

January Gardening Tips for Los Angeles County Residents

by Yvonne Savio

The garden is almost at a standstill this month. It's cold, wet, and dormant. We depend on every leaf of lettuce and spinach, every broccoli florette, every kohlrabi and cabbage, every Brussels sprout. We're either glad we'd planted so much in the late summer and fall or regretting that we didn't. We eagerly anticipate the first asparagus spears and the first pods of the overwintering peas.

Aside from transplanting, most outside gardening activity is limited to pruning and spreading soil amendments. Too much digging is not a good idea, since the soil still retains a good deal of water: disturbing it too much will compact it and destroy its tilth.

Some seeds will sprout outdoors, given a little time, including chard, kale, leeks, bibb and iceberg lettuces, mustards, green and bulb onions, flat-leaf parsley, peas, radishes, and savoy spinaches.

Plant garlic cloves, bulb onion sets, and shallots where they will be able to dry out for a month before harvest next summer. When digging to plant these, move the soil as little as possible: remove a full scoopful with a small hand trowel, place the clove/set/bulb in, and gently crumble the soil back on top. Sprinkle just to settle the soil around it.

Indoors, sow more of these and broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbages, chamomile, caraway, cauliflower, chervil, chives, coriander (cilantro), dill, fennel, lettuces, marjoram, mint, oregano, curly-leafed parsley, sage, spinaches, tarragon, and thyme.

Toward the end of the month, start peppers and tomatoes indoors as a promise to yourself that the sunny, clear-skied warmth of summer truly will come.

After the seeds germinate, move the containers to a cooler area with as much direct sun as possible for sturdy seedling development. Too much warmth and too little light will result in spindly growth that will not produce well outdoors.

You can help seeds germinate--and early seedlings grow--outdoors by covering the seed or seedling beds or trays with clear plastic sheeting after watering them in. Although the plastic doesn't alleviate very much of the chill from cold nights, it does help the soil absorb daytime warmth, and it lessens evaporation. This provides the seeds with a more comfortable environment in which to sprout and develop.

When the seedlings are one inch tall, remove the plastic during the warmer daylight hours to begin acclimating them to the coolness, but recover them at night. After a week or two, remove it completely.

Provide further protection of the seedlings with mini-greenhouses made from clear plastic milk or water jugs with their caps removed and their bottoms cut off. Place the jugs over the seedlings after the bed or tray has been watered well. Press the jugs about one-half inch deep into the soil to prevent the entry of pests such as cutworms at the soil level and to lessen the chance of the jug being blown away during windy gusts.

Remove the jugs when the foliage begins to crowd the jug, or when night temperatures are above 50 degrees.

Transplant artichoke and asparagus crowns and rhubarb rhizomes, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbages, cauliflower, chard, garlic, kale, leeks, lettuce, green and bulb onions, flat-leaf parsley, radishes, and savoy spinach. Plant cole crops up to the first set of leaves to prevent their maturing into weak, leggy, less-productive plants.



*Chard's year-round bright color and nutrition-rich greens are especially welcome in winter.
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When transplanting, be careful to not compact the soil, now that it's thoroughly cold and moist. Dig and replace the soil gently, and barely water in the transplant--just enough to settle the roots. Do not stomp it with your hand or foot. Tamping the soil more than lightly will damage the soil tilth by compression.

Asparagus will grow and produce satisfactorily in partially-shaded areas such as next to a fence or a building, especially if the plants receive morning sun.

Choose a new area rather than replanting an old asparagus bed with new roots. In an old bed, residues from the old plants will retard the growth of the new young ones, and the old bed may have accumulated fungal pathogens.

Dig a lot of compost and manure into the soil, and set roots at least six inches deep and a foot apart. Cover them with a fluffy mix of soil, manure, or other organic mulch, and water in well.

To established beds, apply manure to the depth of an inch or two to slowly feed the plant as rain and over-head irrigation wash the nutrients down into the root zone.

Set artichoke roots with buds or shoots just above the soil line, spaced six inches apart. Water them in. When new growth emerges, deeply soak the area once a week.

