

## Winter Gardening Issues

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It has been an interesting winter for gardening so far. Here are some of the issues to consider.

**Winter Weeds**- the winter weeds exploded this fall when the rain and cooler temperatures finally arrived. The record hot and dry summer left bare ground and stressed lawns ideal for the winter weeds to fill in!

Henbit and chickweed filled in the open ground you had in your cut flower and perennial gardens. They are easy to pull and it is important that they are pulled, especially in the flower garden where the weeds not only compete for moisture and nutrients but they form a high moisture layer that results in foliage fungal dieback in snapdragons, stocks, and calendula.

In lawns on poor soils and in shade which were not irrigated in the summer of 2019, rescue grass, annual bluegrass, and horseherb have covered the area with lush growth. You can attempt to battle it with contact herbicides, but the best strategy is often just to keep the lush growth mowed and declare the lawn "the sustainable winter lawn". It will look good most of the winter without irrigation.

**Leaf Drop**- There are several environmentally appropriate strategies to deal with the leaves from your oaks, sycamores, pecans, hackberries and other deciduous trees. They are too valuable to rake and send to the landfill. If you collect the leaves use them as mulch in the shrub border or as raw material in the compost pile. The easiest way to take advantage of their value as organic material is to let them decompose on the lawn. Speed up the decomposition by mowing them where they lay. Don't worry about the tannic acid in the leaves, our alkaline, highly buffered soils are not negatively affected.

**Cyclamen Performance**- It has been a wonderful winter so far for cyclamen. They are steady colorful bloomers for the shade. They aren't xeriscape plants however and are imported to Texas as blooming transplants with a heavy root soil. Sometimes the roots don't spread into our container or flower bed soil as easily as we would like. The result is that the foliage and blooms wilt during a warm day. Not all cyclamen do it, but watch for any wilt and quickly water the plant at the base.

It is also worthwhile to be conservative about cold protection for cyclamen. The leaves are very tolerant, but the blooms can be knocked off in some planting situations with temps below 30 degrees. Once the blooms and current flower buds are frozen off it is likely that they won't be back for the season. Keep a piece of Insulate fabric ready to cover the bed if temperatures below 30 degrees are forecast.

**Pests in the Garden**- If you have peach plum and other fruit trees it is likely you have scale insects sucking the juices from the plant under the shelter of its calcium shell. At a recent training session, Dr Larry Stein, Fruit and Nut Professor at Texas A&M stated that scale insects were the problem most affecting backyard fruit production. If your trees have the white powdery looking covering on the bark treat it with dormant oil. The organic control is diluted in water and sprayed generously over all the trunk and stem surfaces to suffocate the insects. Apply dormant oil at the beginning of a 48-hour period when temperatures are going to be above 45 degrees. Follow label instructions.

Slugs and snails are causing damage in the flower and vegetable gardens. Primula(primrose) are especially susceptible. Apply a Slug and Snail Bait every 2 weeks to keep the damage to a minimum.

**Freeze Killed Foliage** – The freezes we have had so far have been severe enough to damage lime and lemon foliage in some locations. Don't be too quick to take action in terms of pruning off any branches but be ready to cover the plants and provide a heat source if another freeze is forecast.

Most years snapdragons take a break from blooming in January. Recognize the likelihood if your blooms were damaged from the cold. The damaged blooms can be deadheaded, or you can leave them in place like the lime foliage to see how extensive the damage is. Even if they eventually quit blooming the blooms will be attractive during the transition period.