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DECEMBER GARDEN CALENDAR, 2016

By Sharon Morrisey
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By December, all the pots and chairs and statuary and yard art are put away. The lawn and fall leaves have been mowed for the last time this year and the gutters cleaned out. The holidays now consume gardeners' thoughts.

Despite the weather, plants and gardening can still be part of your holidays if you wish. Decorate with evergreens, winter berries, and holly both inside and out. Start with a live Christmas tree. Dress it with garlands of cranberries and popcorn for an old-fashioned look. Put them outside as well as a treat for wildlife. Use boughs and branches to dress-up empty planters left outside if they are not already frozen.

Liven up the indoors with potted poinsettias, holiday cactus, amaryllis, azaleas, hollies, kalanchoes, Norfolk Island pines and even rosemary sheared into topiaries. Purchase healthy plants and you can enjoy them for months.

Buying gifts for the gardeners on your holiday shopping list is easy. Even if you do not know their preference for pots, the size of their shoes or their temptation for tools, gift certificates to local garden centers always fit.

Gift memberships to local botanical gardens, arboreta or nature centers are dual purpose gifts since they support the organization while providing discounts to members on classes and items from their gift shops. Many also have reciprocal admission arrangements with gardens in the region or even nationwide which can provide significant savings when traveling.

Gift magazine subscriptions keep giving all year, too. *Wisconsin Gardening* is a publication written for local gardeners by local gardeners. To subscribe online at the go to https://www.statebystategardening.com/wi/new_subscriptions.

UW-Extension Publications on many of the topics in this month's garden calendar are available on-line at <http://learningstore.uwex.edu>.

Happy holidays and thank you for following the Garden Calendar this year. I look forward to a new gardening year.

First Week

Needle-type evergreen boughs may be used to shield broadleaf evergreens like rhododendrons and boxwoods from sun and wind. Stick the stem ends into the ground to surround and protect small plants with a naturalistic look. Or use burlap and stakes to loosely surround but not completely cover them or to create a screen especially on the windward side.

Evergreens growing close to roads where fast moving traffic produces a salty spray over the winter should also be protected.

Remove tall grass and weeds from the bases of trees, too. Protect trunks of young trees by wrapping. Spiral plastic trunk barriers or hardware cloth close to the trunk are the best options. Surround multi-stemmed and low branching trees and shrubs with chicken wire or hardware cloth held securely against the ground.

It should be tall enough to protect branches as high up as a rabbit can reach when on its hind legs on top of a snow bank.

Combine several tactics to scare away animals that can damage your plants in the winter. Shiny, noisy, moving objects hung in the garden along with bags of human hair or soap can be used in addition to commercial repellents or ones prepared at home. Remember to reapply these substances often since most of them lose their potency quickly.

Check your yard, garage or tool shed for garden products and equipment that should be stored indoors for the winter. Liquids should not be allowed to freeze. Pesticides should be stored locked, out of the reach of children, and in their original containers. Plastic sprayers and rubber and vinyl hoses should be stored empty, preferably indoors.

Winterize your lawn mower by running the engine dry, draining and replacing the oil, cleaning the air filter, oiling the plug, and wiping clean the engine. Now is a great time to take it in for a tune-up and blade sharpening so it's ready as soon as that first surge of growth comes in spring.

Clean garden tools with a wire brush and apply a light coat of oil to protect them from rusting. Sharpen edges of hoes and spades. Clean, readjust and sharpen the blades of pruning tools. Lightly sand handles and then apply a coat of linseed oil.

Second Week

If the ground is finally frozen an inch or so deep, it is now safe to apply winter mulches to newly transplanted or tender perennial flowers, roses and strawberries. This will insulate them from the cold above ground and help reduce the fluctuations of temperatures in the soil throughout the season, which can heave their root balls right out of the ground.

Surround rose bushes with chicken wire cages and fill with up to two feet of chopped, dry leaves or straw to protect them for the winter. Cover the base of the stems with several inches of soil or compost first and then place the chicken wire on top of the mound after it has frozen. Tie canes together with cloth strips or nylons to keep them from rubbing when they are blown by the wind. Do not cut them at this time. Wait until next spring when you will know how much was killed and therefore how much to prune out.

Mulch strawberries with straw, leaves, or evergreen boughs. Mulch needs to be 6 inches deep after it has packed down. Branches cut from the base of a Christmas tree are perfect either as the mulch or to prevent straw or leaves from blowing away.

Pile soil or compost over the crowns of garden chrysanthemums that are in very exposed sites for the winter. Then add a few inches of mulch on top. Whether covering mums or not, do not cut off dead stems until next spring.

A thick layer of straw over root crops like potatoes, parsnips, and carrots as well as parsley and leeks will protect them long enough to harvest them a little at a time well into the winter.

Third Week

Cyclamen, Christmas cactus and azaleas are good choices for people who keep their houses cool. Also look for Jerusalem cherry, ornamental peppers, and

kalanchoes. Be sure to cover them when transporting even a short distance. Most of these are very sensitive to temperatures below 50 - 55 degrees.

Floral arrangements should be kept cool and out of the sun. Contrary to common belief, arrangements and cut flowers should be watered with very warm water which contains floral preservative. Re-cut flower stem ends first and then condition them in a very cool spot for several hours before bringing them into warmer rooms. Every couple of days, re-cut the stem ends, wash the vase with soap, and refill with warm floral preservative water. Substitute non-diet lemon lime soda or vinegar and a drop of bleach if you don't have preservative on hand (not an aspirin, a penny or a nail as is sometimes recommended. These don't work.)

Check stored vegetables like tomatoes, potatoes, onions and garlic and non-hardy bulbs like canna, tuberous begonia, dahlia, and gladiolus for mildew and rot. Remove affected items immediately.

Geraniums stored dry in the basement or attic for the winter should be checked and the root systems moistened. Do this monthly all winter.

Avoid rock salt, which is sodium chloride, to melt sidewalk and driveway ice. Products made of calcium chloride or potassium chloride cause less damage to plants. For traction, sprinkle sand, kitty litter, or wood ashes sparingly. Mix with a little melting compound if more than just traction is needed. Minimize de-icing and traction products to reduce pollution in storm sewers and streams.

Fourth Week

Watch your new holiday gift plants closely. Most of them need bright but indirect light and moderate temperatures. Keep them out of drafts as well as away from the hot air from heat vents, fireplaces, and TV's. Keep the soil just slightly moist and do not allow them to stand in runoff water.

Adjust your indoor plant watering practices as needed according to the weather conditions. Plants use less water on cloudy days and during the short days of mid-winter. December 21st is the shortest day of the year. Cool conditions indoors may also mean less water is needed.

Groom indoor plants to clean leaves, remove fallen leaves and faded flowers. Cleaning removes dust and grease that can clog leaf pores. Hand dust large-leaved plants with a pair of old socks or gloves on both hands. Put individuals or groups of plants in the shower if hand washing is not possible. To keep soil from washing away cover it with foil, newspaper or plastic.