

## What To Do in December

**Protect tender plants during freezes.** Use sheets, blankets, or specially-designed row cover. Construct a cold frame or a "hoop house." Mulch, mulch, mulch! Water well before a freeze (except for prickly pear cactus). Allow hardy perennials to freeze back, and do not prune them until late winter or early spring, if you can stand it. The dead structure of the plant helps to insulate and protect the living core of the plant, and is part of the winter landscape. In addition, any pruning can stimulate tender new growth, which would be susceptible to subsequent freezes.



Last chance to plant bulbs. It is best to plant them early this month.

**Plant flower/ornamental seeds.** Delphinium, Larkspur, Poppy

**Plant vegetable plants.** Arugula, cabbage, chard and other greens, lettuce, spinach

**Plant strawberries.** Spinach is a great companion plant for strawberries.

**Plant herbs.** All hardy perennial herbs such as lavender, oregano, rosemary, rue, sage, and thyme; other cold-hardy annual or biennial herbs like parsley, cilantro, dill, and fennel (Dill and fennel may need some protection during freezes).

**Plant annual flower/ornamental plants.** Sweet alyssum, bluebonnet plants, ornamental cabbage and kale, Dianthus, Johnny jump-up, pansy, snapdragon, stock

**Plant hardy perennial plants.** Some examples are agapanthus, damianita, most ferns, Mexican bush sage, Russian sage, trees, and shrubs. It is especially important, if you haven't done so already, to plant spring-blooming perennials such as columbine, coreopsis, ox-eye and shasta daisies, Salvia greggi, and wallflower.

**Plant ground covers and borders.**

**Prune, if necessary.** Hire a reputable arborist or study a good, current pruning book before tackling important pruning jobs. If the pruning book is teaching the "flush cut" method, it is teaching an outdated and detrimental pruning method. If the pruning book is written by or refers to Dr. Alex L. Shigo and recognizes the branch collar, you are on the right track. Dr. Shigo's research, along with improving upon the flush cut, also showed that pruning paints are not necessary and may impede the healing process.

**Fruit trees have specific pruning requirements for highest productivity and ease of harvest.** Again, a reputable fruit tree pruning guide should be consulted - literally from day one of planting.

**NEVER "top" a tree,** which is pruning back the main leader (or trunk) of a tree, **except for certain fruit trees.** Topping has also come to mean that awful practice of harshly pruning back some if not all of the branches back to the main trunk. Natasha, the Rose Queen of The Natural Gardener, calls this "poodle-dogging" the tree. Please don't trim back the crape myrtles harshly, either. This is unfortunately so prevalent that it has a name: Crape Murder.

We don't know exactly how these practices got started. I've been told that the practice of topping stems from the need for firewood in olden days. However, they are not necessary; they ruin the beauty of the tree's natural structure; they stress the tree, thus promoting more disease. Trees are so valuable in the landscape that extreme care should be taken to preserve their health.

**Spray fruit trees.** None of our most common fruit trees are native. Therefore, they need more care than, say, a yaupon holly or a bur oak. To keep apple, pear, peach, and plum trees healthy, and to get the best fruit, these fruit trees need to be put on a spray schedule. (The four trees above are all in the rose family; this may explain why they need more pampering. Figs, pomegranates, and persimmons and the like do not need a spray schedule). Step One of the Organic Fruit Tree Spray Schedule is to spray fruit trees with copper at leaf fall, if this hasn't happened already at your house. "Leaf fall" is the time when the largest bunch of leaves fall from the tree. As John Dromgoole says, this mass exodus of leaves leaves many tiny wounds, or entry points for diseases in the tree. Copper is an organic fungicide which will help prevent this. Be careful when handling copper; follow package directions and wear protection. Use with discretion (as a last

resort) in other parts of the landscape; it is a strong fungicide that wipes out beneficial microorganisms along with the undesirable ones. Never use copper when temperatures are expected to rise above 80 - 85 degrees, or it may burn the foliage. At least ten days after spraying copper comes Step Two: spray dormant oil on the fruit trees to smother unwanted insect pests. If there were disease or pest problems in the previous season, rake up and dispose of the fallen leaves and twigs. Be sure fruit trees are well-mulched, and water deeply if we go four weeks or so without an inch of rain over the winter. Step Three will be at "Bud Swell" in the spring: spray copper again. Step Four will be at "Petal Fall" in the spring: Spray an insecticide to combat the Plum Curculio. This could be a Pyrethrin-based insecticide. We can go into more detail on steps three and four as the season approaches, along with other maintenance practices.

**Consider purchasing a live Christmas tree for the holidays.** Afghan (Eldarica), Aleppo, and Italian Stone pines can often be found this time of year. A trick for watering these trees indoors is to place ice cubes on top of the soil, making sure there is a sturdy saucer underneath the pot. Avoid keeping these trees indoors for any longer than two weeks. To allow the tree to adjust to the abrupt change in lighting when moving outside, place the tree in shade first for about a week, then move gradually to more and more sun. Finally, plant your tree outside in a sunny area with very good drainage. Pamper it when planting by using bone meal or rock phosphate in the hole, and by following the regular watering with some seaweed solution for the first few months.

**Choose and prepare areas for planting fruit trees in January.** Many fruit trees, berries, and grapes become available in bare root form in January. Most fruit trees require a partner to pollinate. Therefore, choose a full sun area with plenty of space for two trees, for each type of fruit you wish to plant. Most fruiting plants prefer a well-drained, fertile, slightly acidic soil to a depth of 24 inches. If there are drainage problems or shallow soil, construct a raised bed with good garden soil. Work in some of the garden soil to the existing soil as much as possible before adding the rest on top. If you already have a deep soil, work in to the top six to twelve inches some high quality manure compost. Include soil sulfur and some cedar flakes to help lower the pH. Other amendments which can be dug in at the same time are Volcanite or greensand and a light application of organic fertilizer such as Rabbit Hill Farm's "Buds and Blooms."

**Clean and oil gardening tools and equipment.** Sharpen and repair, as necessary.

**Recycle old phone books, and the Christmas tree.** Towards the end of December or the first of January, look for the dumpsters dedicated to phone book recycling in the parking lots of major grocery stores. After the holidays, turn your Christmas tree into free mulch! If you live in an Austin area with "Pay-As-You-Throw/Curbside Christmas Tree Recycling" service, you can leave your tree on the curb for the three weeks after Christmas for curbside service. If you don't have this service, take your Christmas tree to Zilker Park. The Christmas Tree Recycling dates are Saturday December 28, Sunday December 29, Saturday January 4, and Sunday January 5 in Zilker Park next to the Polo Picnic area. For more information, go to the city's website [www.ci.austin.tx.us/parks/christmastree.htm](http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/parks/christmastree.htm), call 494-9400 or 440-5163, or email [toni.grasso@ci.austin.tx.us](mailto:toni.grasso@ci.austin.tx.us). According to the website, there are other recycling sites in outlying areas, but no dates are indicated. Call or email the city for more information. The free mulch will be given away free to the general public at a later date. The city website says, "Watch the media for more information." Last year over 3,000 trees were recycled and turned into mulch!

(Thanks to Howard Garrett's Texas Organic Gardening Book, the Travis County Master Gardener Association's Garden Guide for Austin and Vicinity, and the staff of The Natural Gardener for some of this month's tips).