

What to do in the garden in January 2024

Jan. 6 to 12

Perennials: If you celebrated the holidays with a Christmas tree, consider landscape uses before you drag it to the curb. Cut some branches and lay them over and around marginally hardy plants, or put the tree in an out of the way spot in the backyard as shelter for birds and other wildlife.

Flowers: Keep poinsettias looking good by exposing them to four or more hours of direct sunlight or bright artificial light every day. When the top layer of soil is dry, water the plants enough so that excess water drains from the bottom of the pot. Don't let the pots sit in water. Poinsettia likes temperatures between 65-70° F by day and 55-60° F at night.

Fruits and Vegetables: It's too early to begin sowing most seeds indoors yet. You can use this time to plan the vegetable garden, assessing what worked last year and what you want to change. You can also place seed and plant orders for spring. Focus on plants with improved resistance to diseases, drought, and pests. Learn the cultural conditions preferred by each crop so you can choose the right site and care for them properly. Contact your local Cooperative Extension for advice.

Trees and Shrubs: Check plant protection, adjusting stakes. Patch gaps in animal-resistant netting and fencing. Assess the property for trees that need to be pruned or removed by a professional. Avoid pruning frozen plants. Shade trees, most fruit trees, and grape vines are best pruned in March to early April before bud break. Oak is an exception that should be pruned by March, before the beetles that transmit oak wilt emerge. Don't touch spring-flowering shrubs like azaleas and rhododendrons, whose buds are already set. (If you prune those now, you'll have no blossoms this spring.) While you're outside, check for spotted lanternfly egg masses on trees and many landscape surfaces. SLF is a major agricultural threat that can kill crops (grapes, fruit trees and others) and affect landscape plants.

See <https://westchester.cce.cornell.edu/horticulture-environment/invasive-nuisance-species/invasive-pests/spotted-lanternfly> Report sightings by sending an image to [ReportSLF.com](https://www.reportslf.com) and crush as many eggs as you can find. Use a stiff card to scrape them off of surfaces into a sealable bag, squish and discard in trash.

Lawns: Avoid using salt to melt ice and snow on walkways near the lawn and other plantings because it's toxic to grass and many other plants. Try instead birdseed, sand, or sawdust for traction (these may be messy if tracked indoors). Ice melter alternatives that are more "plant friendly" include magnesium and calcium chlorides.

Houseplants: Be careful transporting gift or other indoor plants. Bag or wrap them for protection from the cold before transport. Sticking a plant in a trunk of a vehicle for the ride home is a recipe for trouble. Better to use the pre-warmed interior cabin (protect the floor or seat from water with a tarp or other covering). Houseplants can be damaged by even a few minutes' contact with frigid air.

General: Sign up this week for access to the complete 2024 Cornell Cooperative Extension of Westchester Home Garden Lecture Series. If you miss the January 17 lecture, "Back Yard Birds of Prey" led by Saw Mill River Audubon Director Ann Swaim, you can still sign up for the other virtual lectures, one per month from February through May, and the garden tour in May if space is available. Additional topics in 2024 include landscape and garden design, dealing with winter injury, gardening in a changing climate, and recognizing insect natural enemies of pests. All lectures are remote on Zoom. The whole series is \$45; a ticket to any single remote lecture is \$5 and the tour is \$20 (while there is space). For more information, contact CCE at westchester@cornell.edu or call 914-285-4620. Check out the brochure at: https://s3.amazonaws.com/assets.cce.cornell.edu/attachments/59393/2023_Home_Gardening_Lecture_Series_11-3-22.pdf?1667500184

Jan. 13 to 19

Perennials: For inspiration, continue reading catalogues and online information with reputable, evidence-based information for plants that reasonably fit the conditions on your site. Look for species that support birds and pollinators. For the best selection, place your order soon.

