



# NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

## Helpful Garden Tips for February 2025 (February 1, 2025)

by Peyton Ellas, Tulare/Kings Counties Master Gardener

Will this year begin another drought cycle? Or will we get unending storms the rest of winter and into spring? We don't know, but there are still things we can predict about February and ways we keep our gardens healthy and attractive. Many days in February feel like spring. Early wildflowers appear. Some trees leaf out. But we might have frost, fog, rain, snow, and even hail. February is a transition month. Enjoy watching the seasonal shifts.

**PLANTING:** You can transplant most trees, perennials, spring-blooming bulbs, and summer flower annuals this month. Plant so that the center of the plant is an inch above the soil level, and use a two-to-three-inch layer of mulch. Clippings, including leaves and small twigs, from your own garden are the best mulch. Shred up large leaves like sycamore so rain can reach the soil. Keep mulch several inches away from tree trunks and from the base of roses and other woody shrubs. You can use inorganic mulch like rock or gravel, especially for pathways, but for plants that are not very well adapted to summer heat, organic mulch will help them survive the summer heat and look their best.



In the vegetable garden, it's time to plant asparagus, chives, cilantro, leek, green onion, parsley, potatoes, English peas, radish, spinach, kale, and strawberry. You can also transplant cauliflower, cabbage, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, and beet seedlings. You still have time to start from seed: onions (for setting out in April), tomato, peppers, basil, eggplant, and tomatillo. Set out dahlia, gladiolus, lily and canna. Sow California poppy and other wildflower seeds if you can keep the area weed-free and watered for a few months. I planted poppy seeds where I knew weeds would compete, but I am a crazy gardener and find it relaxing to sit down amongst the seedlings and use my garden scissors to cut at ground-level competing weeds like filaree and annual grasses so the poppies get more sun and can outgrow the weeds. My wildflower bed is small, fortunately, and I am looking forward to a great display of California native flowers in another month or so.

**MAINTAINING:** Whether February will be rainy or not, this is a great month to check your irrigation system and make needed repairs for both sprinkler and drip systems. Consider upgrading to water-saving lawn sprinklers. Switch to drip irrigation for planting beds and orchard trees. Using tubing with inline drip emitters can greatly reduce maintenance, but all drip systems benefit from an annual check and system flush before heavy spring and summer use. Adjust turf sprinklers to eliminate overspray. Don't forget to check faucets and irrigation valves for leaks.

Pruning can still be done on berries, grapes, deciduous fruit trees, and roses. Do not prune camellias, forsythia, Eastern lilac, California lilac, California native sage, coyote mint, penstemon, quince, and other spring-flowering shrubs or trees until they finish blooming. If you have plants that show signs of frost damage, wait until it's warmer to prune the brown stuff off to protect the crown and roots. After pruning fruit trees, apply a dormant spray before the buds swell but when the air temperatures are at least 45 degrees Fahrenheit. You don't need to spray if you haven't had any pest issues. Products containing copper are used to control some diseases, like peach leaf curl. Products containing oil kill insects and their eggs that overwinter in the cracks and crevices of the tree. Choose a calm day with no imminent rain in the forecast and follow the directions on the container exactly.

This is also a good month to prune ornamental grass and ground covers like lantana, CA fascia, and verbena.



Earwigs and mollusks are active this month. Opaque bottles placed sideways in the garden bed, small tins with oil or stale beer, or rolled newspapers or cardboard tubes can all be traps. Check them each morning and drop insects in a bucket of soapy water. If you use plant-based soap, you can pour it into the compost bin and repeat it. It's very effective. The chemical control for slugs and snails is iron phosphate, which is not toxic to pets, beneficial insects, and people. As always, follow the package instructions.

Weeds give us an ever-ready garden therapy opportunity. Try to remove weeds before they set seeds. If you have a limited time, go for the worst invasives like non-native thistle and mallow and escaped ornamentals like large leaf vinca.

Pick up fallen camellia blossoms and discard them to prevent flower bud infection, which leaves ugly brown blotches on the blossoms. At the end of the month, fertilize deciduous fruit trees. Do not fertilize citrus or avocados yet.

As temperatures warm, watch for early signs of fire blight. Trees and shrubs in the rose and apple family are especially susceptible, including native Toyon. It is a fungal disease that is most active as daytime temperatures rise to the high 70s Fahrenheit. Very early signs are tan or black sap oozing from dead bark when trees start actively growing. Later, blossom and fruit tips die back and look scorched, thus the name. The best control is to prune out diseased branches. Cut back the dead or dying branches well beyond reddish or brown streaks or patches that appear under the bark in affected wood. Fire blight is hard to eliminate, but most trees can survive minor infections. Avoid overwatering or fertilizing affected trees because rapid vigorous growth often increases the infection. Although the disease can reduce fruit production, it is not harmful to humans, and harvested fruits are safe to eat. Continue to monitor and prune affected branches as signs appear. You can safely fertilize after a blossom drop occurs.

**CONSERVING:** Watch your native bee nesting box for action this month. Be wary of spraying pesticides/herbicides when bees and native wasps are active. Social defensive wasps have given all wasps a bad reputation, but most wasps are very small, don't sting humans, and can be terrific allies in the garden. They can help with pollination, but they also are carnivorous for part of their lives, so they eat insects that cause harm to our plants. The website [insectidentification.org](http://insectidentification.org) has useful photos and information. As always, compost and mulch can be added to the garden to reduce erosion and soil damage and support soil organisms, both that you can see and the billions that you cannot. If you have a large property, consider adding a brush pile for birds. Adding a large native shrub like quailbush (*Atriplex*) or mulefat (*Baccharis salicifolia*) can attract and support birds to your garden. Think of how we can form better partnerships with our wild friends. Even small gardens can be sanctuaries for wildlife and humans. Three design principles, scale, balance, and harmony, are not only about creating the garden but also about caring for it. When we walk into a balanced garden, we understand we are not alone in this endeavor, and although it may feel like we are in a battle sometimes, it's a war we won't win without our natural friends. A garden in which you are a partner instead of the beleaguered master is a happy, calm, and beautiful place to be. Happy Gardening!

**Questions? Call the Master Gardeners:**

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