



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

December Garden Tips 2019 (November 30, 2019)

by Peyton Ellas, UCCE Master Gardeners

Have you noticed how the sun's position is mainly in the southern sky? Solstice comes from the Latin words for "sun" and "to stand still." On December 21, and for a few days before and after, the highest point in the sun's daily path across the sky has reached its southernmost position. If you note your areas of sun and shade on the solstice, it can help you decide where to plant sun loving and frost tender plants. Plant heat lovers next spring where they will receive some daylight even on the solstice, and they will be happier year-round.



Rather than work hard, my December garden is more for enjoyment and gathering decorations. But I enjoy working out of doors, as all gardeners do, and "fortunately" there are still some tasks we can do during these short days. Also, once leaves fall, I can see the structure, often called "the bones" of the garden, and plan changes I want to make next year.

PLANTING: It is nearing the end of the bulb planting season and nurseries may have them on sale. Choose healthy firm bulbs and make sure they are not mushy or moldy. Tulip and hyacinth bulbs should be cooled in the refrigerator (away from fruit) for six to eight weeks before planting, so skip those until next year. But you can probably get a decent bloom from daffodils, narcissus and hyacinth. We can also begin bare root planting this month of fruit trees and roses. For some instant color to brighten a dull winter day, try snapdragon, calendula, flowering kale, primrose, sweet pea, stock, and viola. In the edible garden, plant artichoke, garlic, lettuce, parsley, radish, spinach and rhubarb roots. You can still plant Asian greens, green onions and many other cool-season vegetables, especially if we have a few weeks of warm weather to get the seeds germinated.

This year my planting has been delayed due to the long warm fall; I didn't want to say goodbye to the still-producing summer squash and eggplant until late in November. Every year is different, and it's always good to keep in mind we are not in total control: we have to work with the climate and the local, current weather as well as the genetics of our individual plants and all those other creatures who are living on the same tiny square of the planet as us. A wise gardener once told me, "Enter the garden with humility." At the very least, it makes the experience more positive. There are enough battles in our lives; gardening should not be one of them.

MAINTAINING: Watch for frost warnings and protect your sensitive plants. Plants will survive better if kept moist but not overwatered. Remove old dried fruits, called "mummies," left on fruit trees. Water citrus trees well this month if the rains aren't steady in order to have a good crop next year. Also, deep water your other trees during a dry spell that lasts more than two weeks, even if they are dormant.

We are finishing up our annual tidying up as winter approaches. Shrubs and perennials that benefit from severe pruning include non-compact *Buddleia* (butterfly bush), lion's tail, Matilija poppy, Mexican sage, most penstemons, Jerusalem sage, *Rudbeckia*, *Epilobium* (*Zauschneria*), and yarrow (*Achillea*). For the rest, just remove any branches and old flower stalks that look dead or bedraggled. You can also begin to prune your winter deciduous trees and shrubs, or wait until January, especially if plants aren't fully dormant and safety isn't an issue.

If you had major problems with aphids, mites, scale or whitefly on your fruit trees or roses, spray with dormant oil after the leaves have fallen to kill overwintering adults. Handpick slugs and snails or set out iron phosphate (a less toxic alternative to Metaldehyde for pets, insects it isn't intended to kill, and birds) as a bait. To help control them, eliminate their hiding places under debris such as wood or pots. Unfortunately, many common garden plants, such as daylily and agapanthus, also make good hiding places. You can go on a patrol or engage the help of children in the family and make it into a treasure hunt.



Cabbage Looper Moth

See any white moths around your winter veggies? That cute little dear is laying eggs on your prize broccoli or cabbage. The eggs will hatch into the cabbage looper and eat holes in the leaves. You can't do much about the moth, but seeing it is a signal to start looking under the leaves for the next several days to snag the small, green caterpillars before they do much damage. Large plants can survive some damage, but seedlings can be devoured. Chemical control is BT (*Bacillus Thuringiensis*). Be sure to spray plant leaves thoroughly on the tops and bottoms. Remember many caterpillars, especially on ornamental plants, do little harm and turn into desirable moths and butterflies. And all Lepidoptera are food for birds, lizards, toads and other creatures in the food chain. So, use common sense and a little tolerance for

damage to encourage a healthy garden full of interesting life, even in the urban neighborhood.

Finally, keep up with cool season weeds so weeding doesn't become a tiresome and overwhelming job later. Common household white vinegar or commercially formulated non-systemic organic herbicide can be kept in a small labeled spray bottle in the garden to zap weeds on sunny days. Or lightly hoe them out. You can also try piling on more mulch and shading them out, which works fairly well in these weak-sun days.

CONSERVING: Much of the conservation work we do is about choosing how we maintain the garden. But there are some other ideas to consider this month. Depending on the size and style of your garden, perhaps a few of these will be perfect for you:

- Leave a pile of branches from trees and shrubs for birds to shelter in.
- Keep the bird feeders filled. And don't forget the water. Small creeks as part of a water garden design, mister-style sprinklers, or a bird bath with fresh water are all popular with our wild bird friends.
- When getting ready to prune trees, examine the high branches of large trees for bird nests and avoid pruning if hawks or other birds are nesting.
- If you haven't already done so, cut the flowers off tropical and other non-native orange-flowered milkweed varieties. The Monarchs that stick around because of a ready food source will not survive the cold winter; they need to migrate south. You may want to consider replacing it with a native milkweed next year. On the other hand, we have so many hummingbirds that do not migrate, it is okay to continue to provide them with hummingbird feeder food through the winter.
- If you have a large pond with wild fish, consider tossing your Christmas tree into the pond after the holidays as a hatchery. Remove any artificial decorations first of course.

Winter is an important part of our valley, foothill and mountain climate. Let's hope for a good one, with plenty of rain, snow, a little frost even, and gardens that provide us with the peace and goodwill of the season.

The UCCE Master Gardeners will be available to answer your gardening questions at the following venues in November & December:

Visalia Farmers' Market – Every Saturday morning (8-11 am), Sears parking lot, Mooney Blvd.
Dec 14, 9:00 – 12:00, Lindcove Field Station Citrus Display and Tasting

For answers to all your home gardening questions, call the Master Gardeners in Tulare County at (559) 684-3325, Tuesdays and Thursdays between 9:30 and 11:30 am; or Kings County at (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 a.m.; or visit our website to search past articles, find links to UC gardening information, or to email us with your questions:
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