Rhubarb prefers partial shade. Plant the single bud of its rhizome at the soil line. The wide spread of its mature leaves requires four feet between plants. Water deeply once new growth begins. Restrain yourself from harvesting until the plant's second season, to enable the plant to gain strength. When you do harvest, pull off no more than one-third the number of stalks at any one time, to not stress the plant by leaving too little foliage to continue growing.

Plant grapes, berry vines, and strawberries from now through March. Tips from last year's berry canes should be well-rooted. Cut off the vine above the third node from the rooted tip. Use a slant cut at the top and a straight cut at the bottom so you'll know which end is which when you transplant it.

Use strawberry runners to renew your patch or start a new one. Strawberry plants that are more than three years old have passed their prime and are best replaced. Avoid locating strawberries where eggplants, peppers, potatoes, or tomatoes were growing within the last three years, as they have similar disease problems. Dig in lots of manure and compost before transplanting strawberries right at the soil level--so roots are buried but leaf bases are not.

Plant bare-root fruit and nut trees (except for citrus and avocados) through early March. Buy trees that have well-developed fibrous root systems, a single well-shaped leader, and no serious bark injury. Avoid trees with circling or tangled roots. Branches should be smaller than the trunk and growing from it at angles more horizontal than 45 degrees.

Roots of mature trees can spread up to three or four times beyond the distance from trunk to dripline, so be sure to prepare the planting hole well at least a foot or two beyond the size of the rootball. Loosen soil and add some compost and manure, but don't be too generous, or the tree roots will not have to reach out into surrounding soil for nutrients. Instead, they'll circle in the planting hole and not anchor the tree well outside, making it prone to being blown over, the larger it grows. As the tree develops, feeder roots will remain somewhat close to the surface, so keep ground covers and construction away from the trunk at least as far as its drip line.

This month's "height" or "depth" of dormancy is time for another spraying of dormant oil for fruit trees, especially if this was not done last month or if it rained within two days of that application. The point is to have the sprayed material on the tree throughout the dormant season, and especially at specific pest growth periods.



*Young apple tree just beginning to leaf out.
Photo by Yvonne Savio
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Choose a day when the temperature stays above 40 degrees and the wind is calm. For peach leaf curl, choose a fungicide such as Bordeaux, Orthorix, or Microcrop.

The next critical time for spraying is about mid-February, when the buds are swollen but don't yet show color. Spraying at the precise period of bud swell is critical--before the buds swell is too early, and after the blossoms open is too late. Once the buds open, the damage has already been done.

This is the big month for pruning deciduous fruit and nut trees. Basic guide-lines for winter dormant pruning are to remove crowded or crossed branches, to open the center for good light exposure and airflow, to repair structural weakness, and to remove vigorous vertical-growing branches (waterspouts). The height or width of the tree can also be reduced. Take care to not leave stubs or to overprune in any single year, as this encourages excessive new foliage and less fruit.

An excellent, inexpensive, and easily-used disinfectant for pruning tools is rubbing (isopropyl) alcohol. Wipe shears with the alcohol after pruning every several cuts to avoid spreading any diseases. Clean the blades extra well before moving to another tree or bush.

Pruning cuts that are under one-and-a-half inches across don't need protective covering. Paint larger cuts with an off-white or sand-colored interior latex paint that has a matte finish, not a glossy one. Black asphalt substances or dark-colored paint, especially on south-facing surfaces, will concentrate the sun's heat--baking and killing the tissue that the tree is trying to heal.

Pruning citrus trees requires a different approach: remove entire branches at the trunk. Heading branches back--cutting off only portions--will remove wood that would have blossomed and set fruit this coming season and stimulate more bushy growth.

Cane berries are most easily pruned when all their leaves have fallen off and the buds have just begun to fill out and show their light pink color. The dead canes and the plant structure are then quite apparent, and the thorns are more easily avoided. When clipping away all the dead growth, be careful to not injure the new pink shoots at the crown. Then prune each strong cane from the root crown just above its point of attachment to the top horizontal support of the trellis.

Prune side shoots just after the third strong bud. Spread and re-anchor the upright canes evenly along the trellis in order to keep the area open for good ventilation and promote the even spread of developing foliage.

This pruning and trellising procedure will encourage strong growth of fruiting vines but not of unnecessary foliage. Although cutting down all dead and growing vines at the soil level in a clean sweep is an easy approach, it encourages weak bushy growth with only a few berries setting very low on the plant.

