



December Tips MISCELLANEOUS

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- Snow is a mixed blessing in the garden. Fluffy and light, freshly fallen snow is an excellent insulator. Its millions of tiny air pockets hold warmth in the soil around snow-covered plants. When frigid weather comes after a heavy snowfall, the snow cover may save many plants of borderline hardiness. On the aesthetic side, snow creates an attractive scene when it accumulates on and around evergreens. Nandina, holly, and other fruiting plants are especially colorful against a white background.
- Prune your grapevines a little earlier this year to make a classic wreath. If you can't shape the wreath as you prune, before bending the vines, soak them in water overnight for increased flexibility.
- A miniature herbal wreath can be made by coating a wooden or plastic curtain ring with a generous amount of glue and dipping it in potpourri to coat it. A tiny bow completes a perfect wreath for a doll house or as a Christmas tree ornament.
- For Christmas or as a housewarming gift, give a garden or landscape book to a friend with a new home.
- The use of fruit in wreaths, such as frequently seen in Colonial Williamsburg, was inspired by Luce della Robbia, a 15th century sculptor who carved garlands of fruit and nuts in his work. Fruit can be tied in place using a pliable, 18-weight florist wire that is first inserted through the fruit, then through the straw base. A wooden base with nails to secure fruit is also used. In cold weather that is above freezing, fruit will last for seven to eight days before it needs replacing (unless the birds decide to feast on your decor).
- Gifts from the garden, such as dried flowers, grapevine wreaths, pickles, and preserves, can be very economical but highly prized. You're limited only by your imagination.
- In some species, plant size impacts winter hardiness. A small, young plant may be killed, while a larger plant may be hardy. Also, poor culture methods and attacks by insects or diseases can weaken a plant, making it more susceptible to winter injury.
- Cut poinsettias can last up to ten days in arrangements. Congeal latex immediately after cutting by quickly searing the cut ends, dipping the ends in boiling water for ten seconds, or soaking the stems in ice water for several minutes.
- Lining shelves or window sills with aluminum foil reflects light and provides extra light for house plants. Be sure there are no leaks that allow water to collect under the foil and damage sills.
- Door ornaments can be quick and easy to make from evergreen branches. Wrap a stout wire around the butt ends of

branches of several types of evergreens for contrasting color and texture. Then add a large bow to cover the attachment point.

- Use your microwave to dry flower petals for pot-pourri. Spread rose petals in a single layer on a sheet of paper towel, and place in the microwave along with a cup half full of water. Microwave for one minute on full power. Check them to see if they are dry; if not, give them 10 seconds more and check again.
- Next year, plan to have a special section in your yard or garden for holiday gift-giving. Plant everlastings for wreaths, baskets, and potpourris, as well as flowers for pressing to create original pictures and stationery. Grow herbs for drying or adding to vinegars or baked goods. Plant luffa gourds to be given as back scratchers or sponges. Include giant sunflowers and millet sprays for bird-loving friends who will welcome the seeds. Relatives who live in the city will appreciate canned relishes and preserves.
- Save cardboard cylinders from holiday wrapping paper for making biodegradable, cutworm collars. Cut cylinders into 3-inch tubes to fit over transplants.
- Gift ideas for the avid indoor gardener: a set of plastic-lined wicker baskets or ceramic cache pots, a stocking filled with houseplant goodies, or a gift certificate to a favorite plant shop.
- The scent of bayberry candles is derived from the Northern bayberry *Myrica pensylvanica*, a salt-tolerant, semi-evergreen shrub well adapted to the Tidewater area. A male and female should be planted together to ensure production of the ornamental berries.
- To discourage insects from hatching when nuts, cones, and seed pods are brought indoors for holiday arrangements, place them in the oven on the low setting for an hour.
- For unusual seasonal decorations, attach shiny, red and gold apples to wreaths and garlands.
- Some other garden and landscaping materials that can have a role in holiday decorating include cones, sweet gum seed pods, acorns, dried flowers and gourds, and miniature ears of Indian corn. Dried weed heads, milkweed pods, bittersweet, dried ferns, and even seed pods from catalpa and locust trees can be used as well.
- After Christmas, your tree can be moved outside and redecorated for the birds. Anchor the tree in a bucket full of damp sand. Leave on strings of popcorn and cranberries, and add strings of peanuts (in the shell). Apples, oranges, leftover breads and cakes, even peanut butter cookies can be hung on the boughs, but don't use any foods containing chocolate as it is poisonous to some small animals. For best results, push the edible ornaments well into the tree. Things that swing might scare birds.
- Be careful when using deicing salts around driveways and walks this winter; salt is toxic to many flowers, trees, shrubs, and lawn grasses. Sand, sawdust, or a combination of these work well for deicing walks and will not injure plants.
- Start conditioning seeds that require stratification, such as many of the woody ornamentals. Plant them in a cold frame or put them in the refrigerator or freezer for the required amount of time.
- For hours of window-side enjoyment, trim a tree for the birds. Tie on dried fruit, suet, and peanut butter-covered pine cones rolled in bird seed.
- Sunflower seeds will attract desirable birds, such as chickadees, tufted titmouses, finches, cardinals and grosbeaks, to your feeder. Goldfinches and woodpeckers are attracted to suet.

