

“Gardening in February?” You bet.

By Rachel Oppedahl

Are you waiting for the warm, sunny days of May or June to get serious about gardening again? Well, there's no need to wait, and no need to deny yourself the unique pleasures of gardening when the weather outside is frightful. Here are some winter tasks to help you and your garden prepare for spring.

Keep the bugs at bay. Rather than waiting until mid-spring, when hordes of aphids and other pests cover your beloved plants, one of the simple actions you can take now to prevent or minimize their presence in your garden this year is to use dormant oil (also called horticultural oil) sprays. Many common pests over winter on plants and/or in surrounding soil, so these sprays work by smothering the pests that are actually on the plant and the soil surface at the time you spray. They can even kill eggs and larvae. Horticultural oil sprays are relatively nontoxic, and come in heavier, dormant versions for use in winter, and lighter, summer sprays. Always read the labels to ensure you use them wisely.

Another thing you can do now to prevent pest damage is to stock up early on some store- bought and homemade insect deterrents, such as copper foil rings and/or diatomaceous earth around plants to repel snails; liquid fence and/or caging to foil the deer; and used tuna cans that you can fill with cooking oil and position by plants that have been attacked in the past by earwigs. Both earwigs and slugs are drawn (and drown in) to the oil.

Prune wisely. The best time to prune many trees, shrubs and hardy perennials is in the dead of winter, when they are dormant. That said; don't assume you can use your loppers and pruning shears with abandon. It's always wise to look up any plant you want to prune, to determine the best time of year to do so. For example, some bushes flower on new wood formed this year (typically, in spring), so this might be the last month to do any hard pruning, lest you remove the very twigs or vines that would produce blooms. Another example: some perennials, such as some varieties of sage (*salvia*), resent being pruned hard at any time of year. The last example is fruit trees, which are a whole pruning science unto themselves. So, use the cold, rainy days of February to read up on individual plants before cutting them back.

Make a mindful shopping list. Next month, nurseries (especially the big box stores) will no doubt explode with colorful annuals, shrubs, trees and everything in between. Resist the temptation to wander those dizzying aisles without a thoughtful plan. Things to consider in making your shopping list:

- Even though the nursery shelves are overflowing with petunias, lobelia and begonias, we all know that in the foothills, snow and hard frosts can occur well into May. Just say no until Memorial Day.
- Instead, shop now for useful garden tools and/or equipment that will make gardening easier, and hence, encourage you to spend more time there. Think ergonomics: stools, kneepads, tool totes, or extension rods to help you reach what you couldn't before. Or maybe you need efficiency: better irrigation systems or books/websites for water-wise

landscape planning. Or how about simple products like gardener's hand cream, solar path lights, or more sturdy, yet comfortable garden shoes?

Cuddle up with rainy day garden chores. Some cold, grey Saturday or Sunday in February, curl up on the couch with a hot cocoa and peruse a good seed catalog, put some gardening-related events on your calendar (the UCCE Master Gardener Demonstration Garden lectures started in February and the next one is March 4th), or start a new notebook to track your plant purchases and performance through the season.

And you thought chilly, wet February had nothing to do with gardening!

Rachel Oppedahl is a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County.