

December in the Tallahassee Garden

Katherine LaRosa

During the colder months recently-planted plants face two major problems; the use of the wrong kind of fertilizer and wet conditions. No fertilizer should be added for the first three weeks after planting. When you do fertilize, avoid fertilizers with high rates of ammoniacal nitrogen. This form is slow to be taken up in cold weather and tends to burn the roots. Instead look for fertilizers with [nitrate nitrogen](#), preferably 50% slow-release. You must read the label to determine which fertilizer has which form of nitrogen.

During cool overcast winter days, boggy wet conditions in your garden will quickly produce rot and death, particularly with bedding plants such as pansies. Avoid over-watering and let the soil dry out somewhat before watering. However, two to three days before a freeze is predicted, water plants well to protect them from freeze damage.

Flowers: Plant pre-cooled tulips and hyacinths before December 15th. Wildflower seeds need to be planted in the fall, so finish planting this month. Hardy annuals like pansy, snapdragon, and dianthus and hardy perennials like rudbeckia and Shasta daisy can still be planted. Cover tender plants with mulch or sheets to protect them from freezing weather but be sure to remove the coverings when the weather warms up. Establish cool season annuals for winter and early spring color. Finish dividing and transplanting the clumping perennials such as daylilies, mondo grass, ajuga, and liriope.



Shrubs and Trees: Begin pruning deciduous and evergreen trees after they go dormant. Remove any crossed branches, damaged or diseased wood, and badly positioned growth. Prune spring-flowering plants sparingly and selectively. Buds for spring blossoms are already present on the branches and pruning will reduce the number of flowers. Plant balled-in-burlap and container-grown trees and shrubs this month. You may apply horticultural oil spray to kill over-wintering mites, aphids and scales. Follow label directions carefully, especially regarding the temperature. Remove old mulch which frequently harbors harmful insect eggs and disease spores. A clean layer of pine needles, chopped leaves, or other mulch should be added.

Fruit Trees: Plant bare-root and container-grown fruit trees or blueberries all month. Stick with varieties proven in our area. You may begin pruning fruit trees like apples, peaches and nectarines at the end of the month.

Lawn care: If you're not satisfied with the way your lawn looks, there is not much to do about it now. Keep the leaves off the grass, water during very dry spells and wait and see how the lawn looks in late spring. If you plan to overseed your lawn with winter rye, buy rye grass seed sold especially for lawns, not for pastures.

Vegetables and Herbs: Continue planting cool season vegetables such as cabbage, broccoli,

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Brussels sprouts, radish, carrots, cauliflower, kohlrabi, mustard, onions and turnips. Plant herbs which do well in winter, including parsley, sage, rosemary, thyme, and lavender.

Houseplants: Houseplants that become lighter in color or have very long spaces between branches or stems may need more light. Be sure houseplant leaves don't touch the window glass during very cold weather. Most houseplants like high humidity. Increase humidity by grouping them together or place the containers in saucers filled with pebbles not quite covered with water.

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Snapdragon photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Extension in Leon County

[\[Back\]](#)