An acceptable variation of this easier approach would be to clean-cut half of the berry vines every two years. Then, you'll always have a year-old patch to bear fruit the following summer, and can clear the other patch by clean-cutting.

Prune grape vines after all the leaves have dropped. The choice of pruning approach depends on the specific varieties and trellis structures you have. Generally, grapes will bear on second-year growth, so prune to encourage this.

Pencil-sized grape cuttings with two sets of nodes can be used to start new vines. To identify which end is which, cut the bottom (root end) of the cane flat and the top (foliage end) at a slant. Bury the lower set of nodes in the soil. Don't be concerned if new foliage doesn't appear from the upper nodes until very warm weather, as the strong root system develops first.

Ornamentals

Outdoors, sow ageratums, alyssum, bachelor's button (cornflower), calendulas, candytuft, celosia (cockscomb), columbines, coreopsis, English daisy (bellis), delphiniums, dianthus, forget-me-nots, four-o'clocks, hollyhocks, larkspur, lunaria (honesty, money plant, silver dollar plant), pansies, California and Shirley poppies, salvias, snapdragons, stocks, sweet peas, sweet william, and native wildflowers.

Inside, in a warm and brightly-lit but not necessarily sunny place, sow these (except for California poppies) and asters, balsam, cosmos, African daisies (gazania), dianthus, gaillardias, impatiens, lobelia, marigolds, nicotiana, petunias, phlox, statice, verbena, and vincas.

Transplant these and agapanthus, hardy amaryllis, azaleas, bleeding hearts, camellias, cinerarias, clematis, cyclamens, ornamental cabbage and kale, gaillardias, hollies, primroses, Iceland and Oriental poppies, bareroot roses, violas, violets, and wisteria.

Sweet peas don't like to be moved, but with a minimum of handling and watering them in with a mild solution of a balanced fertilizer, they can be successfully transplanted.

Divide and replant perennials, including agapanthus, chrysanthemums, coreopsis, African daisies (gazania), English daisies (bellis), gloriosa daisies (rudbeckia), and Shasta daisies, daylilies (hemerocallis), delphiniums, dianthus, statice (limonium), and violets. Older gazanias tend to become unattractive at their centers, but rooting the tip portions will provide many new plants.

Simply pinching dead blooms and feeding pansies and violas will keep them looking good and blooming for a longer period.

While old-fashioned roses are often more hardy and easier to take care of than newer hybrid floribundas and teas, some modern varieties are deliciously fragrant.

The seven basic scents most often found in hybrid tea roses are apple, clover, lemon, nasturtium, orris, rose, and violet. Others are anise, bay, fern, geranium, honey, hyacinth, lily-of-the-valley, linseed oil, marigold, moss, orange, parsley, peppers, quince, raspberry, and wine.

For fragrance, consider Chrysler Imperial, Crimson Glory, Dolly Parton, Double Delight, Fragrant Cloud, Garden Party, Granada, Intrigue, Ivory Fashion, Lemon Sherbet, Mister Lincoln, Papa Meiland, Sunsprite, Sutter's Gold, Sweet Surrender, and Tiffany.

In general, the most highly scented roses are the ones that are darker in color, have more petals to the flower, or have thick, velvety petals. Reds and pinks tend to smell "like a rose;" whites and yellows like lemon, orris, nasturtium, and violet; oranges like clover, fruit, orris, nasturtium, and violet.

Fragrance is strongest early on warm, sunny days when the soil is moist. Only two varieties seem immune to the vagaries of the weather--Chrysler Imperial and Sutter's Gold are fragrant even on cool, cloudy days. Roses that appear to be resistant to powdery mildew include Double Delight, Honor, Iceberg, and Cary Grant. To reduce the chance of mildew, spray the plants--especially new growth--with plain water from a hose with a spray head two or three times a week, making sure to cover leaf undersides.

