

WAY TO GROW

**Way to Grow in Orinda**  
*Beat the Winter Blahs*  
*By Spending Time in Your Garden*



Steve & Cathy Lambert

As northern California gardeners, we should consider ourselves lucky that we are able to work (or play) in our gardens pretty much year-round. Although it may be cold and muddy at times, the ground doesn't freeze, we don't have to shovel snow, and it's only a few times a year that we might have to cover our frost-tender plants to protect them. If you've ever lived on the East Coast, or know someone who has, you can appreciate our California gardening climate even more.

In our household, there's a feeling of excitement and anticipation on the day the first gardening catalogs arrive. But in California, planning next year's garden is just one of many winter gardening activities we can enjoy.

**Planning** – Winter is a great time to fantasize about what you can add to your garden to be enjoyed the following spring and summer. If you are planning some major changes or additions to your garden, winter is a great time to hire a landscape designer because most have more time in their schedule during the winter. By completing your plans during the winter, you will be ready to start construction in the spring, giving you all summer to enjoy

your new yard.

**Pruning, Spraying, Deadheading** – Although it may not be as much fun as planting, winter pruning, and general garden clean up is just as important to your garden's appearance come spring. The most important places to start pruning are your fruit trees, perennials, and roses (in that order) making sure to get rid of any diseased or dead plant material.

Last year was particularly bad for fire blight, a bacterial disease that winters-over in infected branches and old mummified apple and pear fruit. It is critical that you cut out all diseased wood and clean up all old fruit both from the tree and ground. The main way fire blight spreads is during late season rains when the trees start to bloom. The second way is through the use of contaminated tools. When pruning infected plant material of any kind it is important to spray your clippers with Lysol or another form of disinfectant after every few cuts so as not to infect the good wood.

Peach leaf curl is probably our second biggest disease problem. Last year we learned that the State of California Agricultural Department has moved its recommended first spraying for peach leaf



STEVE LAMBERT

Terra Cotta Yarrow and Feather Reed Grass are distinctive features of this drought-resistant garden.

curl (on both peach and nectarine trees) to before Christmas when the trees first lose their leaves. The more it rains the more you need to spray. Last year we sprayed three times and had no peach leaf curl. The year before (a much wetter year) we sprayed six times and still had bad curl.

**Pruning Ornamental Grasses** – As grasses are becoming a more prevalent plant choice in many gardens it's important to note proper pruning techniques to keep them healthy and looking their best. Don't prune your grasses back too early and miss out on how beautiful they look in the fall and winter as they turn from green to golden brown and catch that great low autumn sunlight. Last year, the Morning Light Japanese Silver grass on our front bank looked incredible on bright frosty mornings covered in ice crystals.

So when is the proper time to prune your grasses? That varies based on the amount of heavy winter rainfall we receive. We recommend that you wait until your grasses start looking "ratty" (i.e. when the blades and flower inflorescence start falling apart). Some garden maintenance companies don't understand proper care for ornamental grasses. We've seen beautiful clumps of grasses cut back in their prime, and even hedged into ugly lopsided balls or rows. Grasses, even evergreen grasses, need to be cut back once a year down to the ground in order to grow back in with their natural shape.

It's unfortunate, but many ornamental grasses are getting black-listed by several city planning departments, including Orinda, because grasses are considered to

be a fire hazard by fire departments. This is only true if they are not well maintained. Grasses that have never been pruned and contain dry/dead grass within the plant are a fire hazard; but healthy, well-pruned grasses are not. Since many grasses are drought tolerant, tough, and look great with native and Mediterranean plant material they should be encouraged by city planning, not banned.

If you haven't kept up with deadheading in your garden, now is a good time to begin by cutting back all old blooms and seed heads. You will get the best blooms next year from your lilacs and crepe myrtles if the old seedpods are removed now. Butterfly bushes (buddleias) will give you their largest blooms if cut back to 2 feet from the ground in the winter. Hydrangea blooms should also be cut back this time of year. E-mail us for a complete guide to pruning and deadheading your hydrangeas.

Some old flowers and seed heads can look great and add winter interest when left in your landscape a little longer. As we are writing this article, we're watching a dozen yellow breasted finches feasting on the black-eyed Susan seed heads outside our window

**Dividing Perennials** – If any of your perennials didn't perform well this year, or you want to increase your collection, winter is a great time to divide and/or move them. This winter we plan to divide our Morning Light (pale yellow) daylilies, Mood Indigo (dark blue) agapanthus, many different varieties of dahlias, several varieties of black-eyed Susans as well as some irises

[SEE LANDSCAPE page 25]

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