

# The Garden in December

By Rachel Anderson, Certified Professional Horticulturist

There's not too much to do in the garden in December, which is a good thing because I know we all get so busy with the holidays quickly approaching. I, however, still haven't gotten all of my fall clean-up chores done, and now and then I'll glance out the window and see the brown and withering foliage of the last perennials and think "Yup. Still there." Actually, I sort of like that there are one or two lingering chores to be done in the garden, because then when it comes down to cleaning house and making 4 pies for the next family gathering or going out and cleaning up the garden, well, for me the decision is an easy one. It's the perfect excuse for me to be outside working, and admiring the transformation my garden has made as the seasons turn, and thinking about making changes and looking ahead to the next season. It's one of the many wonderful gifts the garden has to give!

In the ornamental garden:

- Use the last of the fallen leaves as mulch in your garden beds. The look may not be as tidy as you like, but they are excellent at protecting the soil, helping to insulate against the cold, and providing food and living quarters for all manner of beneficial soil dwelling creatures. Don't try that trick with foliage that was diseased or buggy over the summer, though. Those leaves should be raked up and tossed out (or composted if you have a very good hot composting system) to help prevent the same problem from occurring next year.
- 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 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 sugar can damage the plants. Use a 1:7 ratio alcohol to water if you're going to use distilled product. 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 watering.
- 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.

I hope you all have the opportunity to get out into your gardens and enjoy the quiet gifts that a garden in winter has to offer. Have a very merry Christmas!