Flowers: How do you care for an amaryllis once it has bloomed? Cut the top of the flower stem to remove the spent blossoms so seeds do not form (once the stem turns yellow you can remove it). Put the plant under bright lights or in a sunny window so the leaves fully develop and can fuel the bulb for the next flowering cycle. Keep the soil moist but not soggy and fertilize occasionally with a general purpose houseplant fertilizer while it is in active growth. In summer, you can harden the plant off and move it outdoors. You can go natural or withhold water to force the bulb into dormancy in early fall. Repotting may not be necessary. Resume watering to start the flowering cycle 10 to 12 weeks before you would like the bulb to bloom.

Fruits and Vegetables: Is there a vegetable you've always wanted to try but weren't sure where to start? Check out Cornell Home Gardening Vegetable Growing Guides at <http://www.gardening.cornell.edu/homegardening/> For additional ideas and local growing information, contact your local Cooperative Extension.

Trees and Shrubs: Take a tour of the winter garden, getting to know the trees by their overall shape, twigs, bark and buds. Many have interesting forms that stand out in the landscape. Could the area use more variety to create additional winter interest? Consider plants with persistent ornamental fruit, interesting bark and stem colors, and varied evergreens that fit the space and site conditions. Check out the Cornell Urban Horticulture Institute Woody Plant Database at <https://blogs.cornell.edu/urbanhort/> You can search by ornamental characteristics and environmental conditions.

Lawns: To prevent the grass from becoming damaged, limit foot traffic on a wet or frozen lawn.

Houseplants: Assess how much light the plants receive now that days are shorter. Foliage plants typically need bright light, but not necessarily direct sun. Variegated plants (those with streaks of white or yellow in their leaves) may revert to solid green if they don't receive enough light, but too much light may bleach or burn them. Most flowering plants grow best in direct sunlight, cacti and succulents especially.

General:

Spotted lanternfly egg masses on trees and many landscape surfaces have a dull waxy covering that helps them escape detection and protects them from cold weather. SLF is a major agricultural threat that can kill crops (grapes, fruit trees and others) and affect landscape plants. To learn what to look for, see <https://cals.cornell.edu/new-york-state-integrated-pest-management/outreach-education/whats-bugging-you/spotted-lanternfly> Report sightings by sending an image to [ReportSLF.com](https://reportslf.com) and crush as many eggs as you can find. Use a stiff card to scrape them off of surfaces into a sealable bag, squish and discard in trash.

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Jan. 20 to 26

Perennials: Enticing seed and nursery catalogs can make it easy to overbuy. If you are new to the site, observe the gardens over the next season, taking notes and photos of how garden and landscape scenes progress. This can help you make a cohesive plan and avoid unneeded purchases. For established gardens, consult notes and photos for ideas of what to grow, and where. Focus on what you realistically have room to plant. Place your order soon, before popular varieties sell out.

Flowers: For an early glimpse of spring, continue forcing bulbs indoors. For more information, contact your local Cooperative Extension.

Fruits and Vegetables: Inventory seed starting supplies: lighting, containers, sterile mix, heat mats, etc. Purchase needed items now, so you are ready come planting time. If you are wondering if leftover seeds are too old to sprout, here's a test: Put 10 or 20 seeds in a paper towel. Keep them damp and warm for a week. If fewer than two thirds of them sprout, buy new seeds.

Trees and Shrubs: Leave snow on woody plant branches for insulation unless it looks heavy enough to break them. Shake the snow off carefully. Mark the calendar to gently tie up loose boughs in evergreen shrubs this coming fall before the snow flies. Inspect newly planted and young plants with an eye toward training them in the coming spring to a form that will naturally shed snow. Allow ice on plants to melt naturally, as removing it could cause damage to the plants.

Lawns: This is a good time to think about possible changes to areas where the grass just won't grow. If there are large trees that cast shade most of the day where less than 4 hours of sunlight gets through, a shade-tolerant ground cover would be an appropriate choice. Is there a hot spot near a driveway or street where crabgrass is always a problem? Heat tolerant ground covers that form a dense mat could do better. Does rainwater wash out a particular spot? A rain garden can slow stormwater so it can seep into the ground and renew groundwater.

