December in the Garden

December in the garden is a time of pure pleasure! Camellias, the “Queen of the Southern Garden,” are beginning to bloom and the weather is perfect for enjoying their varied forms and colors. Maclay Gardens features hundreds of camellia plants, and now is a great time to visit.

Camellia Christmas is planned for Friday, December 7th, from 6 to 9 p.m. This event is a wonderful, non-commercial, way to start the holiday season. Garden walks are lighted with luminaries, hot cider and cookies are served, and carolers sing throughout. The Maclay House is decked out in greenery and camellias, and will remain open through the weekend.

December is also a time of pure pleasure for working in the garden, even on frosty days when physical activity warms us in a hurry. This is the best time for an overall clean-up of planting beds and application of fresh pine straw mulch to conserve soil moisture and keep weeds at bay. Spread straw to a depth of 3 or 4 inches, but keep it a few inches away from tree trunks and don’t smother the crowns of plants.

Be careful in cutting back plants; leave attractive seed heads of ornamental grasses so their graceful movement will enliven the garden when the coldest weather arrives, along with the birds that will visit them. Some perennials have hollow stems that conduct winter rains to the root zone if cut back too soon, possibly causing plants to rot before they resume growth in spring. These are best left until mid-February for cutting back, again enjoying their structural outlines through the winter.
Trees and shrubs can be planted this month, including camellias. Small evergreen plants may need protection from hard freezes that may occur before their roots become established. Even plants considered cold hardy, such as azaleas, can be damaged by a hard freeze coming soon after planting of small specimens.

Much can be placed in the vegetable and flower garden now. Beets and other root crops can be planted, along with sugar-snap peas, cabbages, radishes, onion sets and greens. Lime can be applied to soil now in order to adjust pH by the time of spring planting. Do a soil test first to determine the need, and don’t lime where potatoes will be planted. Sweet peas to climb on the garden fence will reward for months – be sure to grow the old-fashioned fragrant types. You can plant them from seed now.

Tulips that have been pre-chilled for eight weeks can be planted now. Early in the month plant daffodils and other spring blooming bulbs. Annuals in cell-packs, such as pansies, violas, snapdragons, stock, ornamental cabbage and kale, can be planted, but may need protection from frosts until established.

December is a good time for transplanting trees and shrubs. If the plants are very large, root pruning throughout the growing season would have been good preparation, but smaller trees and shrubs can be dug with as large a root-ball as possible, and moved to a new home.

Winter months can be dry and plants need water even during the dormant season. If rains don’t provide approximately one inch of water per week, irrigation is needed, especially on new plants or transplants.

December usually brings days of bright sunshine, with a few dreary cold spells. Enjoy the sunny days outdoors working or strolling amongst the camellias, and use the gloomy ones to sit inside by the fire and dream over the seed catalogs! Either way, enjoy the pure pleasure of the garden in December!

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