

A Greener View: Guide to preparing for spring gardening

by Jeff_Rugg

Gardening is often thought of as a warm weather activity, but it doesn't have to be that way if you are looking to break through your cabin fever. From warm gulf coast regions or even warmer southwestern deserts all the way up to cold Minnesota, there are gardening jobs that can be done in the winter. For example, winter is a good time for doing dormant pruning. Besides keeping you warm on a cold day, there are several benefits to pruning trees at this time of year.

By pruning deciduous plants that have lost their leaves in the dormant season, it is easier to see the shape of the plant and any branches that cross through the middle or rub against each other. Since the plants don't have leaves, there is less landscape waste generated. There is little chance of insects or diseases being spread at this time of year, but it is always a good idea to sterilize pruning equipment with one part bleach to four parts water, before you move to the next plant.

Shade trees are good to prune at this time of year because they are not being grown for flowers or fruit; pruning won't hurt their display. Remember that spring flowering trees and shrubs already have their flower buds on them, so any pruning to them will remove blossoms. Their best pruning time is in the month or so after they bloom.

By pruning interior and wayward branches of shrubs and shade trees over the winter, the new growth that occurs in the spring will only be on the good branches that are left. The plant then only uses energy on growth that contributes to the well-being of the plant.

If you do prune some spring-blooming plants, the branches can be used for indoor flower arrangements. On some plants such as forsythia, pussy willow and crab apple, the flower buds are visible in clusters along the length of the branch. On other plants like azalea, lilac, magnolia and viburnum, the flower buds are bigger than leaf buds and develop on the end of the branch. In either case, cut the branch off above a leaf bud facing toward the outside of the plant. If you make a flower arrangement, it is helpful to know how many flowers you are getting and where they will be produced as the plant begins to bloom. If you cut a stem with flower buds near the base and then strip them off to place the stem in a vase, you will be disappointed with the results.

Take the stems indoors and cut the bottom 1 or 2 inches in half. Rotate the stem 90 degrees and cut again. During the four or more weeks until the flowers bloom, the end may need to be cut off and re-quartered again. Keep the cut end in the water. Leave the vase in a cool, bright location until the buds expand and change color. When in bloom they can be put in a warmer location, but the flowers will last longer if kept in a cool spot at night.

The earlier a plant normally blooms in the spring, the sooner it can be forced. The later you wait in winter to force a plant, the easier and faster it produces blooms. Try pruning your shrubs once a week to make it easier to grow new stems each week, so the flower arrangements will last longer.

You should be getting seed catalogs in the mail, if not, you can still order some. Reading seed catalogs in the winter will encourage you with a hint of the warmth and beauty to come. Ordering early will help in receiving seeds that are in limited supply and they can be planted indoors at the proper time.

Working on a landscape or garden plan is easier now, since there aren't as many things that have to be done outside. Landscape architects and contractors are also less busy and may offer good discounts to get more work. Use a video or other camera each month of the year to see the changes in your yard; it will be easier for you to make needed adjustments.

If you can't wait for spring, try a little indoor gardening now. Plant herb or salad green seeds in pots or flats. Harvest them as they grow or move them up to larger pots. Set them near the sunniest window or under fluorescent lights. You can keep harvesting and replanting or, if you have room and a large pot, you can grow an edible centerpiece. If you put some bulbs into cold storage last October, you can begin potting them for winter blooms.

Check indoor plants for insects and mites. Most can be washed off in the shower or sink. Many plants need a winter grooming, so clean up the dead leaves and rotate them so more leaves will receive some sun.

Don't store extra firewood indoors. Many insects hide in the bark, and will warm up and start moving around

the house.

Another good winter project is to make sure your summer power tools have been cleaned up and tuned. Take them to the repair shop, which will give you plenty of time to work on them.

Don't forget to feed the wildlife, the extra food they get may be the difference between life and death. Suet and black oil sunflower seeds give the most calories for birds to have enough energy to stay warm. Water and shelter are also necessary - don't forget them when you design your landscape. A birdbath heater is designed to keep the water liquid and available for drinking during cold weather; it won't turn the birdbath into a spa. Start building a birdhouse now in order for it to be ready by spring. A heater in the water garden keeps a small area of water ice-free. This allows oxygen exchange with the water, which in turn helps keep the fish alive.

Check your landscape for signs of rabbit and other rodent damage to landscape plants. They especially like chewing on the trunks and stems of berry and fruit-producing trees and shrubs. Look at guy wires and recently installed plants for the possibility that frost action has lifted them out of the ground. Reinstalling stakes may be difficult in frozen ground, but the plants probably won't fall over until the ground thaws. If the plants have been lifted up and their root systems were exposed to the cold air, just add several inches of mulch and replant in the spring.

If you live in an area that has little snow or rain this winter, check your landscape for dry soil and plants that need to be watered. This is especially important for new landscapes and evergreens. Give them water on the next day that is above freezing, and hopefully they will take in enough water to survive.

As you can see, there are many things you can do in your landscape before spring gets here, so don't wait too long before you get started.

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