

The Garden in December

By Rachel Anderson, Certified Professional Horticulturalist

December is a pretty quiet time in the garden, which is a contrast to the hustle and bustle of the holidays. Along those lines, I've been thinking a lot about gifts-gifts given and gifts received. And then I thought about all the gifts my garden has given me, like a place to be creative and get my hands dirty. A place to observe nature and to learn. Then I thought about how great that is and how neat it would be if everyone had a place like that in their lives. We gardeners are pretty lucky people, don't you think?

In the ornamental garden:

- As you're looking around your garden this time of year, pay special attention to areas that maybe need something evergreen to break up the monotony of bare twigs and dormant perennials. Remember that it doesn't have to be a conifer. There are loads of evergreen broadleaf shrubs and even a few perennials that are easy to squeeze in whether you have sun or shade.
- If your heart is missing the sight of flowers in your garden, don't despair! We are fortunate to live in a climate that allows for many winter blooming shrubs and perennials. Look for Camellias, Witchhazel, Sarcococca, Viburnum b. 'Dawn', Mahonia, Garrya, and Hellebores to name a few. Why, you could plant an entire section of your garden with winter flowers in mind!
- Speaking of Hellebores, we have an enormous selection in stock at the nursery right now, including a few nigers that are already in bloom! The pure white flowers of 'Jacob' and 'Joseph Lemper' make lovely hostess gifts for the holidays and they can be planted right into the garden when the festivities are over. They will flower year after year at a time when flowers are most welcome. Hellebores are an evergreen perennial that grow in shade to part shade, and if you plan it right you can have winter flowers from December through March!
- If you're planning to get a living Christmas tree this year, make sure that it's not in the house for longer than 10 days. Water it well before you bring it in and then at least once while it's in the house. Put a saucer underneath it to catch any water that drains out the bottom of the pot. When the time comes to put it back outdoors, place it in a protected area for a week or so (depending on the weather) to get it used to being out in the cold again.
- If you haven't planted those tulips or daffodils that you bought earlier, this is just a friendly reminder-do it! There's nothing worse than coming across a bag of forgotten bulbs come April or May.
- To prevent your paperwhites from getting too tall and floppy, give them a drink. Of alcohol that is. Research has shown that a 5% alcohol/water solution stunts the growth of potted paperwhites. Use only distilled alcohol like gin, vodka, or tequila, or rubbing alcohol can also be used. Don't use beer or wine as the sugars can damage the plants. Use a 1:7 ratio alcohol to water if you're going to use distilled. Use a 1:10 ratio if you're using rubbing alcohol. This trick only seems to work with bulbs that are forced using the pebbles and water method. Once your bulbs have begun to root out and grow, pour off the old water and replace it with the alcohol solution and only use that for future waterings.
- Keep the bird feeders full and clean.

In the vegetable garden:

- There's not a whole lot of work to be done in the veggie garden at this time of year, except keep the weeds down, mulch, and eat what you planted in the summer/fall. If you have greens that you're trying to overwinter, they will really benefit from a good layer of straw or leaves as a mulch to insulate and protect the roots.
- Artichokes sometimes have difficulty overwintering here, especially if your soil is heavy. They would love a toasty straw mulch for the winter.
- Now is a great time to take care of your tools. Sharpen your shovels and spades and store them in a dry location. Pruning season is just around the corner, so **make sure your pruners and loppers are cleaned, sharpened and oiled.**

And now for the best part-put your feet up and relax and feel good about all your hard work in the garden this year and begin your planning for next year. A new season will be here before you know it. And remember to pay attention to the small gifts your garden gives you.

Happy Holidays!

**About the author:**

Rachel has been gardening since childhood, thanks to her mom, and has been part of the team at Christianson's since 2002. She's a Certified Professional Horticulturist with a passion for roses and vegetable gardening. Rachel and her family enjoy gardening together and now share their urban garden with a menagerie of ducks, chickens, two cats, and a dog.

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