

# **WILLIAMSON COUNTY**

# **GARDENING**

January 2020



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**Cover:**

**Herb Demo Garden**

**Photo by Sonia Schuetze**

**MG 2016**



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Williamson County Master Gardeners are on Facebook with information about programs and events.

# Post-Season Care of Christmas Cactus & Poinsettia

by Alice Stultz, MG 1996

Christmas cactus or *Schumbergera bridgesii* is a common plant bought to adorn the interior of one's home in December and lasts for years if properly cared for. Notice the similarity to the night blooming cereus as they are in the same family, the Epiphyllum group. It is native of south-central Brazil, growing in the coastal mountains on trees or rocks in high humidity areas. If growing indoors, it needs to be watered once a week and placed in northern or eastern light. It does not like to dry out too much nor get too much water. Misting indoors can help if the home is centrally heated and it is drooping between waterings. When moving it outdoors in pots, it needs water at least every three days. In the winter months less water will promote blooming. It may be transplanted after the blooming period is over.



One of the many colorful varieties of Christmas cactus

These plants can be enjoyed for years without much care. The ideal temperature is 70 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit and they will set buds at 50 to 55 degrees Fahrenheit. Fertilize monthly when new growth appears in the spring until buds begin to form. If wishing to force blooms, one should place them in a cool, dark area for 6-8 weeks and then bring out into the light.<sup>1</sup>

Poinsettia, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, is from Central America and is commercially grown for December sales in the United States. The flowers are the tiny yellow and green section in the center of showy bracts of various color from white to reds to green. It is an 'obligate short day' plant. For the bracts to change to what we know as "petal color" they need absolute darkness for 14-16 hours per day and light in between these times of darkness. One can mess up this bract color change by even 15 minutes of light amidst the darkness interval.<sup>2</sup> If you wish it to rebloom in the pot next holiday season, fertilize monthly as above like the Christmas cactus and cut the plant back to about six inches. In October, bring the plant into a dark cool area of the house such as a closet for 14 to 16 hours of darkness and eight to ten hours of light per day.

<sup>1</sup> Bradford, D.J., "How Often Should I Water My Christmas Cactus?", December 14, 2018, <https://homeguides.sfgate.com/should-water-christmas-cactus-90871.html>

<sup>2</sup> Hole, Jim, "Darkness holds key to unlock blooming poinsettias", November 6, 2015,

<https://edmontonjournal.com/life/homes/gardening/darkness-holds-key-to-unlock-blooming-poinsettias>

They still need occasional water. This is a bit of work for one pot of color and probably works well in wholesale nurseries where the light might be controlled. In warmer areas of Texas without hard freezes (such as in San Antonio and southward), poinsettias can grow outdoors into tall perennial plants with lovely “blooms”.



Poinsettia trees in a tropical environment

Christmas cactus and Poinsettias are cheerful midwinter house plants. The Christmas cactus is simpler to maintain and bloom. Some find a perfect window ledge for theirs and it is a happy house plant year-round. The poinsettia returning year after year is a bit more time consuming. They both make nice seasonal winter gifts to brighten the shorter days around the winter solstice.



# Protecting Plants in a Freeze

by Jean Legan, MG 2013

Plants are generally classified according to the minimum temperatures they can tolerate. Hardy plants can handle some degree of short-term freezing whereas “tender” plants are injured or killed by freezing temperatures. Central Texas gardeners select shrubs, annuals, perennials, trees, flowers and vegetables rated for our hardiness zone 8b. Zone 8b has a long growing season with a last frost in mid-March and a first freeze in mid-November. Over the last 2 years, however, our first freezes have occurred earlier in the growing season. In fact, Halloween 2019 played a nasty “trick” on gardeners with an Arctic blast and unexpected freeze!

There is a range of vegetation damage caused by dropping temperatures. A light frost or freeze occurs when temperatures drop to 28° F for a couple of hours. Ice forms on the outside of the plant. Only tender plants and herbs will be harmed. Basil leaves, for example, will quickly turn black as temperatures approach 32° F. A freeze occurs when the ambient temperature drops below 32° F. When water inside a plant freezes, it causes plant cells to burst causing irreparable damage. A hard freeze or killing frost occurs when temperatures drop to 25° F for several hours. Blossoms and foliage are damaged. Root hardy perennials and crops may be harmed. A severe freeze occurs when temperatures drop below 25° F for a prolonged period usually over several days. Damaged plants will desiccate and turn black. It is important to wait until spring when freeze damage has demarcated itself from healthy tissue before pruning dead branches and foliage.

