

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Trees and Shrubs:

This month's tree and shrub tasks are all about planting, pruning, and protecting. In the Pacific Northwest you can plant trees of all kinds: fruit trees, shade trees, and flowering trees; and choosing them is fun now, since nurseries tend to add their new selections in January. As soon as the nurseries have them in stock you can plant new evergreens, rose bushes, and deciduous shrubs. While you shouldn't prune flowering trees until after they've bloomed, you can now prune most shrubs and deciduous shade trees.

When you notice new buds on deciduous trees, possibly late this month or in early February, give them their third and last shot of dormant spray—follow the label's instructions, and avoid spraying on days that are windy, rainy, or below freezing.

Keep up with raking; fallen leaves can do heavy damage if left to smother grass.

If you have snowfall, knock snow off the branches of evergreens and fine-branched deciduous trees using an upward motion to keep limbs from breaking—don't risk the benign fluffy stuff turning into ice overnight; if breakage does occur, prune broken branches

Keep protecting tender plants against freezes by covering them with evergreen branches, burlap or other cloth supported by a perimeter of stakes; just don't let the cloth touch their leafy parts.

Houseplants:

Winter houseplant care is more about attentive restraint than high maintenance. When you water, which should be minimal during the winter, do it just enough so that water saturates the soil and comes through the drainage holes; at this time of year, plants left in standing water can suffer root damage.

Turn plants every two weeks for balanced foliage as they seek sunlight.

Check for pests in the greenhouse and on houseplants; treat with organic products so kids and pets aren't harmed. Hold off on transplanting those plants whose roots are potbound. On nights that are extremely cold, be sure to draw the curtains or blinds of plant windows.

Perennials:

Even after the holidays, the catalog season continues; start planning your spring garden now by making a map of your garden, including what you'd like to plant where, with seed and bulb catalogs by your side for inspiration. Clear away mulch from winter-blooming bulbs. Dig up and divide winter-blooming bulbs after they've flowered. If an unexpected warm streak fools bulbs into thinking it's springtime, help protect them with an extra light layer of mulch.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.
