

DECEMBER GARDEN SCHEDULE FOR NEW YORK CITY

December is a busy month for most of us, but try to devote some time to your garden. There are varied tasks to be performed – between cleaning up last season's debris, winterizing remaining plant material and planning for the spring.

SNOW. It can almost be considered mulch. If the snowfall is deep and lasting it can protect plant roots from subsequent frosts by forming a top crust, which takes the brunt of cold air while enabling tender roots to survive below.

MULCH. In general, the soil should be bare in the winter but mulched with salt hay or any other non-weed, seed-bearing cover or planted with a hardy green cover such as a Winter Rye which can be dug under in the spring. Bare soil tends to erode, leach out and encourage weeds. Frost can crack bare moist soil and tear plant roots by expanding the soil, heaving out the plants. Mulch should be applied to most plants by now, even if the top growth looks completely dead. Apply rotted manure, bone meal and peat moss to Clematis, as they prefer neutral to alkaline soil. New plantings of Bearded Iris require at least four inches of mulch to prevent soil heaving.

BULBS. If the grounds are still unfrozen, there is still time to plant Tulips. They can often be bought at bargain prices now, but before purchasing, check your selection to make sure no shriveled, sprouted or rotted bulbs are included. Mulch your December bulb plantings heavily to allow them time to form the necessary roots for spring growth. As you pull up shriveled lily stalks in the garden, check the bottoms for small bulbs, as these can be replanted now for flowering in two to three years when the bulbs have developed to sufficient size.

COMPOST. Save your wood ashes from the fireplace this winter. Store them in watertight containers or add them to your compost pile. Wood ash is high in potash, an essential plant nutrient. Keep turning your compost heap; the decomposition process continues even though winter is upon us.

TOOLS. Store your clean and oiled tools in a secure dry place until spring. Note the additions you may care to make to your tool collection for next season. Make sure all tools are in good working order and make any necessary repairs – hone, sharpen, oil, paint and label. Sterilize pruning implements after each use.

PLANNING. Start ordering your seed catalogs now. Make note of varieties that produced well for you last season. Consider crop rotation in your garden planning for next spring. For example, do not plan to plant members of the cabbage family in the same area for a second year; next year plan to sow seeds of “heavy feeders” like Corn in the area in which peas grew this past year; plant vegetables top crops this year in the area where last year's root crops grew. Bare spots will be more apparent now, if you are considering purchasing additional perennials or hardy plant material.

WILDLIFE. Make a Christmas tree for birds. Tie sunflower heads, suet balls, dried fruit or commercial birdseed in containers to one of your trees. Try to leave out fresh pans of water and chip or pour hot water on it to melt ice daily. You must continue feeding birds throughout the winter though, once you start. The birds that you feed now will thank you during the growing season by devouring insects in you garden. Considering planting hardy plant material that will provide color and berries for birds year round – varieties of Holly, Ciborium, Pyracantha, Russian olive, Red Cedar and Hemlock meet these needs. Squirrels can be kept at bay by scattering nuts on the ground. Place a wire mesh screen around the trunk of the trees to prevent rodent damage to the bark, or making a repellent of five parts resin to one part linseed oil and paint the trunk with this mixture.

INDOORS. Plants received as holiday's gifts and used to a greenhouse environment will last considerably longer if you provide high humidity for them. Bulbs refrigerated for six to twelve weeks can be placed in a pot for forcing now. Paper white Narcissi should be started now for indoor bloom in January/February.

PROJECTS. You may want to construct benches, play equipment, birdhouses, etc. while you are cooped up inside during cold weather, or try your hand at designing a mural for a bare garden wall.

SEEDS. Seeds suitable for gathering now are: Hawthorn, Wisteria, Cotoneaster and Inkberry. The dual action of frost and moisture spurs ready germination of fresh black walnuts, butternuts and hickory nuts if planted 1½ inch deep and covered with rich soil.

THE CITY LOT

PESTS. Examine the bark of your trees closely for cocoons, insect's eggs and egg masses. A stiff brush or broom may be able to dislodge any unfortunate discoveries, but do not attempt to scrape away or peel off the outer bark. Prune branches if necessary; treat pests appropriately with corrective applications.

TREES AND SHRUBS. Deciduous trees (those that lose their leaves in the fall) may still be moved for planting. Frozen root balls may be trenched (heeled in) and covered with good mulch. Take care to water root balls well during winter dry spells. A coating of an anti-transparent will help prevent loss of moisture through the leaves and the buds.

PRUNING. Most deciduous trees (particularly fruit trees) in your community garden can be safely pruned now. Remove damaged branches or branches casting excessive shadow over vegetable or flowerbeds. Sterilize your saw and shears in alcohol to prevent the spread of possible diseases from limb to limb or tree to tree. Remove and clean any decay and cover large wounds with tar-based tree pruning paint when the weather is above freezing. In any case, make sure you have permission and jurisdiction over the tree in question and observe all safety precautions. Young trees scheduled for transplanting in the spring may be root pruned in mild winter weather. A sharp well-honed spade is essential to this procedure.

MORE ON POISON IVY. The toxic oils in Poison Ivy are almost minimal now. Sulfuric acid or copper sulfate in strong solution applied to the crown of the plant will kill the roots. When the weather is above 40° you will be able to cultivate the soil loosely and apply the poison. Be sure to protect yourself, your neighbors and other gardeners by notifying them of the locations treated in this way. **Caution:** the roots of other nearby plants may die also if you are careless in applying this poison.