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## **GARDEN CALENDAR FOR JANUARY 2016**

By Sharon Morrisey  
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It certainly has not behaved like winter, especially in southeastern Wisconsin. I could actually plant those spring flowering bulbs I did not get around to earlier. The cold weather is bound to come but the predictions all say as an El Nino year, this could be a very mild winter.

Snow does serve a purpose and so does cold weather. Cold temperatures and shorter days are the signals for plants to go into dormancy. Even slightly tender plants need cold soil, frozen an inch or so deep, to go dormant. Once that happens, they can use some extra insulation in the form of straw, dry leaves, evergreen boughs or wood chips to moderate the cold. Since the soil has not frozen yet, I have delayed putting on this protective blanket around planters containing perennials or fruit plants or covering the strawberries. A snow blanket a couple of inches deep also actually insulates roots, crowns and stems. Even our hardy plants do better in winters with good snow cover.

The frozen soil and snow cover also help plants stay dormant. Many plants have very short dormancy periods but they don't begin to grow again until the soil temperatures begin warming up in the spring when it is safer to come out of dormancy. If the soil warms too early, some plants can start growing only to be frozen solid when the weather returns to a more normal pattern.

We had many reports this year of plants coming out of dormancy and growing in November and December or even earlier. If they flower before the leaves emerge, then just the flowers will be spent without significant damage to the stems. They will not, however, flower again next spring. If leaves are frozen back, there are latent buds buried under the bark that can sprout. This drains energy from the plant but will not kill it as long as it does not stay warm too long and then suddenly freeze solid again.

For the month of January gardeners need to busy themselves indoors mostly. Houseplants, especially those that flower, and seed catalogs and magazines and garden journals have to keep us busy this month.

In Milwaukee County, if you have plant questions, you can call anytime and leave a voicemail at 414-256-4664 or e-mail [planthealth.advisors@ces.uwex.edu](mailto:planthealth.advisors@ces.uwex.edu). Someone will return your call or answer you e-mail shortly.

In other counties, either contact your county UW-Extension office or go to the UW-Extension Horticulture website at <http://hort.uwex.edu>. On the contact page, you can ask your question and it will be sent to your county Extension contact person.

### **First Week**

Reuse your Christmas tree in your own yard to provide protective cover for our feathered friends. Place it near an existing feeder or make the tree itself a naturalistic feeding station.

Another option is to cut off the limbs and use them to cover planting beds where perennial flowers, strawberries, parsley, carrots, etc. are trying to survive the winter.

They also give added protection to screen sun and wind from broadleaf evergreens like boxwood, hollies, and rhododendrons.

Next spring when the Christmas tree limbs have lost their needles, use the bare stems to stake peas and vining vegetables or perennials like delphiniums and peonies that need a little extra support.

The Christmas tree trunk stripped of its limbs can be used as a naturalistic bed edging or lay it at the back of a mulched perimeter planting bed allowing it to decompose naturally.

Bulbs in cold storage for forcing can be brought out now if they have had their proper chilling period. Small bulbs like crocus and hyacinth need 8 weeks and larger ones like tulip and daffodil need 12 - 14. If potted before storing, simply move them into a spot that is cool but very bright and begin watering. If stored cold but not potted, plant them in a well-drained medium that will also hold plenty of moisture and place them in a cool but bright location to begin growing.

Care of poinsettia, amaryllis and Christmas cactus after flowering calls for bright light, cooler temperatures and reduced watering. Start fertilizing now with a dilute, balanced fertilizer.

Trees and shrubs may need winter protection from damage by rodents, rabbits, and deer. Install small mesh hardware cloth, chicken wire or plastic trunk guards. Apply repellents to susceptible plants like young fruit trees and burning bush. Be certain to reapply repellents often since they wear off over time.

### **Second Week**

Brush off ice and snow from tree and shrub limbs. Use an upward sweeping motion to prevent breakage. Tie together tall, multiple stemmed evergreens like arborvitae with wire covered with hose segments or old pantyhose. Sometimes bent branches can have hairline cracks that are invisible once the branch has snapped back into place. Then in June when the branch inexplicably wilts, the correlation to this winter damage is seldom made.

Use tree wrap on trunks of newly planted trees as well as those species with thin bark like linden, ash, mountain ash, and maple. This helps prevent frost cracking of the sun warmed bark (generally on the southwest side of the tree) when it freezes again rapidly after the sun sets on a

winter day. Always wrap from the ground up so the overlap sheds water rather than collects it. Remove wrapping in spring.

### **Third Week**

Indoor foliage plants really benefit from an occasional cleaning. Dust settles on leaves and clogs "pores", hindering light penetration as well as gas and moisture exchange. Give them a shower to wash the leaves. Water allowed to run through the soil helps leach out minerals and salts.

Wait until really vigorous growth begins again in the spring to transplant potbound houseplants. Fertilize sparingly now and also water so that the water runs through the soil and out of the drainage holes. Do not allow plants to reabsorb this water since it contains salts and minerals that can be toxic when they are concentrated in the soil.

### **Fourth Week**

Now is a great time to start garden carpentry projects. Plans for cold frames, trellises, benches, etc. can be found in the many gardening books available at your public library. Build a lighting rig for starting vegetable seeds indoors. Use one cool white and one warm white fluorescent bulb in a fixture which can be kept 4 - 6" above the plants, adjusting it as they grow.

Start to grow seedlings inside now for varieties that are slow to germinate and require long growth periods to be ready for the garden in late May. These include impatiens, petunia, and begonia. Be forewarned, however, that supplemental lighting is an absolute necessity for successfully growing these seedlings indoors for such a long time. Use specially designed heat mats to provide bottom heat to produce really strong seedlings.

If you are getting antsy inside, do a tool inventory and cleaning. Hoes, shovels, and spades all need to be sharp to perform at their peak. Soak and scrub to remove dirt. Then coat with light oil to protect metal surfaces. Sand handles and apply boiled linseed oil. Use a splash of brightly colored enamel spray paint to personalize them and make them easier to locate when left lying among the foliage. Padded grips can be added to cushion your hands.