



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Helpful Garden Tips for December 2022 (December 3, 2022)

by Peyton Ellas, UCCE Master Gardener



December can be one of the coldest months of the year in Tulare and Kings counties, and the winter solstice occurs on Wednesday, December 21, at 1:48 pm. That's the moment the sun reaches the Tropic of Capricorn, which is the equatorial line cutting through South America, the tip of Africa, and through Australia. At noon, the sun will rise to its lowest point all year before sinking below the western horizon, and thus the day is both the shortest and coldest. It's also the first day of winter, and from then on, the days will be getting longer. For about a week before and after the solstice, the sun doesn't seem to move very far in elevation during the middle part of the day, appearing to "stand still," and that is what solstice means: sun standing still. Celebrations around the solstice are most often marked with greenery for the promise of returning spring, yule logs, and candles to increase the light for the day, and in general, everything nature-related to remind ourselves we live on a living, changing, a complicated planet in a vast universe. What better companions to pondering these deep thoughts than applying our muscles and energy to a few winter garden tasks?

PLANTING: Bare-root planting begins in December for roses, berries, and deciduous trees. Plants that are frost sensitive should not be planted until spring. Even for frost-hardy species, use a layer of mulch to protect plant crowns and roots from freezing. Finish planting bulbs and wildflower seeds. In the edible garden, in addition to perennial herbs, you can still transplant seedlings of most cool-season vegetables. Also, plant bulb onions, asparagus, and rhubarb. These last two are perennials, so you won't be harvesting them until well into next year. You can also plant lettuce and related salad green seeds in cold frames.



MAINTAINING: Watch for frost warnings and protect your sensitive plants. Plants will survive better if kept moist but not overwatered. Remove old fruits, called "mummies," left on fruit trees. Water citrus trees well this month if the rains aren't steady 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 the trees are dormant.

You can begin to prune your winter deciduous trees, shrubs, and fruit vines or wait until January, especially if plants aren't fully dormant and safety isn't an issue. Don't prune if frost is expected within the week. Force your roses into dormancy by removing leaves that haven't fallen. Mow cool weather lawns, which should be actively growing now, at three inches. This also applies to over-seeded lawns.

If you have had major problems with aphids, mites, scale, or whitefly on your fruit trees or roses, spray with dormant horticultural oil after the leaves have fallen to kill overwintering adults. Handpick slugs and snails or set out iron phosphate as bait. You must replace iron phosphate after rain, but it is not toxic to people, pets, and beneficial insects and doesn't appear to harm soil microorganisms either. In late December, spray early-blooming peach and nectarine trees with a copper fungicide to control peach leaf curl if you've had symptoms this year.

See any white moths around your winter veggies? The moth is looking for good spots to lay her eggs, which will hatch into the cabbage looper and eat holes in the leaves, sometimes decimating the crop. You can't do much about the moth, but seeing the moth 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*) or going chemical-free, and hand picks and toss caterpillars some place hungry birds will find them.

Finally, keep up with cool season weeds, so it 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 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 well on these weak-sun days. Use cardboard or layers of newspaper as a decomposing mulch. You can cover the paper products with wood or leaf mulch or with hay or straw in a practice called "sheet mulching."



CONSERVING: Remember, many caterpillars, especially on ornamental plants, do little harm and turn into desirable moths and butterflies. All *Lepidoptera* are food for birds, lizards, toads, and other creatures in the food chain. Use common sense and a little tolerance for damage to encourage a healthy garden full of interesting life, even in the urban neighborhood.

Leave a pile of branches from trees and shrubs for birds to shelter in if you can. 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. Consider replacing your non-native milkweed with a native to CA variety now that they are readily available in nurseries. Once you have your milkweed established, think beyond a single species to expand the habitat benefits.

Cover bare soil with plants, mulch, or erosion control fabrics to reduce losing more of your topsoil. If you have a significant stormwater runoff, consider installing a creek, rain basin, swale, or French drain system.

I hope you have a wonderful winter holiday full of beneficial garden companions and delightful surprises.

The Tulare-Kings Counties Master Gardeners will answer your questions:

Visalia Farmer's Market- 1st & 3rd Saturdays, 8-11 am, 2100 W. Caldwell Ave (behind Sears)

Ace Hardware, Visalia - 1st Sat./every month, 10 am-1 pm

Luis Nursery, Visalia - 2nd Sat./every month, 10 am-2 pm

Hofman's Nursery, Hanford – 3rd Sat./every month, 10 am-1 pm

Wed., December 21, 8-10 am -- Public Rose Pruning Day with the Master Gardeners at the Tulare County Courthouse, Visalia

Questions? Call the Master Gardeners:

Tulare County: (559) 684-3325, Tues & Thurs, 9:30-11:30;

Kings County: (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 am

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