So, what can we do to protect our favorite plants? When a freeze is forecast, vegetable gardeners harvest tender crops and ripen them inside. Almost ripe citrus should also be harvested before freezing weather is expected. Dehydrating tender herbs for long-term storage is a suitable way to preserve herbs. Container plants can be moved indoors when freeze warnings are posted for the area. Tender, in-ground plants including citrus and freeze-sensitive shrubs must be covered with an old sheet, blanket, row cover, or commercially available protective thermal coverings. Some gardeners hang a string of incandescent Christmas lights on the limbs of their shrubs before covering them. Lights generate heat, which is trapped under the coverings, giving the shrub some degree of protection from colder temperatures. In-ground crops can also be protected by thoroughly watering the ground around plants. Well hydrated plants can withstand a light freeze or frost. Applying a generous layer of mulch, pine straw, or other ground covering around the plant will also protect its root zone in freezing temperatures. When the freeze is over, it's vital to remove protective coverings to allow the shrub to re-equilibrate with the ambient temperature.

With respect to citrus, tree-ripe lemons can tolerate freezing in the critical temperature range of 26-30°F. Meyer lemons can withstand freezing temperatures down to 22° F. Ripe fruit is more cold-tolerant than green fruit because the sugar content of ripe fruit acts like an anti-freeze to lower the temperature at which the fruit will freeze. Trees with fruit are less cold-tolerant than trees without fruit. So, early harvesting will not only protect the tree but the fruit as well! My Meyer lemon bush and fruit survived the multiple early freezes of 2019.



After the freezing weather passed, the bush was uncovered, and remaining fruit harvested.

In the process, I discovered new lemon blossoms and growth on the bush! I suspect our unseasonably warm weather confused the bush's growth cycle.

All remaining lemons were harvested in three batches then ripened on my kitchen counter. Bucket #1 has been ripening for two weeks whereas bucket #2 is only one-week post-harvest. The third bucket has just been picked!



Finally, the Meyer lemon bush produced 49 pounds of lemons in 2019!



# Cameras in the Demo Gardens

Photos by Sonia Schuetze, MG 2016



# From Garden to Table

by Radhika Baliga, MG 2015

I just learned how to make gluten-free sandwich bread and have been voraciously consuming obscene amounts of toast in an attempt to make up for lost time (I was virtually bread-free for 23 months). So here is my cool-season inspired recipe for radish toast. It's toasted bread smeared with radish top pesto butter, topped with thinly sliced radishes. I love this recipe because it showcases the radishes and their often neglected leafy green tops.

If you want to steer clear of bread entirely, that's no problem at all. Smear the radish top pesto butter (or even just the pesto) onto thick radish slices and enjoy as crudite.

The radish top pesto is very versatile and you can use it in the same manner as basil pesto. Use it to add zing to winter vegetable soups. Mix it into your favorite recipe for balsamic vinaigrette and use it to dress salads. Or toss it with pasta.

P.S. Jean Legan's article on Meyer lemons reminded me of a Meyer lemon recipe in our December 2018 newsletter. It's called Lazy Mary's Lemon Tart and it was submitted by Martha Baddour. Check it out.

## Open-Faced Radish Sandwiches with Radish Top Pesto Butter

By Radhika Baliga

### Ingredients

sliced bread (baguette slices are classic)  
 radish top pesto (see recipe below)  
 unsalted butter, softened  
 red radishes, thinly sliced  
 flaky sea salt, such as Maldon (optional)



### Directions

1. Make Radish Top Pesto Butter. In a bowl, combine equal parts radish top pesto and softened butter. Set aside.
2. Toast the bread slices.
3. Smear each slice of toasted bread with a generous portion of pesto butter. Shingle radish

slices on top of the butter. Sprinkle with flaky salt if using. Serve immediately.

## **Radish Top Pesto**

**By Radhika Baliga**

makes approx ½ cup pesto

### **Ingredients**

- 1 bunch of greens from 1 dozen radishes, washed, blanched in lightly salted water, and drained
- 2 cloves garlic
- 3 Tbsp almonds
- 1 tsp lemon zest
- 1 Tbsp lemon juice
- ¼ cup grated parmesan cheese (grated on a Microplane)
- 2 Tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- salt and pepper to taste

### **Directions**

Place all ingredients into the bowl of a food processor. Process until ingredients form a finely chopped paste, scraping down the sides of the food processor bowl as needed.

# Three Winter Forbs

by Alice Stultz, MG 1996

Spring is around the corner, or at least I hope so since we are past December 21 when each day gets longer. At this time of year it is fun to walk in open fields in Texas and see the forbs. According to Wikipedia: “A **forb** or phorb is a herbaceous flowering plant that is not a graminoid (grass, sedge, or rush). The term is used in biology and in vegetation ecology, especially in relation to grasslands and understory.” Bluebonnet, poppies and thistle forbs are what I like to spot first. If one has trouble identifying forbs, there are free plant identification apps and this can be a fun way to take a walk in mid-winter.

In Williamson County and particularly in Georgetown, Texas, annual poppies are promoted. These bright red orange blooming flowers have extremely tiny seeds and once planted and “gone to seed” they will disperse with the help of the wind. These seeds can be purchased locally and of course help tourism when they bloom in mass around the county. These are not native but have a tradition here in Georgetown. Their forbs are popping up now. The red poppy in Figure 1 is tall and has a strong round seed head which can be dried and used in floral arrangements. The “Georgetown poppy” is often weeded out of my beds because it looks like a dandelion or similar “weed” in the winter garden and I could not find a forb of this poppy on my walk.



