

What to Do in December 2023

Dec. 2 to 8

Perennials: As long as the ground's not frozen, you can keep planting spring bulbs. Perennial mums may benefit from a loose cover of mulch after they have finished flowering as the ground begins to freeze.

Flowers: You'll have crocus and hyacinth blooms in mid-winter if you pot the bulbs in clean pots with a well-drained potting mix now. If the bulbs are not pre-chilled, they'll need to receive a cold period (35° to 45°F) for 12 to 14 weeks to trigger flowering. Pre-chilled bulbs should be stored in a cool (55° to 65°F) protected place that will be accessible in winter. Pot up the bulbs 3 to 4 weeks before you'd like to see flowers. Keep the pots in a cool (60°F) well-lit room and resume watering during this pre-flowering period.

Fruits and Vegetables: Protect remaining kale, spinach and other cool season crops from freezing with plastic sheeting or a cold frame. Make sure the cold frame or plastic can be vented on sunny days to keep plants from heating up too much, or putting on tender growth that may freeze later. If you have not already done so, remove any remaining fallen fruit under bearing trees.

Trees and Shrubs: Once the leaves are down, clear out roof gutters. Continue to remove dead or damaged wood from trees and shrubs to minimize additional damage after winter storms. Oaks may be pruned at this time. Contact an arborist for work on large trees.

Lawns: Before you put the mower away for the season, sharpen the blade (or have this done by a professional) so this task doesn't await you in the spring. If you have a gas mower, change the oil, spark plug and air filter. If you use a fertilizer spreader, clean and put it away. New York State law prohibits the application of lawn fertilizer between December 1 and April 1. (Early fall is the best time to fertilize the lawn anyway.) Continue to remove sticks and other debris, and be gentle with the lawn in its dormancy. Stay off frozen grass and don't allow people to park on the lawn at any time.

Houseplants: Overwatering often leads to root rot and is the biggest killer of houseplants. When you water, it's better to do this thoroughly but less frequently, based on the plants' individual needs. Allow the overflow to drain out of the bottom of the pot and wait until the top of the soil dries before watering again. If you water frequently but just enough to moisten the soil, salt deposits can build up.

General:

Here's a great holiday gift for the gardener in your life: a subscription to the Home Garden Lecture Series through Cornell Cooperative Extension of Westchester. There is one webinar lecture per month from January through May, and a tour in May while space lasts. Advance registration is required. The whole webinar series is \$45; individual webinars are \$5 each. Check out the brochure at https://s3.amazonaws.com/assets.cce.cornell.edu/attachments/64215/2024_Home_Gardening_Lecture_Series_brochure_committee_final.pdf?1699386965 For more information, please call CCE at 914-285-4640, 914-285-4620 or email westchester@cornell.edu

Dec. 9 to 15

Perennials: Seed heads of black-eyed Susan, coneflowers and native grasses and many native plants provide welcome meals for finches and other songbirds.

Flowers: Holiday poinsettia plants may last well past the holidays if you expose them to bright light and cool night temperatures in the 50s or 60s. Water them well, allowing them to dry slightly between waterings without getting to the point of wilting. Protect them from drafts and direct heat sources.

Fruits and Vegetables: Check the veggie garden for surviving harvestable produce. Remove spent plants and add healthy remnants to a compost pile. Remove leaves, grass and weeds around the stems and trunks of shrubs and fruit trees to discourage damage by critters. Consider using collars constructed of hardware cloth to protect tree trunks over winter where animal pressure is high. The collars should extend at least several inches above possible snow depth and be placed a few inches into the ground. Make sure the collars are wide enough that they don't touch the surface of the trunk.

Trees and Shrubs: If you live in an area that may receive heavy snowfall, you can loosely tie evergreen shrubs that are small enough to reach safely and at risk of splitting under heavy snow or ice. Tie jute or another soft biodegradable twine loosely at the base of a shrub, then gradually and loosely wrap the shrub in a spiral upward. The twine should be wrapped tightly enough to keep the stems in place without immobilizing them. Stop when you are a quarter from the top of the plant and tie the end of the twine to the end of a stem. To avoid damage to the shrubs, allow snow and ice to melt naturally and remove the twine before growth starts in spring. If you plant new evergreen shrubs in the future, selecting or training the plants to a single main stem will help them shed snow naturally without breakage.

Lawns: As cold weather holds and grass growth has stopped, it's time to put away the mower. If you haven't already done so, thoroughly clean the deck and body, and sharpen the blade. Unless electric equipment batteries are rated for extreme cold, store them in a dry place at a temperature around 40 to 50°F (an overall range is approximately 32 to 104°F). This will prolong battery life, reduce environmental impact, and save money. Winterize gas powered equipment: change the oil, lubricate parts, and drain fuel or add a gas stabilizer to fuel tanks.

Houseplants: Be on the lookout for aphids, mealy bugs, scale, spider mites, thrips and whiteflies. These are pests that can ravage houseplants. You may be able to remove a small infestation by hand, but it may be best to discard heavily infested plants. Contact your local Cooperative Extension for advice.

General: To enjoy watching our feathered friends, set out birdfeeders (if you haven't already done so). Keep the feeders filled, and clean them regularly to keep the birds healthy. Remove visible all debris, scrub to clean, sanitize and dry before refilling. For more information, see

<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/browse/topic/feeding-birds/bird-feeders-feeding-birds#>

Birds also need an ongoing source of fresh, clean water that isn't frozen.

