

Way to Grow in Orinda

Holiday Help for the Garden

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The holidays are rapidly approaching, bringing with them stress, a doubling of your to-do list, twice the number of commitments on your calendar, shopping, traffic, and the list goes on. But with that said, there is one way in which holidays throughout the year can actually serve as helpful triggers to remind us of our gardening to-dos.

With the busy lives that most of us in Orinda lead, it can be difficult to keep track of all that we need to do and when we need to do it, especially all those annual garden chores. That's why we developed a *Holiday Gardening Calendar*. It serves as a helpful way to make certain that you don't forget an important garden task that should be performed within a particular window of time. This concept came to us when the fire departments began promoting the changing of smoke alarm batteries when resetting our clocks to standard time. So get out your 2005 and 2006 calendars and make the following holiday gardening task entries.

Thanksgiving weekend is the perfect time to get outdoors and away from all those leftovers (food and relatives) and begin planting winter flowers such as primroses, pansies, and cyclamen. Even though they are available at many garden centers in September and October, hold off on planting these cold-weather bloomers until the warm weather has truly past.

The time between Thanksgiving and just before Christmas is the best time to plant spring bulbs. If you wait until after Christmas or the new year, your bulbs will produce flowers with shorter, weaker stems. So, take a break from the holiday rush and dig, dig, dig. It's great relaxation therapy, and you'll be rewarded with the gift of bright spring color in just a few short months. Speaking of gifts, here's a great Christmas gift idea for your favorite gardener. Sneak some spring bulbs in the ground while they are out shopping then wrap up the picture that came with the bulbs so they can see what your gift of spring color will look like. In late December, bare root roses and fruit trees replace the Christmas trees at local nurseries. The

prices and availability are usually quite good, making them an affordable gift idea for the rose or fruit lover on your list.

Make your New Year's resolution to begin pruning all of your fruit trees and deciduous shrubs right away. The first spraying of peach trees and nectarines should also be done in early January. Don't sit down for the Super Bowl until you have completed your pruning and the second dormant spraying of fruit trees. Make an exception for your fruitless flowering trees. Wait until they have completed their late winter to early spring bloom before pruning. Fruitless flowering trees pruned too early (at the same time as fruit bearing trees) deprive the tree, and you, of its most beautiful display of the year.

Before you buy your sweetie a dozen long-stemmed roses for Valentine's Day, be sure that you've pruned all of your roses and planted any new rose bushes you plan to add to your garden. Better yet, why not be original and give or plant a rose bush instead of the usual and much shorter-lived, long-stemmed bouquet. Your Valentine will get to enjoy this gift much longer. Our weather usually begins to warm up quickly after mid-February so don't miss this Valentine's Day deadline.

Although vegetables and spring color, such as impatiens, begin arriving in the garden centers by Saint Patrick's Day, resist the urge to plant all but the heartiest of vegetables this early. Think green for Saint Paddy's Day. Leafy greens, spinach, and garden peas can withstand cooler weather and late spring rains. Carrots and beets are also a safe bet to plant this early. Hold off on the rest of your spring color and veggies until after Easter but before Mother's Day. Our Mother's Day gift for many years has been the planting of a vegetable garden. If you're tempted to get your vegetable garden going sooner just think back to the late rains and cold temperatures of spring 2005. I know many local gardeners who had to plant a second batch of tomatoes last spring when their first plants succumbed to cold, wet weather.

Father's Day is a good time for planting

your Halloween pumpkins. A few of our favorites that have done well in Orinda are the Cinderella (marvelous ornamentals but too thick a flesh for carving), Lumina (a white ornamental that's great for carving), Spooky and Sweetie Pie (great for pie and as small carvers), and Howden's Field (a classic, tall carving pumpkin). If you want to extend your squash- and bean-growing season, Father's Day is a good deadline by which to get your second batch in the ground.

If you are lucky enough to have the space and sun in your yard for growing corn, you can plant batch number two by the July 4th to provide you with fresh corn for your Labor Day barbecue. Thinking ahead to the fall, you can extend your garden's color and have a bounty of brilliant fall flower bouquets by planting more sunflowers, zinnias, dahlias and black-eyed Susans around July 4th.

Labor Day is the last time of the year to fertilize your roses. A light nitrogen fertilizer applied at this time of year may provide you with blooms right up to Christmas, barring any strong frost before then. By planting sweet pea seeds near Labor Day you'll give yourself the gift of spring color in the garden at Christmas. If you are considering adding lighting to your garden, start your project before or by Labor Day to enjoy the benefits of a lit garden during the long, dark winter months. Between Labor Day and Halloween you can still add some fall flowers to your garden. Chrysanthemums and black-eyed Susans are good choices.

The week before Halloween, it's important to use a fall and winter fertilizer on your grass. If you follow-up with a second application of fertilizer just before Thanksgiving, you will have a beautiful green lawn right through to Easter. When daylight savings time ends and you are breaking out the fresh set of batteries for your smoke alarm, change the batteries in your irrigation controller, too. In case of a power outage, the backup batteries will keep you from having to re-program your watering system. This is also a good time to reduce your watering schedule by about 50 percent.

As we head into the Thanksgiving Holiday, count among your many blessings the joy you find while digging in the dirt and the rich rewards that gardening adds to your life. Pass this pleasure on to your children and grandchildren so they will have the joy of gardening to be thankful for, too.

If you have specific questions about

seasonal gardening tasks, email us at gardenlights@comcast.net. Our February column will focus on rose care.