January in the Tallahassee Garden

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Photo by David W. Marshall, Leon County Extension UF-IFAS: Azaleas – Now is a good time to plant shrubs, such as azaleas, for spring color.

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Right Plant, Right Place

January is a great time to plant trees and shrubs, but keep in mind the size the plant will be at maturity. Many a tree has been cut down because it was planted too close to a structure years earlier. For example, river birch (*Betula nigra*), is a beautiful tree with good fall color and unique peeling bark. But at maturity it will be 50 to 60 feet tall and is a fast grower.

Also, consider testing your soil before you plant in order to take advantage of natural soil conditions. A soil testing kit may be picked up at the Leon County Extension office at 615 Paul Russell Road. Be sure to follow instructions carefully.

Fruit trees and cold-hardy citrus can be planted now. Choose a location with at least six hours of sun per day. Plant citrus trees where they will be sheltered from the north wind.

Indoors start basil, pepper, tomato, eggplant, and leeks from seed. Move the plants to bright light after they sprout and transplant them outside in March. Also, you can start spring-flowering annuals from seed for transplanting outside after the last frost.

This is the ideal time to prepare beds for spring planting. Add organic matter, like compost, to the soil.
**Water**
Plants need less water in the dormant season. So most plants can get by with once-a-week watering when it is dry. Generally, it is better to water more deeply and less frequently. The exception would be newly planted shrubs, trees, or bedding plants where the root system is still restricted to the original rootball. Until these plants grow roots out into the surrounding soil they will probably need to be watered two to three times a week, even at this time of year. Make sure the water goes into the rootball and doesn’t just run off into the surrounding soil.

**Fertilizer**
Fertilize winter-flowering annuals and herbs monthly. 15-0-15 fertilizer with 7.5% slow-release nitrogen is a good choice of fertilizer.

**Wildlife**
Keep bird feeders and baths clean and filled for year-round species as well as winter visitors.

**Maintenance**
Most dormant trees and shrubs can be pruned now. Remove crossing, broken or dead branches. Do not prune more than one-fourth of a tree’s live branches at a time. Pruning cuts should be made just outside of the branch collar to allow the tree to compartmentalize the injury. Spring-flowering shrubs and trees, like azaleas, redbud, and dogwood should NOT be pruned now. Wait until they have finished blooming. Pruning now will remove this year’s flowers buds.

Peaches, plums and nectarines need annual pruning in January or February. Pruning now allows more light to reach the fruit, keeps the fruit within reach and stimulates new growth.

Mow your lawn occasionally to prevent weeds from going to seed and to remove fallen leaves from the grass. This is also a good time to service your lawn mower by changing the spark plug, oil, and air filter and sharpening the blade.

Maintain two to four inches of mulch in beds and around trees. Leave an inch or two airspace next to the trunks of plants, though.
**Cold Damage**
Tender plants may be covered with old sheets or blankets on those very cold nights. But never place plastic covering in direct contact with foliage because it will cause the plant to cool more rapidly. Watering your plants a day or two before a freeze may also provide extra protection from cold weather. Do not rush to cut back cold-damaged plants. Cold-damaged foliage can serve to protect the plant from further damage. Many plants that die back to the ground in the winter will return in the spring. Replace freeze-damaged annuals with winter-hardy ones like pansies, snapdragons, and petunias.

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