be planted with the tops just above the soil. Crocus bulbs should be planted about 1 inch below the soil surface.
- The expression "fine herbes" may be found in many cookbooks. This is a French herb mixture containing chives, chervil, parsley, tarragon, and sometimes other herbs that were added to sauces, soups, and cheese and egg dishes.

- Houseplant foods are beneficial, but remember that a little fertilizer can go a long way. Many gift plants may not need to be fertilized until spring.
- The potted plants you receive during the holiday season are not meant to be kept as permanent house plants. They were raised in a greenhouse and do not adapt well to the conditions in your home. Treat them like long-lasting cut flowers -- enjoy them as long as possible, but discard when they become unattractive.
- Brown leaf edges develop on some potted tropical plants when grown indoors. To keep these plants looking their best, use sharp scissors and trim away dried portions of leaves, following the natural shape of the leaves.
- Keep your flowering chrysanthemum blooming longer by keeping the plant out of direct sunlight. Keep the soil slightly moist. Day temperatures should be 68F, and night temperatures 40 to 55F.
- Be sure to remove or punch holes in decorative foil around holiday plants, or it will collect water and cause roots to die.
- A common complaint in growing rubber tree plants indoors is yellowing leaves with dead spots on the edges. This is usually caused by overwatering. Bottom drainage helps remove surplus water. If the plant has been in the container for a long time, remove the soil ball and loosen the pot-bound roots. Remove some of the soil at the top of the ball, and transplant into a larger pot
- Seeds taken from fresh grapefruits and oranges sown in a well-drained, sandy soil will soon produce attractive, green-leaved plants.
- Rotate house plants in dim locations to sunny spots to keep them all in prime condition.
- House plants with large leaves and smooth foliage (philodendron, dracaena, rubber tree plant, etc.) benefit if their leaves are washed with clear water at intervals to remove dust and grime, thus keeping the leaf pores open.
- Pots of narcissus started indoors now will still bring the fragrance of spring before their outside cousin's bloom.

Herb 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.

Fruits and Vegetable Gardening Tips for this month:

- 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).
- 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."
- Prune your grapevines a little earlier this year to make a classic wreath. If you can't shape the wreath as you prune, before bending the vines, soak them in water overnight for increased flexibility.

Don't forget to visit

Master Gardener/Cooperative Extension Programs:

<http://cmgv.org> (Chesapeake MG Programs)

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

<http://www.nmgv.org> (Norfolk MG Program)

<http://jccwmg.org/> (James City County/Williamsburg Master Gardeners)

<http://www.yorkcounty.gov/vce> (York County MG Programs)

www.ext.vt.edu/resources (Virginia Tech Gardening Information)

Other Horticulture sites of interest:

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

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

<http://www.fredheutte.org/> (Fred Heutte Center Information)

<http://www.tidewaterbeekeepers.net/> (Tidewater Beekeepers Association)

<http://www.butterflysocietyofva.org/> (Butterfly Society of Virginia)

<http://www.tcc.edu/horticulture/> (Tidewater Community College School of Horticulture)

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 the new season's growth. Coastal areas

tend to get some sustained warm days in winter and the plants can be 'tricked' into thinking spring is here only do be hit with a frost that kills 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 sasanqua (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 (Oregon 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.

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.

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If you have any questions, you can call or visit your Virginia Cooperative Extension listed below:

Virginia (area code 757):

Chesapeake	382-6348	Eastern Shore:	414-0731	Hampton:	727-1401
Isle of Wight:	365-6261	James City:	564-2170	Newport News:	591-4838
Norfolk:	683-2816	Portsmouth:	393-5314	Suffolk:	923-2050
Virginia Beach:	427-4769	York County:	890-4940		

North Carolina (area code 252):

Currituck:	232-2262	Dare:	473-4290	Pasquotank:	338-3954
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“We hope you find this gardening newsletter helpful.”
Happy Gardening !!!