

December Gardening Calendar

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If your cold sensitive plants survived the November cold spells you can expect more cold weather challenges in December. Move the cold sensitive plants such as bougainvillea, mandivilla, and plumeria into freeze protected cover now. Keep old blankets, sheets or agricultural fabric at the ready as a covering. Backyard citrus are wonderful assets to the landscape but some of the most desirable varieties are cold sensitive. Cover limes and lemons at 30degrees, and satsumas, oranges and grapefruit at 28degrees. If temps 26 degrees or below threaten, include a heat source under the cover. Mechanics lights and poultry heat lamps work well.

December is a good month to plant shade trees and shrubs. The temperatures are not cold enough to threaten the plants with freeze damage and they develop root systems before they are challenged by our summer heat and drought.

If you have never taken advantage of using a live tree complete with its roots for a Christmas tree, this may be the year to try it. The obvious advantage is that you meet 2 needs for the price of one tree. Purchase one of the sheared trees for the dual purpose at your favorite nursery. Place it in the house or on the patio, decorate the tree and then after the holidays plant the tree in the landscape. There are some complications including the fact that the living tree with its roots in tact is heavy. To use it successfully as a holiday tree requires planning and muscle. You also must be content with a limited choice of trees that meet both needs. The two most likely species that you will find offered in nurseries are Aleppo pines and Italian stone pine. In the sheared form they make attractive Christmas trees. In your landscape they will grow to large trees with typical pine characteristics. If you look beyond the sheared trees, it is possible to find deodora cedar, Arizona cypress and ornamental junipers specimens that have enough of the conifer, pyramid shape to work well as the holiday tree before being planted in the landscape.

Early in the month make an effort to finish planting your winter annuals in the flower garden. If you wait on the snapdragons and stocks you may miss the fall/early winter bloom period. They often stop blooming during the coldest part of the winter and only resume in late February. Pansies and cyclamen will bloom continuously through the period. Use pansies and their viola cousins in full sun. Cyclamen are a spectacular provider of winter color in deep shade in containers or raised beds. Pansies do not usually require any cold protection. Put a sheet or piece of frost clothe over the top of cyclamen if the forecast is for temperatures under 30 degrees.

The usual first freeze of the winter occurs after mid-November. If your tomatoes survive that initial freeze you can often expect to receive 3 or more weeks of mild weather. Long enough to mature and harvest most of the fall tomato crop. Even if the temperatures are so cool that the tomatoes don't turn red, they are usually physiologically ripe and will color up in the house if you collect them just before a December freeze.

The winter vegetables such as broccoli, carrots, turnips, lettuce, English peas, cauliflower, cabbage, and beets can be planted in December the earlier in the month, the better. Onion transplants will also become available. Plant them 4 inches apart in the row so that every other plant can be harvested for

green onions and make room for the development of big bulbs for a May harvest. Onions are a foliage crop in that they require considerable nitrogen to grow to their full potential. Prepare the planting bed with 2 inches of compost and 10 cups of winterizer or slow-release lawn fertilizer for every 100-sq. ft. of bed.