

# The Garden in December

By Rachel Anderson, Certified Professional Horticulturist

It seems to me that the sunrise in winter is so much more beautiful than at other times of the year. Maybe it's because the sun is so seldom seen here in December, that when the clouds part and I am able see the peach and rose hues of a winter sunrise, I can't help but stop and stare transfixed and mesmerized by the color and brightness. Or maybe it's because the sun rises so much later in the morning that I'm actually awake to witness it. That's probably it right there. But that doesn't make it any less beautiful, especially at this, the darkest time of the year, when colors and light are most welcome.

There's really not a whole lot to do in the garden in December, especially with our attention turned indoors for the holidays. But if you really must get out there and do some puttering, here are a few suggestions:

- Keep bird feeders and bird baths full, clean, and free of ice.
- Take care of your tools. Store them somewhere dry when you're not using them. Now is a great time to clean, sharpen, and oil your pruners and loppers because pruning season is right around the corner. If you're unsure how to do it yourself, check with your local hardware store. Sometimes they will offer that service and do it for you.
- If you're into making wreaths for the holidays, take a look around your garden for interesting materials to use. It's okay to do some light pruning on most trees and shrubs this time of year and there are tons of great garden plants that make beautiful accents in wreaths. Get creative! Don't forget that at the nursery, we have a few wreath machines that are available to use free of charge. Just make sure to call ahead and schedule a time to come in. It's really fun and your creations make great gifts!
- If you're missing the color and fragrance of flowers in your garden this time of year, then consider planting a few winter flowering shrubs and perennials. There are a surprising amount of things you can plant in our climate that will flower despite the cold, wet season like Daphne odora, witch hazel, Camellia sasanqua (of which we have an incredible selection right now), Sarcococca (sweet box), Garrya, Mahonia, winter heather, hellebores, and others that I've surely forgotten. Also, the flower buds on Pieris are very beautiful and interesting this time of year. Many of these plants are deer resistant and evergreen, and provide a much needed nectar source for overwintering hummingbirds.
- 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.
- 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.

- If you have plants that for one reason or another you haven't gotten into the ground yet, make sure to protect them during cold frozen weather. Sometimes just pulling them up against the side of the house is protection enough. However, if your plants are on the marginal side as far as hardiness, then it would be better to put them in the garage or something similar until things warm up again. No matter what the plants are, be sure to keep them watered. Watered plants have a much better chance of weathering the storm than dry plants. So go ahead and make plant-cicles. It's a good thing! Of course, the very best thing you could do is get your plants in the ground with a nice blanket of mulch to protect new roots.

Stay warm and cozy, and have a great holiday!



**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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