Houseplants: If the tips of houseplant leaves are turning brown and the plants are not pot bound, increasing humidity in the room may help. A room humidifier is most effective. In a pinch, you may create some humidity around plant pots by placing them on a tray of moist pebbles. Make sure the bottom of the pots don't sit in standing water.

General: If you raise chickens or other poultry, songbirds should not be allowed to mingle with poultry to reduce the risk of avian flu in flock. If you don't raise chickens or other domestic fowl, keeping your bird feeder clean and full will aid the songbirds in your neighborhood. See The Cornell Lab All About Birds <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/browse/topic/feeding-birds/bird-feeders-feeding-birds#>

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Learn about creating a landscape garden in the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Westchester 2024 Home Garden Lecture Series: *Landscaping and Garden Design*.

Wednesday, Feb. 28 from 10 to 11 am, remote on Zoom, \$5.

Speaker: Raj Pande, Master Gardener Volunteer with Cornell Cooperative Extension of Westchester.

Raj will discuss the creation of landscape gardens, planning, design, site conditions, budgeting and scheduling, and examine the aesthetics of gardens as an art form, garden purpose, style, location, form, texture, color, and plant selection, with ongoing maintenance in mind. For more information, contact westchester@cornell.edu or 914-285-4620. See

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Jan. 27 to Feb. 2

Perennials: Frost heaving can push newly planted and shallow-rooted plants out of the ground. Check plants and cover exposed roots with a light mulch now. Replant them as soon as the soil thaws. While you're out there, check for spotted lanternfly egg masses on trees and many landscape surfaces. SLF is a major agricultural threat that can kill crops (grapes, fruit trees and others) and affect landscape plants. See <https://westchester.cce.cornell.edu/horticulture-environment/invasive-nuisance-species/invasive-pests/spotted-lanternfly> Report sightings by sending an image to [ReportSLF.com](https://reportslf.com) and crush as many eggs as you can find. Use stiff a card to scrape them off of surfaces into a sealable bag, squish and discard in trash.

Flowers: You can begin sowing pansy seeds indoors now. Pansies grow best in cool temperatures, optimally at 50°F to 55°F. While their seed may sprout in a week or two, the plants may take as much as 14 to 15 weeks to reach flowering size.

Fruits and Vegetables: If you are a beginner who always wanted to plant an orchard, be sure to do your research first. Tree fruit require a commitment, a lot of care, and may take years to produce a crop. If you are not ready for this, small fruit may not be as demanding, but they may need protection from animals, trellising or other specialized care. Know what's required before you start. See the Cornell Guide to Growing Fruit at Home: <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/60165302-b299-433a-952d-9ac82cc63849/content> Do you have more leftover vegetable seeds than you can use? Plan a seed swap with gardening friends.

Trees and Shrubs: Consider planting early flowering trees and shrubs to add beauty to the landscape and provide an uplifting scene during the dark days of winter. Ozark witch hazel, witch hazel hybrids and the related buttercup winter hazel bloom in late winter on warmer days and into early spring. Our native spicebush (*Lindera*) has yellow blossoms in early spring. These shrubs do well in moist areas. Other early flowering woody plants include Cornelian cherry dogwood (*Cornus mas*), winter daphne, heaths and heathers (in well drained locations).

Lawns: If you didn't get around to sharpening the mower blade or getting the mower tuned up, beat the spring rush and do it now.

Houseplants: Continue to inspect the plants for insects. Isolate infested plants in a separate room away from "clean" plants to prevent spreading an infestation. If there are only a few pests in exposed locations, remove them by hand. Keep the plant in isolation for at least a month or until you're sure the pests are gone (it's a good idea to do this with newly acquired plants too). If pests keep recurring, contact your local Cooperative Extension for advice. Heavily infested plants are often best discarded.

General: Call a gardening friend today and plan a date to learn about creating a landscape garden in the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Westchester 2024 Home Garden Lecture Series: *Landscape and Garden Design*. Wednesday, Feb. 28 from 10 to 11 am, remote on Zoom, \$5.

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