Add Some Holiday Color to your Winter Garden

Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: It’s time to plant winter annuals like pansies and diascia.

Pam Sawyer is an employee of Maclay Gardens State Park and a Master Gardener volunteer with University of Florida IFAS Extension in Leon County, http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu

Thursday, December 10, 2009
Tallahassee Democrat

There is nothing like brightly colored pansies and petunias to warm your soul on a cold December morning. Or try planting snapdragons, dianthus, nemesia and diascia. Don’t have a garden bed to plant? Put an evergreen shrub in a pot and tuck some alyssum around the edges. Be sure to place the pot close to a walkway or by a doorway so that you can smell the sweet alyssum as you pass by. With winter annuals it is especially important to remove old flowers, water and fertilize regularly.

One way to warm the body is get outside and dig some holes or even entire beds in preparation for planting shrubs and trees. The cold weather gives plants time to establish good root systems before they are required to produce new leaves, flowers and fruit. Also they need less water in winter. Hollies are a festive tree whose decorative berries provide food for birds. Being an upright evergreen they make a good screen in a tight spot. They grow in sun or partial shade and are a good replacement for camphor and Chinese tallow trees which also feed the birds but spread these invasive exotics to wild areas where they crowd out our native plants. Dahoon holly, the larger American holly and the smaller East Palatka holly are all good choices for you and the birds.

In the winter vegetable garden you can still sow cabbage, beets, bok choi, broccoli, kale, kohlrabi, and mustard. Don’t forget carrots, radishes and onions. I am grateful to the genus Allium for the wonderful flavors imparted to many a delectable dish by its fun and easy to grow members. Choose between bulbng, bunching and multipliers or plant them all as I do. Bulbing onions include sweet types such as Vidalia as well as more pungent types. The key to producing large bulbs is moist soil and timely, repeated applications of fertilizer. Fertilize at planning time, 6 weeks later and once more when the bulbs begin to form. Bunching onions, otherwise known as green onions, scallions or spring onions, don’t form bulbs but have slightly swollen white stalks. Shallots are a type of multiplier onions which form small bulbs and have a mild flavor used to make sauces and gravies.
Perk up the vegetable plot with some cool season herbs - cilantro, comfrey, dill, fennel, parsley, thyme and sage. Sow a row of your favorite sweet peas for fragrant blooms in spring.

Water well if a freeze is predicted. Mulch tender plants or cover with cloth such as old sheets or towels. Be sure to remove the cloth when it begins to warm up. Some fabric-type plant covers made of polyethylene, polyester or polypropylene allow water, air and light to penetrate. They also protect plants from cold temperatures (and insects) and can be left on plants indefinitely.

To make holiday greenery arrangements take cuttings from anise, azalea, boxwood, camellia, cleyera, holly, pittosporum, and podocarpus. Condition the cuttings by placing them in a bucket or tub of water up to their necks for twenty-four hours before using. For a red accent add holly and nandina berries or the red leaves of azalea, cleyera and red tips. Anise, boxwood, and podocarpus make wonderful wreaths for decorating doors and walls. Add a candle in a glass vase to the center of the wreath and place it on the table as a centerpiece for holiday festivities.

Take a walk in your garden and pick some pansies to decorate a holiday cake. Sip hot cider, tea or coffee while you eat your cake and thank the earth for its many gifts to you.

###