

Winter is a Great Time for Garden Prep

By Rachel Oppedahl

What is an avid gardener to do in the dead of winter, when it's cold, wet, and most plants are asleep? Here are a few ideas for outdoor and indoor activities that will help you plan and prepare for spring:

Continue Leaf Litter Cleanup. While fallen leaves are a great compost material, a solid, wet, airless mass of whole leaves on top of garden soil may be a breeding ground for disease. If you want to protect plant roots from frost, classic mulching material such as wood chips may be a better choice. Put the undecomposed leaf litter in your compost pile.

Start Composting! Making your own soil is a magical thing. And there is a composting method for everyone, whether you opt for a small, convenient plastic tumbler just outside your kitchen door or go big-time with a large outdoor system. For a basic primer on composting, visit this Central Sierra Master Gardener web page: <http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.org/files/114706.pdf>

Prune While Plants Are Asleep. Winter is the dormant season for most trees, shrubs and perennials, so this is the time to trim or prune. The University of California Cooperative Extension has a number of helpful pruning guidelines on its website: www.ucanr.edu. Our local UCCE Master Gardener office also has pruning tips handouts. Call (209) 533-5912.

Start Aging Manure Now. If you'd like to use "fresh" manure in your garden come spring planting time, put it somewhere in the landscape now where it can age for one to two months before use. Fresh manures, especially nutrient-rich chicken manure, are too "hot" to use in a planting hole, as they might burn tender roots. Plants cannot make use of the nutrients in manures until they have at least partially decomposed.

Maintain Garden Tools. If you didn't clean, sharpen or repair garden tools before putting them away last fall, spend a rainy weekend day preparing them for use this spring.

Curl Up With Seed Catalogs and Gardening Books. This is probably my favorite winter gardening activity. Pore over garden and landscaping books, as well as some of the websites mentioned above, to research plants and their ideal growing conditions, learn how to install drip irrigation systems, or maybe pinpoint the causes of and ways to prevent pests or plant diseases that plagued your garden last year. There are a gazillion gardening resources, but some of the best are: Sunset's *Western Garden Book*, the California Native Plant Society website (cnps.org), and the UCCE California Garden Web (<http://cagardenweb.ucanr.edu/>)

If you plan to start plants from seeds indoors, now is the time to peruse the seed catalogs and order. There are many seed companies to choose from, but here are a few of my favorites: Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds (www.rareseeds.com) and Johnny's Selected Seeds (www.johnnyseeds.com). Also, check out the seed-lending library at the Tuolumne County Library. Call for days/times: (209) 533-5507.

Start a Gardening Journal. Use this relative downtime to make notes about what worked and what didn't in your garden last year. Think about your goals for your landscape, and prioritize the tasks necessary reach them. Consider purchasing a calendar that you dedicate to gardening todos by month.

Gardening is, in a way, a state of mind, so enjoy the tasks that are ideal for winter weather now — because before you know it, spring will be here.

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