

The Press Democrat
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ADVICE TO GROW BY » SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
Protect your garden from freezing temperatures



Plants and trees in a garden covered to protect them from frost and cold temperatures.
Photo: Shutterstock

In January, nighttime temperatures can be cold, even freezing. Keep an eye on weather forecasts and when frost is expected, protect frost-tender plants such as citrus, hibiscus and bougainvillea.

Use an anti-desiccant spray such as Cloud Cover or a spun-fabric floating row cover when frost is predicted. Covering plants with sheets, lightweight blankets or burlap is another option. A strand of holiday lights in a citrus tree is often enough to protect the plant from frost. Choose old-fashioned incandescent lights if you have them rather than LED lights, which do not emit heat. Potted plants should be moved under shelter.

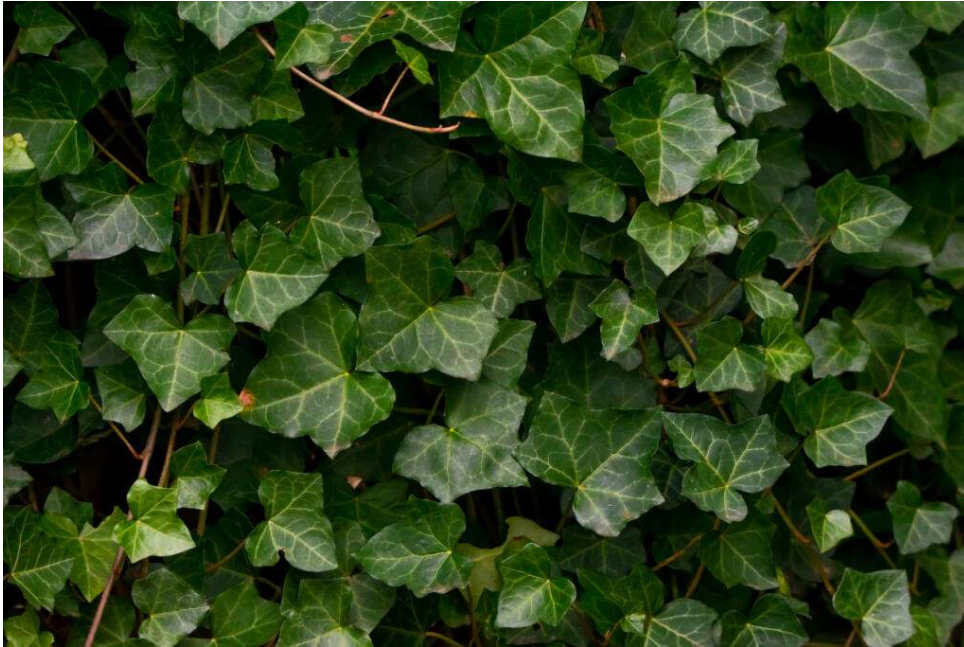
- Prune roses anytime between New Year's Day and Valentine's Day. Be careful not to compact the soil around the plants with your feet when you prune. Prune hard, down to three to four young vigorous canes per plant.

- Prune pines and other dormant conifers. Don't trim back individual branches part way and do not top them. Topping causes irregular growth. Instead, thin trees where necessary by pruning out entire branches to the base. You can control the size of most pines by pinching out new shoots, called candles, at the tip of each new growth cluster.
- Begin to cut back deciduous ornamental grasses, pruning within a couple of inches of the ground. Wait until February or March if you like the existing structure. Winds often blow dried stems away from unpruned grasses.
- Bare-root shrubs and trees will begin appearing in nurseries. Bare root is a good way to plant many fruit trees, shrubs and roses.
- You can start seeds indoors now for cool-season leafy vegetables like lettuce, collard greens, kale, Swiss chard and spinach, and for Brassica-family crops like broccoli, spring cabbage and cauliflower. For information on when to plant your starts, see the useful guide to year-round food gardening in Sonoma County on our website at bit.ly/3ilxJll.
- Plant bare-root fruit trees, strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, rhubarb, asparagus and bulb onions.
- Make sure that citrus is well-watered as freezing temperatures will turn water in the soil to ice, making some of it unavailable to plants. Also, the temperature above moist soil is warmer than the temperature above dry soil.
- Good soil means healthy plants. Top your soil with finished compost. This will improve soil nutrition and tilth and feed the beneficial microorganisms that help plants take up nutrients from the soil. No need to work it in. Let winter showers, soil macrobiota and soil "heaving" do that for you. Do not work very wet soil. If you had serious problems in your food garden last year, a soil analysis may be helpful. Many local nurseries have kits for this purpose.
- Most well-established natives can take a few weeks of dry weather. Newly planted natives can die in unseasonably dry or especially windy January weather. They need water until they are well-established.
- January is a great month to prune native winter deciduous shrubs, small trees and some perennials.
- Most natives can be planted in the winter. It's a good time to put potted plants in the ground in our mild-winter areas.

Tool maintenance

Clean, oil and store tools such as shovels, hoes and pruners. Apply light machine oil to metal parts to prevent rust. While you are cleaning, consider spray painting the

handles of the tools a fun color — it's a great way to keep your tools separate from any you happen to borrow or lend out and also makes them easier to find in the yard.



Rats prefer heavy cover, like overgrown ivy. If you have ivy, the best time to prune or remove it is in winter, when growth slows and the soil is somewhat soft. Photo: Shutterstock

Winter is the season when rats forage and damage ornamental plants. If you have had problems in the past or if your neighbors have noticed rats, put out traps early, before they damage fruit trees, vines, climbing roses and shrubs.

Rats prefer heavy cover, like overgrown ivy. If you have ivy, the best time to prune or remove it is in winter, when growth slows and the soil is somewhat soft. If you wait until spring, ivy will quickly grow back and the roots will be harder to remove.

Contributors to this week's column were Diane Judd and Debbie Westrick. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County, sonomamg.ucanr.edu, provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.