February in the Garden

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Whether planning by the fire with seed catalogs all around, or out on a warm day to work in the garden, February is a time of hope and new beginnings, as we imagine our gardens’ beauty during the coming growing season. Garden chores may seem more like play than work this month, because the ground and the air are soft and cool.

Now is the time for planting and transplanting trees and shrubs. If you have plants that must be pruned often to keep in bounds, consider moving them to a new location where they can grow to full size. This gives an opportunity to plant something new and appropriately sized, for replacement. Plant bare-root or potted fruit and nut trees or shrubs, and flowering trees and shrubs, including roses.

Prune broad-leaf evergreens, and deciduous flowering trees such as crape myrtle, vitex and oleander. Overgrown shrubs such as abelia, and Chinese ligustrum, can be cut almost to the ground if they’ve gotten too big. Junipers cannot be pruned in this way, as no growth buds are present on old wood, so never cut needle-leaf evergreens below green growing branches. Hybrid roses should be pruned mid-month to remove dead or weak canes, leaving several healthy canes, cut back to about eighteen inches. Old shrub roses and climbers can be trimmed now and again in summer while cutting flowers to take inside.
Now is the time to finish clearing away debris from plant beds. If larkspur or poppy seeds were sown in fall, add only a thin layer of mulch and avoid smothering seedlings. Otherwise, a three- to four-inch-thick layer of mulch can be applied now, to prevent weeds and conserve moisture.

Lawn grasses may decline if fertilized too early, so wait until warmer months. Do not apply weed-and-feed fertilizers at this time – if broad leaf weeds such as Florida betony are a problem, a careful application of an herbicide containing atrazine can be used (most effective if also applied last November.)

Fertilize fruit trees and shrubs in February, waiting on blueberries until after they have flowered. Prune fruit trees to train to the proper shape.

Seeds can be planted now for the flower and vegetable garden, some direct-seeded and some started indoors to be set out later. Sugar-snap or English peas, carrots, beets, greens, lettuces and parsley, can be seeded in the garden now, along with sweet peas and alyssum. Other cool-season crops can be set as transplants, including broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, and for the flower garden, pansies, snapdragons, petunias, stock and dianthus.

Indoors, start seeds of all warm-season crops, vegetables and flowers, to plant out after the danger of frost is past.

Some determined gardeners set out tomato transplants in February, taking extraordinary measures to protect from freezing. If successful, this can result in strong plants with greater resistance to pests, and an early harvest.

Potatoes are traditionally planted on Valentines Day. Do not lime potato planting areas, but beds where spring vegetables will be planted later may benefit from adding lime. It is common for gardens of many years to need adjustment of the soil pH, so if you’ve noticed that your garden is producing less, with plants not responding to fertilizers, soil testing is in order.

When planning the garden, include some whimsy in the form of artistic touches. A great container strategically placed, a bird-bath, “found object,” sculpture, walkway, bench or arbor – all add structure to the garden to serve as focal points for the surrounding plantings. A “hard-scape” feature may be just the element needed to pull it all together, and adds to the fun of February dreaming.

PLEASE USE THE PARAGRAPH BELOW AS A BREAK-OUT BOX IF SPACE PERMITS:
A mid-February visit to Maclay Gardens should be added to the “to-do” list for all local gardeners. You’ll find many plants in early bloom, weather permitting, and may get some great ideas for your own garden planning. Typically seen are lots of camellias, along with redbuds, oriental magnolias and cherry trees. It’s like walking through a pink cloud. Savvy men, young and old, know to bring their loved one for a stroll through the Gardens near Valentine’s Day as a sure path to romance!