

# Horticulture Tips

## December 2012

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service  
Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources  
Oklahoma State University

### **GARDEN TIPS FOR DECEMBER!**

#### Lawn & Turf

- ❖ Remove leaves from cool-season grasses or mow with a mulching mower. ([HLA-6420](#))
- ❖ Continue mowing cool-season lawns on a regular basis. ([HLA-6420](#))
- ❖ Continue to control broadleaf weeds in well-established warm- or cool-season lawns with a post-emergent broadleaf weed killer. ([HLA-6421](#))

#### Tree & Shrubs

- ❖ Select a freshly cut Christmas tree. Make a new cut prior to placing in tree stand. Add water daily.
- ❖ Live Christmas trees are a wise investment, as they become permanent additions to the landscape after the holidays.
- ❖ Light prunings of evergreens can be used for holiday decorations. Be careful with sap that can mar surfaces.

#### Flowers

- ❖ Apply winter mulch to protect rose bush bud unions and other perennials. Wait until after several early freezes or you will give insects a good place to winter.
- ❖ Poinsettias must have at least six hours of bright, indirect light daily. Keep plants away from drafts.

#### Fruits & Nuts

- ❖ Cover strawberry plants with a mulch about 3 to 4 inches thick if plants are prone to winter injury.
- ❖ Wait to prune fruit trees until late February or March.

#### General

- ❖ Keep all plants watered during dry conditions even though some may be dormant.
- ❖ Irrigate all plantings at least 24 hours before hard-freezing weather if soil is dry. ([HLA-6404](#))
- ❖ Order gardening supplies for next season.
- ❖ Now is a great time to design and make structural improvements in your garden and landscape.
- ❖ Send for mail-order catalogs if you are not already on their mailing lists.

- ❖ Christmas gift ideas for the gardener might include tools, garden books or magazine subscriptions.
- ❖ Clean and fill bird feeders.
- ❖ Make sure indoor plants are receiving enough light, or set up an indoor fluorescent plant light.
- ❖ Till garden plots without a cover crop to further expose garden pests to harsh winter conditions.
- ❖ Visit your county extension office to obtain gardening fact sheets for the new gardening season.
- ❖ Join a horticulture, plant or urban forestry society and support community “greening” or “beautification” projects.
- ❖ Review your garden records so you can correct past mistakes. Purchase a new gardening journal or calendar to keep the New Year’s gardening records.

## **GARDEN TIPS FOR JANUARY!**

- ❖ If precipitation has been deficient (1” of snow = ~ 1/10” of water), water lawns, trees, and shrubs, especially broadleaf and narrowleaf evergreens. Double check moisture in protected or raised planters.
- ❖ Check on supplies of pesticides. Secure a copy of current recommendations and post them in a convenient place. Dilution and quantity tables are also useful.
- ❖ If you did not treat young pines for tip borers in November, do so before March.
- ❖ Check that gardening tools and equipment are in good repair—sharpen, paint, and repair mowers, edgers, sprayers, and dusters.
- ❖ Inspect your irrigation system and replace worn or broken parts.
- ❖ Control overwintering insects on deciduous trees or shrubs with dormant oil sprays applied when the temperature is above 40°F in late fall and winter. Do not use “dormant” oils on evergreens. ([EPP-7306](#))
- ❖ A product containing glyphosate plus a postemergent broadleaf herbicide can be used on dormant bermudagrass in January or February when temperatures are above 50°F for winter weed control. ([HLA-6421](#))

## **Selecting and Caring for Christmas Trees**

*David Hillock*

Selecting a fresh Christmas tree is important so you can enjoy the tree longer and reduce the risk of a hazard.

Check for freshness by gently bending the needles on the tree. If the needles bend easily and don’t break then the tree is pretty fresh. Another way to check for freshness is to lift the tree several inches off the ground and then drop it on the stump end; if an abundance of outer green needles fall off, the tree is not very fresh. Of course you can always visit a local “Choose & Cut” Christmas tree farm ensuring freshness of your tree.

Once you get your live tree home, it should be placed in water as soon as possible so it won't dry out. If you purchase a tree from a retail store, cut one inch off the bottom of the trunk to create a fresh cut that will absorb water. A tree purchased from a Choose & Cut farm should be placed in water as soon as you get home. Do not let the stump dry out or you will have to make a fresh cut. A new tree will take up quite a bit of water the first few days so be sure to check the container or tree stand frequently and keep it full of water. Never let your tree get dry or it quickly becomes a hazard.

## **Oklahoma Grown Christmas Trees**

*David Hillock*

The best way to ensure that you are getting a fresh Christmas tree is to buy one directly from one of the many Christmas tree farms in Oklahoma. Each one offers a different experience, but one that is always a fun and memorable one for the family. Some of the farms offer more than just Christmas trees – wreaths, garland, table decorations and gifts may be available too. To make the experience more memorable some also offer free hot cider, hot chocolate, coloring books and candy canes as well as children's activities.