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Dec. 16 to 22

Perennials: Did you know you can plant many native plant and other perennial seeds outdoors in winter? Special equipment is not required. Many hardy types require a cold period to break dormancy for germination. An easy method uses vented recycled milk or other beverage containers filled with potting mix where the seed is planted and watered. Placed outdoors, the containers provide protection from animals and harsh weather, and promote germination in spring. The containers should be checked occasionally and watered if needed, but you will not have to worry about hardening off tender seedlings. For more information, contact your local Cooperative Extension.

Flowers: Add winter interest to outdoor containers by including evergreen and holly boughs. If you are not using excess materials from holiday decorations, see “Trees and Shrubs” below.

Fruits and Vegetables: Continue to harvest leeks and other protected winter vegetables. Now that fruit trees are bare, take a good look at their form. Remove dead branches. Mark weak, crossing, or unproductive shoots with surveyor’s tape or other soft material for removal in spring. Unsure of how much to prune? See the [Cornell Guide to Growing Fruit at Home](https://ecommons.cornell.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/60165302-b299-433a-952d-9ac82cc63849/content) at <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/60165302-b299-433a-952d-9ac82cc63849/content> or contact your local Cooperative Extension for advice.

Trees and Shrubs: It’s ok to use some small trimmings of holly and other evergreens to make garland or add as filler to flower arrangements. Save corrective pruning for spring as growth resumes.

Lawns: Keep cars and foot traffic off of frozen grass.

Houseplants: If the houseplants are looking a bit dusty, it’s time to clean them. Many foliage plants may be washed off in the sink or shower when they need to be watered. Make sure their containers drain thoroughly. Use a soft brush to clean plants with fuzzy leaves, and cacti and succulents that do best in drier conditions.

General: Need a last minute holiday gift for a special gardener? A subscription to the Home Garden Lecture Series through Cornell Cooperative Extension of Westchester. There is one webinar lecture per month from January through May, and a tour in May while space lasts. Advance registration is required. The whole webinar series is \$45; individual webinars are \$5 each. Check out the brochure at https://s3.amazonaws.com/assets.cce.cornell.edu/attachments/64215/2024_Home_Gardening_Lecture_Series_brochure_committee_final.pdf?1699386965 For more information, please call CCE at 914-285-4640, 914-285-4620 or email westchester@cornell.edu

Dec. 23 to 29
(this is intentionally short)

Perennials: Peruse the photos you’ve taken and garden notes to begin planning next year’s perennial beds.

Flowers: To keep dried flowers and seed heads from deteriorating on wreaths and arrangements, you can spray them with a fixative or hairspray. This can be messy, so be sure to cover any work surface you’d like to protect.

Fruits and Vegetables: You can’t beat homemade soup for the holidays, especially when you’ve used favorite recipes and your own stored produce and herbs. Now is a good time to think about adding additional types of herbs and vegetables in the garden to extend your repertoire next year.

Trees and Shrubs: It’s ok to use some small trimmings of holly and other evergreens to make garland or add as filler to flower arrangements. Save corrective pruning for spring as growth resumes.

Lawns: Mowing should be done, and lawns cleared of leaves and other debris. It’s time for a well-earned break. Enjoy the holiday season!

Houseplants: Use tepid water on houseplants; ice cold water can shock them. Move plants away from cold drafts and heaters.

Dec. 30 to Jan. 6

Perennials: If you bought a cut evergreen tree this year or decorated with pine boughs, consider laying cut branches and boughs over perennials planted this season after the holidays are over. This can help protect them from harmful freeze and thaw cycles. Look through catalogs for ideas of new varieties to plant in spring and order ahead for the best selection.

Flowers: Tap your inner creativity with floral arrangements. You can try a unique vessel to hold interesting branches, dried grasses and/or herbs alone, or mix these in with flowers.

Fruits and Vegetables: Continue to harvest usable produce. Blueberries provide healthy, delicious fruit in season and ornamental interest throughout the rest of year. If you've thought about growing this native crop and want to move forward, begin planning now. Assess site conditions to select the best site for the shrubs. Choose a spot that is protected and sunny all through the growing season, with well-drained soil and plenty of organic matter (or add compost if needed). Unless your soil is already strongly acidic, it will likely take a season or more to adjust the pH (this may be an ongoing task). If you construct raised beds, you can add a suitable soil mix, and the frames can serve as a base to support a temporary netted enclosure if you want to protect the ripe fruit from birds. For more information, see the Cornell Guide to Growing Fruit at Home at <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/60165302-b299-433a-952d-9ac82cc63849/content> or contact your local Cooperative Extension for advice.

Trees and Shrubs: Keep leaves, grass and weeds clear around shrubs and fruit trees and young trees to discourage mice, voles and other critters. After the soil is frozen, you can replenish mulch if needed up to a depth of 2 inches, keeping it away from tree trunks and the bases of shrubs. This can help to protect newly planted and shallow-rooted shrubs from winter damage. Shredded oak leaves, pine needles or bark nuggets work well.

Lawns: Continue to pick up loose twigs and branches.

Houseplants: Move plants away from chilly windows on frosty nights. Keep houseplants away from cold drafts and the hot dry air given off by heaters.

General: Is there a new plant or gardening technique you'd like to try next year? This is a good time to research plant requirements and best management practices from your local Cooperative Extension, Cornell and other local and regional evidence based university sources. See <http://gardening.cals.cornell.edu/>

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