

Winterizing Your Garden

by Joyce Friels, Bell County Master Gardener

Let your plants be happy during the cold winter months in Central Texas. They will be content to lie in wait for the warm spring rains and warming temperatures while storing energy to grow healthy root systems if you will do some pre-planning.

The month of November is the best time to take a walk through your garden to see how everything looks. Be sure to take a note pad and pencil with you to make notes on what you see. You can decide at this time what plants are overgrown and need to be thinned out or divided; which plants are looking scraggly and should be trimmed up; or which plants should be pulled out if they look like they have bloomed their last blooms this past summer. Some plants do great in a garden and for hundreds of reasons some don't do so well. Make that note so you will remember not to plant the same plant next year. But then, if you liked the plant and it made you smile when you looked at its blooms, maybe you should try it somewhere else in the garden. It might be happier in another location, with more morning sun? or afternoon shade? This is the time of year to divide and relocate spring blooming perennials and bulbs if you think they could make a prettier show in another place in your garden. After you have walked through your garden and taken notes of what needs to be transplanted, decide where in the yard these plants would put on the best show and be happiest.

If you would like some roses in your garden, now is the time to plant them so they can get a good root system established during this cool season. Roses should still be available at local nurseries. Fall planted roses are more likely to be more vigorous during their first summer. However, do not fertilize roses that you plant now but a root stimulator may be applied after watering in the rose bush. Refrain from fertilizing all roses. Feeding them during now and February will interfere with dormancy and any new growth will be damaged by cold weather. Continue to water your roses, however, through fall and winter. If you need to move a rose bush to another place, wait until December or January. Deadhead any roses that are already established in your garden and remove discolored blooms from new plantings to keep insect pests from spending the winter in them. Don't prune them heavily as this will stimulate new growth.

November and early December are the best times to plant trees in Texas so if you would like to add trees or shrubs to your landscape now is the time. The soil is still warm and this encourages new root growth and the cool weather enables them to go dormant which reduces stress. If rainfall is not adequate continue to water newly planted trees and shrubs. Winter is a good time to prune any existing trees, both deciduous and evergreen, while they are dormant. Bushes such as butterfly bush, flame acanthus, and turks cap are best pruned during February as they are early summer bloomers.

Continue watering all your garden plants if the ground is dry. In this part of Texas, cool season nursery plants such as chrysanthemums, pansies, snapdragons, dianthus, annual phlox, calendula, and nicotiana (to name a few) can still be planted. You can also direct seed poppies, larkspur, sweet pea, marigolds, and wild flowers. Now is the time to plant irises and amaryllis.

Start preparing the beds for their winter nap. Trim out any dead foliage on plants that are happy and clear out all dead debris around each plant and place new mulch around each one. Put new mulch around those plants that are still putting out blooms. Cover any plants that have died down to the ground and put a name marker of what they are so you won't mistakenly dig them up while putting in new plants in the spring. Also cut back any summer blooming plant foliage that has browned and mark these locations. Spring bulbs require no care now.

Remember, the weather in Central Texas can be mildly pleasant in November or a chilly cold front can blow in quickly and unexpectedly. If a "blue norther" blows in, your tender perennials and still blooming flowers need to be covered. This can be done easily by just placing a bed sheet or light blanket over them holding the edges down with rocks or soil. This method is enough to keep the cold wind and cold temperatures from harming them. Other coverings such as sheets of plastic or buckets can also be used. Be sure to remove the covering when the sun comes out and the temperature rises. Also, tender plants that are in containers should be brought inside at this time. Place them in a sheltered area such as the garage where they will be out of the wind. Newly planted trees and shrubs can be covered with water as

the frozen water on the leaves and branches will protect them from the freezing temperature.

After making these assessments and preparing your garden for the winter, start planning for next year. Remember, there is always room in a garden for one more plant. Come spring you will be glad you made all the plants comfortable for the winter and they will show their appreciation by blooming brightly and abundantly for you. Enjoy your efforts as they will provide a happy garden for you and your friends.