*Figure 1 A poppy forb in December, not the “Georgetown Poppy”.*



*Figure 2 “Georgetown Poppy” blooming last spring*

The Texas Thistle, *Cirsium texanum*, is abundant in this area. They can be seen at Berry Springs in the springtime. The forbs appear in the field I monitor crowding out the bluebonnets which I desire. The thistle flower is enjoyed by butterflies and bees. The lesser goldfinch uses the thistledown of the flowers to line its nest and likes the seeds as a food source.



Figure 3 Forb of Texas Thistle



Figure 4 Springtime bloom of Texas Thistle

The Texas Bluebonnet or *Lupinus texensis* is common in our county of Central Texas. The forbs appear in late fall to early winter, hovering until spring when they burst forth with pea-like flowers. It is considered a native annual plant. Elf butterfly caterpillars eat the foliage. This is the most common bluebonnet seen along the highways of Texas. These seeds are very tough and scarification helps in germinating them.



*Figure 5 Bluebonnet forbs with Cranebill in bottom right*



*Figure 6 Bluebonnets blooming in springtime*

Many of us like to scatter wildflower seeds to promote blooms closer to home. Seed balls are a good way to do this. Stir a seed mix with soil and clay into balls and throw these around so that when rains come the seeds will germinate in the soil. A tumbler can be made to mass produce these seed balls and many chapters of the Native Plant Society of Texas do this to replant native prairies in disturbed areas. The Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center is a great place to view how the native plants of Texas can be incorporated in a landscape plan. The Williamson County Drought Tolerant Trial garden is another place to view plants growing from native seed.

The poppy, thistle and bluebonnet are just a few of the annual plants with recognizable forbs popping up in my garden at this time of year. Other young plants such as cedar sage are perennials and not mentioned here as they have just died back closer to the ground in winter.

Whether one has planted seed or one is allowing nature to run its course, it is fun to look for forbs of future “wildflowers” on winter walks. Besides the three plants above that are more easily identified, there are many others waiting to be identified or waiting to fully perform in their moment in spring.

# Winola's Timely Tips for January

by Winola VanArtsdalen, MG 2007

It's a brand-new year, full of opportunity!

Are we ready? First, tidy up a bit! Walk through landscape and cut back dead, ugly stalks of perennials, leaving six inches or so to protect from freeze damage to roots. Be sure leaves and/or mulch is not against stems, but that there is enough mulch to protect roots from freeze. Leaves should not be smothering lawn or groundcovers.

Plan for next season. A soil test will tell you for certain what amendments are needed. Are there areas where plant health is compromised by too much shade, sun or wind? Are there areas that could be converted from water-thirsty grass to planting beds with hardy plants requiring less water, fertilizer, and work for you? While working, do remember to never dig wet soil. If it sticks to the spade, it is too wet. Remember that soil improvements are best made several weeks before planting to give time for microorganisms to have soil prepared to feed your plants!

When planning, be sure to consider different views when approaching home, from porch and from inside!

Now is the time to clean, sharpen tools to ready for the new season. Also, sharpen your mind by learning from fellow gardeners at group meetings, especially Master Gardener meetings. Remind your friends and neighbors that they are welcome! Remember online information always has more to teach us. Just be sure that you are at a web site in or addressing our part of the country, especially TAMU. When I google a question, I include TAMU to be sure I am getting reliable, tested information from our region.

Evaluate your lawn. Rarely, if ever, will lawn need watering during winter in our area. Remember that too much water creates problems more often than not enough. This is a good time to be sure there is enough light for plants and lawn under tree canopy.

You may need to spritz plants inside, where there is less humidity. Do not leave water standing in plant saucers inside or out. As you water, salts collect in those saucers, and, if they stand in that water, it is carried back up into the soil again.

Enjoy the winter break and be ready for another challenging, rewarding year of gardening!

# WCMGA EVENTS

## January 6

WCMGA Board Meeting

AgriLife Training Room, AG205

100 Wilco Way

1:00 to 3:00 pm

All members are welcome to attend.

## January 9

Green Thumbs Up Gardening Series:

Cedar Park

Cedar Park Public Library

7:00 to 8:00 pm

“Raised Bed Gardens”

with Dale Hill, Rick Halle & Jim Williams

## January 13

WCMGA Monthly Membership Meeting

Georgetown Annex Auditorium

100 Wilco Way

6:15 to 8:00 pm

“Hummingbirds” with Cindy Sperry, Travis  
County Audubon Society

## January 14

Green Thumbs Up Gardening Series:

Round Rock

Round Rock Public Library

6:30 to 7:30 pm

“Raised Bed Gardens”

with Dale Hill, Rick Halle & Jim Williams

## January 25

Hands On In The Garden

Old Training Room, 3151 SE Inner Loop

10:00 am to 12 noon (new time)

“Basics of Lawn Care” with Kate Whitney

# See You Next Month After Betty Jo finishes blessing all the vegetables

