



DECEMBER IN THE GARDEN

Sources: Texas Garden Almanac by Dr. Doug Welsh, Professor & Horticulturist/Texas A&M University, Fort Bend County Master Gardeners, Inc. (www.fbmg.com) and A Garden Book for Houston and the Texas Gulf Coast by Lynn M. Herbert and the River Oaks Garden Club.

Garden Tasks



- *Cool-season annuals planted recently are still expanding their root systems. Water at least once this month in the absence of rain. Pansies, violas, ornamental kale and cabbage can still be planted. Be prepared to cover flowering annuals whenever a hard freeze threatens.
- *Spring-flowering bulbs are ready to be planted this month. Don't plant too deep. Our soil does not freeze, so deep planting is not necessary.
- *Onion sets and garlic can be planted this month. Seeds for carrots, spinach and peas (English and snap) can also be planted. This is the time to start tomatoes and peppers indoors from seed.
- *Water and fertilize the actively growing vegetable garden. Succession plantings of crops such as lettuce and spinach will keep the harvest coming. Any areas of the garden not planted can be left fallow. This allows the soil to rest. To prevent weeds from popping up and to build up the soil, lay a blanket of leaves, hay or pine needles over the soil and mix some shredded leaves, manure or other organic material into the soil with a spade.
- *Keep those small winter weeds pulled and the soil mulched to cut down on weeds in the spring.
- *Bare-root and container-grown roses will begin to show up at nurseries this month.
- *Seed catalogs will begin appearing in your mailbox. Take a little time during the hectic holidays to relax and plan your spring gardens.

Christmas Plants



- *Amaryllis: Plant the bulb in a small pot with good potting soil and have the top (pointy end) of the bulb sticking up out of the soil about 1 inch. Place in an area with bright indoor light and water only when surface soil is dry to the touch.. The foliage and bloom spike emerge together in about 14 days.
- *Christmas Cactus: A favorite holiday plant, it produces a profusion of blooms ranging from hot pink to apricot, red, purple, and white. Buy plants that have many flower buds that are just beginning to open. This is not the type of cactus we think of that lives in the desert. This plant lives in tropical jungles in the trees. Take care when watering. Its soil should be moist but neither completely dry nor saturated. When the top 1 inch of the soil is dry to the touch, water lightly. The preferred temperature for bloom formation is 58-65 degrees and plants require 12 hours of uninterrupted darkness each day. Here are Doug Welch's two options for growing and re-blooming a Christmas Cactus:
 - Grow the plant indoors on a windowsill in a room that gets natural darkness all night (no room lights turning on and off!) in the fall and winter, the microclimate created by the cold window meets the lower temperature requirements.
 - Grow the plant outdoors, and let it experience cool nights and naturally longer nights before bringing it indoors at the first prediction of frost. If natural darkness of 12 hours is not possible outdoors, (ie: porch lights are on or street lights shine on it) place a box over the plant to eliminate all light each night (and remove it during daylight hours). Buds should already be visible by the time you bring the plant indoors; then warmer temperatures and intermittent light cannot stop blooming at this point.
- *Poinsettias: Choose one that has small, tightly closed flower buds, dark green leaves, and brilliantly colored bracts. Choose one that hasn't shed its pollen (check the bracts for yellow pollen stains). Select a plant that is about as wide as it is tall. Place it in an area with bright light, temperatures in the 60s and some humidity to slow flowering. To speed up flowering, move to a sunny spot where the temperature is in the 80s.