

Orange County Master Gardeners

December Garden Tips and Tasks

By Diane Gipson

December is the beginning of **winter** in So California. Weather cools rapidly, days grow shorter and plant growth slows down and almost stops until late February. However, the weather can be quite unpredictable.

Note: The following information is just a guideline, so your judgment and experience should dictate your application of any of these suggestions..

Orange County's Climate Zones:

- **USDA hardiness zone: 8, 9, 10** (determined by winter minimum temp, i.e. cold tolerance)
- **Sunset Climate zones: 22 to 24** (determined by latitude, elevation, ocean influence, continental air influence, mountains and hills and microclimates.
- **Avocado climate zone: 1 – So Calif. Coast, So Zone** (close to ocean), **5 – So. Calif. Transitional, So Zone** (inland) by California Avocado Society

Plant:

- Sow winter cover crops, fava beans, oats, barley, pearl millet or proso millet
- Begin planting bare-root roses, trees, shrubs, vines, berries and vegetables
- Buy poinsettias
- Plant sasanqua, camellias and azaleas
- Continue planting cool season annuals, perennials, natives, winter vegetables, herbs, celery
- DO NOT PLANT OR TRANSPLANT TROPICALS

Maintenance (Trim, prune, mow, divide, weed):

- Tidy up the garden – clean out, cut back (prune) perennials. In general, don't cut back anything unless it looks as if it needs it. For specifics on cutting back certain plants, see 52 Weeks in Calif Garden, pp 75-77.
- Remove brown leaves & faded flower spikes, but don't cut back: agapanthus, bearded iris, daylilies and kniphofia
- Cut off flower spikes from dwarf foxglove and delphinium
- Short-lived plants (sometimes called sub-shrubs & shrubby perennials) have centers that fall part & flop open after a few years & get twiggy and look shabby. Lightly trim these plants up to 3 times a year, to keep dense & bushy: in late fall, in late spring if looking leggy & sometimes again in summer. E.g.: lavender, santolina, rosemary & artemisia
- End of month, prune established deciduous trees and shrubs to remove crossed and diseased branches and to open up the center to light and air
- Start pruning deciduous fruit trees, grapes, low-chill raspberries, native plants, wisteria
- Stop picking and deadheading roses and leave hips on the bush
- Provide frost protection by moist, bare ground & ground cover plants. Put potted plants in protected places near house or under trees. Shelter tropical plants & tender annuals
- Keep eye on growth of potted bulbs, removing covers when correct height
- Prepare beds for bare-root roses

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- Prepare amaryllis and cymbidiums to bloom
- Tie up permanent vines to protect from rain and wind
- Living Christmas trees don't tolerate dry, overheated indoors for more than a few days. Only bring inside for celebration then take back outside. Don't overwater.
- Transplant plants you want to move and add amendments to the soil at this time. Be sure soil is dry enough to dig without compacting it.
- Camellias begin to bloom this month until Feb. For largest flowers, disbud by removing all but the largest bud in a cluster of 2 or 3. Slow job but worth it.

Fertilize:

- Don't fertilize roses & stop fertilizing potted poinsettias, bring them into house to enjoy.
- Feed cool-season flowers with complete fertilizer for growth and bloom
- Feed cineraria & shade plants and continue fertilizing cymbidiums until flowers open
- Side-dress vegetable rows according to their needs

Water:

- If rainfall is scarce, provide at least 1 inch of water weekly, esp. if it's hot, dry and windy
- Don't over-water roses or succulents planted in the ground
- Keep cymbidiums damp but not soggy
- Keep all bulbs, especially potted ones well watered

Pest Control:

- Spray peach, apricot and nectarine trees for leaf curl
- Apply dormant oil spray to fruit trees to kill insects and eggs
- Protect cymbidiums' bloom spikes from snails
- Control rust on dwarf snapdragons

Lawn care – all grasses grow slowly now & may need mowing only twice a month or less.

- Let lawns in clay soils dry out before mowing
- Sow annual rye grass to fill in lawns

Cool-season lawns (ryegrass, bluegrass & fescue) thrive under cool skies

- Mow cool-season lawns inc Bermuda that's overseeded with winter ryegrass.
- Feed cool-season lawns by using nitrate fertilizers
- Water cool-season lawns and dichondra if rains aren't adequate.
- Control rust on cool-season lawns by fertilizing and mowing

Warm-season lawns (Bermuda, zoysia & St. Augustine) are dormant in winter

- Don't mow warm-season laws, except St Augustine if it continues to grow.
- Water St Augustine if it continues growing
- Only feed Bermuda that's overseeded with winter ryegrass
- Turn off irrigation systems on warm-season lawns once they have gone brown

Harvest & Crafts

- Winter vegetables as soon as they mature
- Make holiday wreaths from succulents; use grape vines & wisteria stems to make wreaths & baskets

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Bibliography

52 Weeks in the California Garden by Robert Smaus

California Master Gardener Handbook, edited by Dennis R. Pittenger

Gardener to Gardener, Almanac & Pest-Control Primer edited by Vicki Mattern & Fern Bradley

Pat Welsh's Southern California Gardening, A Month by Month Guide by Pat Welsh

Sunset Western Garden Book, edited by Kathleen Norris Brenzel

OCRegister.com, Home and Garden Guides

Sunset.com, Southern California – What to do in your garden in December

Garden California at geocities.com/RainForest