Best cutting roses include:

- Red: Mr. Lincoln, Olympiad, Viva
- Pink: America, Bewitched, Cherish, Color Magic, Duet, Sonia, Touch of Class, Voodoo
- Purple: Deep Purple, Intrigue, Paradise
- White: French Lace, Honor, Iceberg, Pascali
- Orange: Gingersnap, Marina, Prominent
- Yellow: Gold Medal, New Day, Summer Sunshine

In a recent test, these roses were cut when in bud and put in vases of 72-degree water. Every two days, the stems were cut back about 1/4 inch, and new water was added. Blooms were judged for color, substance, retention of petals, and overall appearance. While all of the roses lasted at least four days, Olympiad and Touch of Class remained in good condition for a full nine days. Red, pink, and orange roses lasted the longest, as did those having many petals mainly due to their slower opening time.



Stock offer bright color and fragrance through the cold weather. Photo by Yvonne Savio, © UC Regents 2000.

When transplanting roses, add humus and pot-ash, but be spare with nitrogen fertilizers, as these hasten new foliage which may be damaged by late frosts.

Prune established roses even if they have not lost all their leaves. Remove crowded or crossed branches, and open the center of the plant for good light exposure and airflow. Prune branches at a 45-degree angle just above a bud that faces outward or toward a side that needs filling in. Remove any leaves that have dead or diseased portions, and destroy (don't compost) them. Old-fashioned roses with a single bloom cycle in the spring, as with climbers, should be pruned following that bloom.

Caring for a gift amaryllis so it'll bloom again is easy. After it's through blooming, cut off the bloom stalk about an inch above where it emerges from the bulb. Place the plant in a warm, sunny place to grow. Water it generously, and fertilize regularly until Labor Day. Watering with a quarter-strength houseplant fertilizer solution each time will provide constant feeding for gradual growth. Don't let the soil get dry at any time, as this will disrupt the cycle. During the summer, a spot in filtered sun outdoors is fine. Flower buds set better in fall when night temperatures are cooler, from 50 to 55 degrees.

Acclimate gift poinsettias to the cold outdoors before planting them into the garden is also easy. First, clip overlong branches after the third node to encourage bushier growth. Place the plant in a sunny spot outdoors that's protected from wind for several hours each day, and a cool spot indoors at night. Keep its soil moist, and feed it a slow-release or quarter-strength regular fertilizer every week or so. After a week or two, plants should survive a full day outdoors in the protected spot. After another month, they can be successfully transplanted into the garden.

Feed azaleas, camellias, and rhododendrons by renewing their peat mulch and working cottonseed meal into the top two inches of soil. Use a half-cup for small plants and up to a cup for larger ones. Plant acacia, dogwood, forsythia, lilac, mimulus, flowering quince, and other ornamental trees. Avoid planting weak-wooded plants like Jacaranda, Brazilian pepper, and Coral tree. Trees that better withstand storms include liquidambers, magnolias, oaks, palms, pines, and sycamores.

Prune crape myrtles severely to force growth of new flowering wood. Prune dormant deciduous flowering vines and shade trees.

Wait to prune spring-flowering ornamentals until just after they bloom--pruning now will remove the wood that already has bloom buds set inside, stimulate frost-tender new growth, and possibly remove wood that was not truly dead.

Lawns--especially frosty or soggy ones--need to breathe, so keep leaves and litter raked up, and walk on them as little as possible.

General

Frost continues to be likely on dry, windless, clear nights. Plants are less susceptible to frost damage when they have been sufficiently watered--keep soil or planter mix barely moist. More water may stimulate new growth or drown the plant, since roots don't circulate moisture quickly in cold weather. Keep frost-protection cover-ings, especially those made of plastic sheeting, away from the foliage, or the foliage will more readily freeze.

If plants are damaged by frost, don't remove any of the dead foliage or branches. Plants may look messy, but these damaged portions will protect sensitive growth further inside the plants from later frosts. Wait to start trimming until growth begins in spring--you may find that branches which appeared dead are alive and well after all.

Plants that have frost damage should not be fertilized till spring growth begins, when more frost is unlikely.

Soil amendments applied to the soil surface now will decay over the winter, and their nutrients will wash into the soil gradually with each rain. Which amendments your soil needs can be determined best by a soil test. At the very least, all soils can benefit from nutrient-rich compost and mulch. Healthy plant root growth and overall plant vigor depends on a moist and loose soil.

Apply a layer of mulch onto soil that is close to the house or in a windowbox to prevent mud from spattering during rain or sprinkling.