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December is a good time to tidy your yard, garden

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS

FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



Poinsettias are a traditional holiday plant. With the introduction of long-lasting cultivars during the past several years, the plant's popularity has increased.

Healthy soil is the foundation of sustainable food, water, air and biodiversity.

Restoring and preserving healthy soil results in:

- Improved plant health and yields
- Increased water infiltration and retention
- Sequestered carbon and reduced greenhouse gases (GHGs)
- Reduced sediment erosion and dust
- Improved water and air quality
- Improved biological diversity and wildlife habitat

The California Department of Food and Agriculture celebrated Healthy Soils Week this past week. Go to, bit.ly/3YVC5VT for more information on the importance of healthy soil in your garden.



Achieve healthy plants with effective mulching techniques. Discover the benefits of using mulch in your garden for better growth and moisture retention.

Mulch is good for soil

Mulch is one of the best means to maintain soil health. Mulch encompasses any number of materials placed on the soil to protect it from compaction, conserve soil moisture, moderate soil temperature, minimize soil erosion or prevent weed growth.

Of the many different types of materials that can be used to cover the ground, only one benefits both the soil and the gardener — a mulch derived from plants. As organic materials slowly breakdown into compost over time, they assist gardeners by reducing time spent on weeding. More critically, they slow evaporation, moderate soil temperatures, prevent erosion, and gradually improve soil quality and fertility. The continuous supply of compost feeds soil organisms, which are key to converting nutrients into forms plants are able to absorb. Food plants, ornamental perennials, shrubs and trees all benefit from a continuous renewal of layers of mulch.

To learn more about nurturing your soil with mulch, types of mulch and the application of mulch, go to <https://bit.ly/3TDbmw5>



Rats favor heavy cover such as overgrown ivy. If you have ivy, the best time to prune or remove it is winter when growth slows and soil is somewhat soft. If you wait until spring, ivy grows quickly and its roots are more difficult to remove.

Winter garden pests

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

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Holiday plants at home

Poinsettias are a traditional holiday plant, and, with the introduction of long-lasting cultivars during the past several years, their popularity has increased. The poinsettia was introduced to the United States in 1825 by Joel Robert Poinsett, the first U. S. ambassador to Mexico who obtained plants from the wilds of southern Mexico. The common name for the exotic plant, poinsettia, came from his last name. Botanically, the plant is known as *Euphorbia pulcherrima*. For more information on the care of poinsettias, go to <https://bit.ly/3Z1QkIX>

Thanksgiving (*Schlumbergera truncata*) and Christmas (*Schlumbergera x buckleyi*) cacti are now in bloom. For information about their care, see our article from Oct. 25. <https://bit.ly/3OglvuS>

December to-do list

Cover your existing compost pile with cardboard, burlap or tarp during heavy rains to avoid overly soggy compost. Too much water blocks out air, kills beneficial microbes and may cause unpleasant odors.

Clean out gutters to avoid overflow and to direct water to downspouts.

Clean and store any unused pots and containers that can be used as hiding places by overwintering insects, slugs and spiders.

Clean your garden tools. Disease microorganisms also overwinter on the surface of stakes, tomato cages, trellises and other garden equipment. Remove all soil from the tools, and clean them with a 10% bleach solution or other disinfectant to protect tools from spreading diseases. Apply a light layer of oil to prevent rusting if you will not be using them for a while. Wash garden gloves.

Feed the birds. Keep suet and seed feeders full. Be sure to clean and disinfect feeders every week to prevent diseases. Leave some spent flowers in your garden as natural bird forage.

Lightly fertilize potted winter-growing succulents such as Aeonium, Aloe, and Kalanchoe if needed. Take cuttings of succulents and create small container gardens for holiday gifts.

Reduce water to houseplants over the winter (when they are not actively growing) to avoid root rot. Ensure that they are not exposed to heat sources.

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.