- Use hair spray to keep seed heads and dried flowers intact.
- For easy "country candle sticks," cut five to seven small logs (approximately 2 to 3 inches in diameter) into lengths from 3 to 6 inches. Drill holes in the log tops the diameter of the candles you plan to use. A collection of these surrounded with pine cones and nuts make an attractive centerpiece for the holidays.
- Peat moss absorbs moisture very slowly. When it is used in potting soil mixes, break clods apart and moisten the material slightly before incorporating it into the mixture. Ideally, prepare potting soil the day before you plan to use it so the moisture equalizes throughout the mixture.
- Start reviewing and expanding your garden notes to help with next year's plans.
- Early winter is a good time to collect more stones for expanding the rock garden in spring. The rocks are more visible, and the solid ground makes a good base on which to haul stone.
- Write to nurseries to order seed and plant catalogs. A stack of these and a blank check under the Christmas tree would be a nice present from Santa Claus.
- Ventilate cold frames on sunny days and do not allow plants to dry out. Remove any infected plants as soon as these are noticed.
- Research at Oregon State University has shown that dipping berried shoots of holly *Ilex aquifolium* in 3 to 4 percent calcium chloride solution for one minute results in firmer, better-keeping berries.
- Be unconventional -- offer perennial divisions, seedlings, and shrub volunteers as gifts to your gardening friends. If you have seed from a treasured vegetable variety that you know comes back the same year after year, share some with an equally treasured friend. Write I.O.U.s for perennials that you will be dividing in spring so the recipient can plan ahead for the best location.
- Keep mistletoe out of the reach of children and pets as the berries are poisonous.
- Check any fruits and vegetables, or corms and tubers that you have in storage. Sort out any that show signs of disease, and dispose of them.
- Both live and cut Christmas trees need water while they are inside. Keep live trees indoors for a minimum of time to keep them healthy.
- To avoid drying out cut Christmas trees, transport the tree covered with a cloth in the trunk of the car. At home, cut an inch or two off the trunk and plunge the butt into a pail of warm water. Keep in a cool, shaded, protected place until moved into the house. Mount in a tree stand or place tree in a bucket with rocks and sand, and fill with water after tree is indoors. Check water needs daily.
- When decorating for the holidays, be sure you do not place fresh, needled evergreens directly on finished furniture or a mantelpiece; use felt or a tablecloth under them. Sap from branches may take the finish off wooden surfaces.
- To make your long winter evenings by the fire more enjoyable, burn aromatic woods, such as cherry, apple, and pine.
- On very cold nights, cover cold frames where semi-hardy plants are being overwintered. Use old carpet scraps, burlap bags stuffed with leaves, or bales of hay.

Monthly Tips have been prepared since 1986 by various staff of the Office of Consumer Horticulture including Ellen Bennett, Michelle Buckstrup, Susan Day, Susan DeBolt, Sharon Dendy, Kate Dobbs, Sheri Dorn, David Gravell, Virginia Nathan, Jenny Shuster, Ellen Silva, and Ruth Sorenson. Resource material for the development of this information includes the Virginia Master Gardener Handbook; Extension Publications and newsletters from VCE, numerous other states, and the USDA; and an extensive library of over 900 books, magazines, and journals. Project funded by The Virginia Gardener Newsletter subscription fees. Diane Relf, Project Director and Content Specialist.

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