Master Gardener Newspaper Articles

Volunteer Program

Tulare/Kings Counties

In My Garden – December 2009

by Betty Coffelt, Master Gardener

It is hard to believe that the holidays are just around the corner. One thing I like to do for my holiday home décor is to make evergreen wreaths. Over the years I have planted some evergreen shrubs in my yard just for this purpose. For example I have 3 types of holly, old gold junipers, variegated osmanthus, and 3 different small arborvitae. I wait to do any pruning on these bushes until early December and use the prunings to make the wreaths.

One comment about pruning evergreens: Don't just hack off the branches and shoots. Instead, lift the lower branches and cut back to a small limb or leaf. Then when the branches fall back into place the shrub still looks natural and you don't see a large area of bare limbs. These not only look bad but can sunburn in the summer heat and eventually kill the bush. It doesn't take more time to do it correctly and when you are finished it looks nice too!

If you want to use evergreens from your yard to make holiday wreaths, swags, or centerpieces, then make sure they are well watered and thoroughly washed off before you cut them. We often have some fairly warm days in December, so if you plan to display your wreath in the sun, you might wait until mid-month to hang it so it doesn't dry out excessively and shrivel.

Getting back to the garden. We have had several light frosts here in Woodlake but the afternoons have been sunny and clear. This has confused some plants that usually bloom early in the spring. I have a lilac that has started to bloom and my earliest bulbs (paper whites) have been blooming for about a month. I have an unusual amaryllis (cream, green, and burgundy colors) that is also in bloom. Gerbera daisies are very vibrant now; the cool nights really make the colors stand out as it does with the roses.

If you planted bulbs be sure to check on them regularly to remove any weeds that might be popping up. Annual bluegrass, prickly lettuce, clovers, and sowthistle are a few common weeds that you might see emerging after this last rain. If you stand over the planted bulbs you can spot the weeds easily and pull them out.

If you have citrus trees you've undoubtedly noticed that the fruit is starting to color up. Tangerines and mandarins are almost sweet enough to pick and the lemons are not far behind. Navel oranges and grapefruit are not usually ready to eat until January, but some of you might already be harvesting some. One advantage of having your own fruit trees is you can let them ripen on the tree and pick them as you need. The flavor is so much better that way. The lemon, orange and grapefruit will be good left on the tree for a few months and still have very good quality, but the mandarins and tangerines need to be eaten by the end of January or their quality will deteriorate.

Come to the UC Lindcove Field Station's open house on Saturday morning, December 12 to learn more about citrus varieties.

If you've been to the nursery lately you've seen the holiday plants and pine trees, but you should also notice that bare root plants are starting to arrive. Our local nurseries sell plants as seeds, transplants, container plants, and bare root. Buying bare root plants and planting in winter months is a smart move as the plants are considerably less expensive and easy to place in the garden. Many shrubs, roses, fruit and ornamental trees are available.

One comment about bare root plants is to be sure to plant them as soon after purchase as possible so that their roots don't dry out and die before you even get them into the ground. If you have to wait a little while before planting you can water the plant in the medium it come in but be sure to poke holes in the bottom of the plastic so the water can drain out. If your plants did not come in plastic but directly out of sand you can just cover the roots with some more moist sand and keep them in the shade until you plant them into the ground.

Outside chores often get left behind during December, but if the stress of shopping, cleaning, and cooking starts to get to you, then take a break and go outside. The garden is a great place to retreat from all the activity. Take time to relax and stay in the holiday spirit. Rake the leaves and pull some weeds or decorate an area in the patio, the pruning can wait until January.

Enjoy time with family and friends this month and get ready to garden hardy next year. The Master Gardeners will get you in a gardening mood at their Winter Gardening Demonstrations at the Tulare County Courthouse rose gardens on January 16, 2010. Come visit the myriad of gardening displays and learn how to do it yourself.

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