A free marketing directory produced by the Oklahoma Christmas Tree Association shows 19 different farms across the state in 2012. The 2012 marketing directory lists members of the Oklahoma Christmas Tree Association with trees for sale this holiday season. These Oklahoma grown trees are beautiful fresh green Christmas trees which were carefully planted and nurtured for years specifically for you this Christmas.

When Christmas is over, use your tree for a bird feeder and shelter during the winter months. Tie fruit peelings, popcorn or other favorite bird snacks to your tree for bird feed. Many communities also have Christmas tree recycling programs. The branches can be cut off the tree and used as a mulch to protect landscape plants as well.

For more information about Oklahoma Christmas trees go to [www.okchristmastrees.com](http://www.okchristmastrees.com).

## **Poinsettia Care**

*David Hillock*

The poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima Willd.*) is the traditional Christmas plant. It is native to Mexico and was introduced to the United States by Joel Poinsett, the first U.S. Ambassador to Mexico. In mild climates such as Florida and California the poinsettia is also grown in the landscape, but is not winter-hardy in Oklahoma.

The striking beauty of the poinsettia is found in the showy bracts, which are specialized leaves, surrounding the true yellow flowers. Plants with red bracts are most popular, but plants with yellow, pink, white, and variegated bracts are also available.

The newer cultivars of poinsettia, in addition to being very showy, have excellent keeping quality and stronger stems than older cultivars. When buying your poinsettia, choose a plant with well-expanded, well-colored bracts. Foliage should be medium to dark green with uniform coloring. Flowers should be present in the center of the bracts.

- (1) After you purchase your plant, do not expose it to chilling temperatures or cold drafts of air. If the temperature outdoors is below 50°F do not carry an unwrapped plant from the retail shop to your car. In the home or other place of display, avoid cold drafts and excessive heat from heating ducts, TV sets, or large incandescent lamps. Temperatures of 70°F or below (down to 55°F) are desirable to retain best bract color. Large plants can be placed on the floor if light is adequate.
- (2) Light plays an important role in retention of leaves on the plant. Place the plant in an area where it receives at least six to eight hours of direct natural or artificial light. A minimum of 75 foot candles is desirable where possible. This would be similar to the minimum light intensity required for good desk lighting in an office. Incandescent lights such as those found in most homes will give a truer, brighter bract color than most types of fluorescent light.
- (3) Poinsettias can be displayed with other houseplants. The adjacent plants raise the humidity and allow poinsettias to last longer. Also, the regular houseplants can be spruced up for the holidays.
- (4) Many commercial growers use non-soil mixes of sphagnum peat, pine bark, vermiculite, perlite, or similar ingredients. When plants are grown in such non-soil mixes, it is sometimes difficult to decide when the plant needs water. If there is no heavy component (sand or soil) in the mix and a plastic pot is used, the pot can be lifted to determine its weight. If the plant is heavy, there is usually plenty of moisture in the pot; if it is lightweight, the medium is dry and a thorough watering should be given. Moisture needs can also be assessed by feeling the growing medium in the pot. Water when the top of the growing medium is starting to feel dry, but do not allow too much drying. Slight wilting of the plant is not harmful, but avoid severe wilting, which will cause leaves to drop. Water the plant thoroughly. Make sure a small amount of water drips through the drainage holes of the container. If the plant is wrapped with decorative foil, punch a hole in the foil beneath the pot to allow excess water to escape. The plant should be placed on a saucer to prevent damage to the furniture or carpet. Do not water the plant too frequently when the soil or growing mix is already wet or this may result in roots suffocating from lack of oxygen, causing the leaves to wilt, yellow, and drop.
- (5) Recent research has shown that poinsettias are not poisonous, but the plants are intended solely for ornamental purposes. Some people are allergic to the milky sap and may develop a rash when exposed to the sap. Avoid breaking the leaves and stems, as this will release the sap. It is wise to keep any houseplant out of the reach of small children and pets.

## **Mistletoe**

*David Hillock*

Mistletoe is a familiar plant this time of year. The mistletoe that we use for decorations (*Phoradendron* spp.) is native to North America and Oklahoma. The mistletoe of European folklore is actually in the same family but a different genus (*Viscum album*) than the North American mistletoe. The customs associated with European mistletoe were transferred to the North American mistletoe with the settlers.

