WAY TO GROW

ay to Grow in Orinda

Beat the Winter Blahs By Spending Time in Your Garden

Steve & Cathy Lambert



s northern California gardeners, we A 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



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,

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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◆ LANDSCAPE from page 12

and grasses.

Planting – The winter months can also be a great time to plant many shrubs and trees. Transplant shock is at a minimum since most plants are in a slow growth mode during winter. You can plant just about anything that is not frost tender in the winter then when the warmer weather hits in the spring your winter plantings will take off. Avoid planting frost sensitive citrus and tropical plants until things warm up in March.

Planting winter vegetables can be fun and rewarding. Just a few climbing green pea plants can provide hundreds of super fresh peas. Other easy winter vegetables planted from seed include beets, spinach and carrots. Cabbage, broccoli, and onions do better from 6-packs or 4-inch nursery plants. Garlic and shallot bulbs are also a great addition to your winter vegetable garden.

Just because it's cold outside doesn't mean you can't enjoy adding some color to your yard. Now is the time for planting winter color such as cyclamen, pansies, primroses, calendulas, snapdragons, and Iceland poppies. These will bloom all winter long and provide some colorful eyecandy during those long drab winter months.

To complement spring bulbs and flowering shrubs, there are many flowering annuals that you can also plant now for early bursts of color come spring. Our favorites include Shirley and Bread Seed poppies, many varieties of clarkias and sweet peas (both climbing and dwarf), lupines like red Morello Cherry, and larkspur such as Earl Grey for its unusual blue/grey color. Our best tip, when it comes to annuals, is to plant large groupings of solid colors using the same or different plant materials, stay away from mixes with too many colors and plants as they tend to confuse the eye.

There are many plants other than annuals that can be added to your yard for some festive holiday color. We have several potted Yuletide camellias that spend their off season in the back yard, and after Thanksgiving we move them up by the front door to enjoy their contrasting colors; cheery red flowers, gold stamens and dark green foliage. Also planted in our front yard are several varieties of hellebores, the Christmas or winter rose. These come in many colors from bright green to an almost black purple. These usually start blooming in mid-December and continue to bloom through June. For a great color combo plant some winter roses with variegated daphne which blooms from late January through March and has a knock-you-over fragrance. Hollies are another great winter plant that will add classic holiday foliage throughout your yard and when cut for indoor decorating, too.

This winter, be sure to take advantage of those dry, warm days that we're so lucky to have here in California and go outside to play in your garden. Digging in the earth is great therapy that will help you beat those winter blahs. For questions about winter gardening or to suggest a topic for a future Way to Grow article, e-mail us at gardenlights@comcast.net.

◆ ADOPT from page 13

marking calendars now," says Hathaway. "Early next fall, contact the agency you would most like to serve and spend your holiday helping others."

Contact Information:

Monument Crisis Center, 2350 Monument Blvd. Concord. CA 94520. (925) 825-7751.

Shelter, Inc. 1815 Arnold Drive, Martinez, CA 94553, (925) 335-0698.

Bay Area Crisis Nursery, 15-6 Mendocino Drive, Concord, CA 94521 (925) 685-6633.

The Volunteer Center, see their website at www.volunteersolutions.org.

◆ TREES from page 8

intuition to backtrack hours to find the fourth farmer, they were pleased to locate a true lover of trees in Greg Bartells. "We were supposed to meet with him for an hour and ended up staying for four hours because he had such enthusiasm for his trees," Kang explains. "Greg turned out to be the Crocodile Hunter of Christmas trees. His trees are not the cheapest, but they are the best."

Tree orders are placed with Bartells at the end of October. "It's a bit of a gamble ordering the trees as we don't know yet how many to order. Once we purchase them, they become our trees, and we can't return them or receive a refund in case we don't sell them." Last year, one of the best surprising results for Mike was that he lost 15 pounds in the tree lot. "When it came time to unload the trees (and remember, they're over eight feet tall), each tree can weigh more than 75 pounds. As it had rained heavily in Oregon right before cutting them down, they were thoroughly soaked and much heavier than usual. I lost the first 10 pounds just unloading the trees, getting soaked myself with rain water and sticky with sap. The other five pounds came off as I ran around the lot."

So this holiday season, drive to 8 Altarinda Road and look for your own Christmas tree right here in Orinda.

Kang can be reached by going online to www.orindachristmastreelot.com or at (925) 528-9522. For more information on EFO, go to www.orindaefo.org.

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The Berkeley-based organization strives to nurture children through an array of foster care, adoptive, therapeutic, and educational services. Since many of these children come to their foster homes with very few belongings, A Better Way has asked for help in making the holidays and birthdays special for these young people.

Children's Wish List

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Volunteers

If you would like to help, contact Billy Brimmer at (510) 601-0203, ext. 113 or email bbrimmer@abetterwayinc.net. To find out more about the organization, go to www.abetterwayinc.net.

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