Mistletoe is a partial parasite. It can make its own food through photosynthesis, but it also sends roots down into the vascular tissue of the host tree to obtain water and nutrients. Mistletoe is spread by birds. They eat the seeds, which are then deposited on branches in the bird droppings. The seeds then sprout and send rootlets down during the winter; large populations of mistletoe can severely stunt the growth of the tree and even kill it over time. If mistletoe is a problem, there is a product that can help get rid of it. Florel Brand Fruit Eliminator by Monterey Lawn and Garden Products helps suppress mistletoe and can be sprayed on the mistletoe any time after the leaves have fallen from the host trees through midwinter. This product can also be used in the spring to eliminate nuisance fruit such as sweetgum balls, unwanted apples, crabapples, cottonwood, flowering pear, and other plants.

## **Don't Forget to Water this Winter!**

*David Hillock*

Lack of adequate soil moisture is often a major cause of winter damage. Dry soil coupled with strong winter winds can cause havoc on a plant. All plants, but especially narrowleaf and broadleaf evergreens, use water during winter. When little or no soil moisture is present, plants can become desiccated and it is more likely root damage will also occur.

When dry cold fronts are predicted, water the landscape at least 24 hours in advance of the front. Apply about ½ inch of water at the time of watering. A sunny day on moist soil helps warm the soil and root area thus reducing the amount of time the roots will be exposed to cold temperatures.

Moisture must be available below the frost line or frozen soil. When the soil freezes, if moisture is not present in soil pore spaces, moisture is pulled from plant roots to form the ice crystals resulting in desiccated roots, thus what some would refer to as “winter kill.”

Of course some common sense needs to be practiced at this time of year; do not allow the sprinklers to come on during a hard freeze. Ice forming on some plants could result in some serious damage and you could create a hazardous situation for you, pedestrians, or even passing vehicles.

Too much water can also result on problems during the winter. Cold wet soils can lead to rotting roots. Soils with more than ample moisture may also encourage winter weeds to germinate and

flourish. Water only every two to three weeks and apply only enough water to moisten the top six or so inches of soil.

Do not forget plants growing in aboveground planters protected from rain. They need watering even in a wet season. Also, remember to water plants that are located under the eaves of a building or home since they often receive little natural precipitation.

## **Narcissus**

*David Hillock*

Paper white narcissus can add some bloom to the dreary winter days. The bulbs are some of the easiest for forcing as they do not require any chilling before they will bloom. Supplies needed include a low, flat container without drain holes that is anywhere from 3 to 5 inches deep, some gravel ( $\frac{1}{2}$  inch or less in diameter), bulbs, activated charcoal and water. Place the gravel in the bottom of the container filling to  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  full. A little bit of charcoal can be added to keep the water from stagnating. Place the bulbs on top of the gravel so they are close to each other but not touching. Fill in around the bulbs with gravel so that the bottom  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the bulb is covered and then fill the container with water so that the water level is just below the bottom of the bulb. If the bulbs actually sit in the water they will start to rot. Do not let the container run dry after root growth has begun as the roots will die if they are allowed to dry out. Place the container in a cool, dark place for about 3 weeks in order to get good root growth and then move it into an area with brighter light so the tops can grow. Turn the container daily so that the leaves do not have to stretch towards the light. When the paper whites start to bloom, move them to an area with filtered light so the blooms will last longer. This whole process takes about six weeks. Potting up a succession of bulbs every two weeks will insure bloom throughout the winter months.

## **New Pecan and Grape Management Courses Available**

*Becky Carroll*

Brochures are now available detailing the 2013 Pecan and Grape Management Courses. Both courses offer an opportunity for potential new or veteran growers to learn or refresh their basic management skills needed to successfully grow each crop. The classes meet one afternoon a month beginning in February and continuing for the growing season. Having the classes through the season gives participants the chance to see what management requirements are necessary at specific times. Students learn in both the classroom and in the vineyard or orchard setting. The courses meet at the Cimarron Valley Research Station near Perkins. Classes also travel to a couple of established orchards or vineyards/wineries to learn from other growers.

The cost for enrollment in either course is \$250 per student. Pecan course members are also eligible to use the online pecan management course for no charge. Registration for the pecan course is due by February 13 and the grape course by February 15. For registration information, visit <http://www.hortla.okstate.edu/events/index.htm>.

The courses not only can help growers learn but are a great opportunity for County Extension Educators to hone their skills with these crops. Educators can take the course at no cost. The online Pecan Management Course is also available to county educators who would like to learn more about pecans. The online pecan class is located at <http://pecan.okstate.edu/>. For more information about the contents of the class, please contact Becky Carroll at [becky.carroll@okstate.edu](mailto:becky.carroll@okstate.edu) or 405-744-6139.

## **Upcoming Horticulture Events**

### Horticulture Industries Show

January 11 – 12, 2013

Holiday Inn City Center, Fort Smith, AR

For program information and registration go to <http://www.hortla.okstate.edu/his/>.

For more information about upcoming events, please contact Stephanie Larimer at 405-744-5404 or [stephanie.larimer@okstate.edu](mailto:stephanie.larimer@okstate.edu).

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