

Monthly Garden Chores

January & February:

Pruning: good months to do some tree pruning. Most trees are best pruned at the same time wood is shed in nature (exceptions are some of the fruiting ornamental trees such as Crabapples, Pears and Cherries). In winter, wind, snow, and ice snap off dead and weak branches on trees that are fully dormant. We spend a lot of time here at Boxerwood in the winter just picking up sticks. When the leaves are off the trees, it is much easier to see the branching structure. Look for those crossing branches or those that are dead or diseased. You want to have a strong well-balanced framework. Look for an outward facing bud that will give a new shoot room to develop. For alternate buds, make a slanting cut about 1/4" above the bud; for opposite buds, cut squarely across the tops of the buds as close as you can get. When the weather warms the wounds will heal quickly. Some of the very tiny seeds like parsley need to be started inside. Continue feeding the birds. Cut back the foliage of last year's perennials and ornamental grasses. It may be too early to cut back your vitex and butterfly bushes. Our weather is so variable this time of year and you don't want new growth to be zapped by frost. Our Loebner Magnolias at Boxerwood usually bloom at the end of February and are almost always hit by killing frosts, leaving lots of brown mushy unsightly blooms. **Seeds:** Do you have seed left over from last year? It is probably still good. Most seed will last for about two years, even longer if you keep them in cold dry storage. I usually store my seed in ziplock bags in the refrigerator. To see if your seeds are still viable when it comes time to sow them, try this trick: moisten an unbleached coffee filter and fold your seeds inside it. Place the filter in a ziplock plastic bag and within three days or so, the viable seeds will germinate.

Plant Damage in Weird Winter Weather: less abundant. This is especially worrisome for fruit growers, as blossoms equal fruit. It is hard to believe this year that our last frost date is usually around Mother's Day in May. Ordinarily in mid-February I cut the **butterfly bushes** back to about 2', but I see they are already starting to leaf out. Bulb foliage has begun to push its way out of the ground, but the flower buds are still under the earth and should be fine. With shrubs, the cold damage may not be readily evident, but will show up later in the form of small lateral splits in the twigs or splotches of dead foliage. Is there anything we can do? A layer of **mulch** under trees and shrubs will help maintain a constant temperature in the root zone and helps retain soil moisture.

March:

Now is the time to get out there and **clean up the garden**. Cut back ornamental grasses (hedge clippers work the best on large clumps of grass), clean up and compost (or discard if diseased) foliage from last year's perennials, pull weeds in garden beds (I don't think any of them died over the winter. Working in my own garden this last weekend, I can't say I remember ever seeing so many green weeds this early in the season), mow the liriopse, sow seeds of hardy annuals and cold hardy vegetables. Remember, our last frost date is around Mother's Day, so don't let the warm weather fool you. March is always tricky – 35 degrees one day and then 70 degree the next.

Pruning Roses: The old adage, "Prune roses when the forsythia blooms", does pretty much hold true. Now is the time. First, follow the three D's: remove dead, damaged or diseased canes. You can also cut out any cane that is narrower than a pencil. I like to leave 3-5 canes evenly spaced around the plant. This will help increase air circulation

and will keep the shrub from become a tangle of stems. Most roses are very susceptible to a fungus called black spot (yellowing leaves with black spots on them) and maintaining good air circulation is a good preventative measure. When pruning, make sure you cut at an angle about 1/4" above an out-ward-facing bud on the stem or on a leaf axil so that the lower end of the cut is opposite the bud. If you are cutting older, less productive wood cut squarely through the stem either at the base of the plant or above a strong, young shoot. Make sure your pruners or loppers are sharp so you don't crush the cut. These are just some general rules for pruning roses. You might want to check a pruning reference book or Internet site (Cooperative Extension websites are usually your best bet) for more detailed information.

April:

Weed, weed, weed. Now is the time to attack all those pesky weeds before your shrubs and perennials leaf out fully. Root vegetables can be planted now. Keep an eye out for **tent caterpillars**. They especially love fruit trees, although this year I am seeing a lot of them on quince bushes. I like to cut out the nests and destroy them and get a perverse pleasure out of stomping on caterpillars (what does that say about me?).

May:

Still weed, weed, weed. With the warm weather and lots of moisture, the weeds have been popping up all over the place. It seems as if I get one area weeded and a week later I have to do it all over again. Once your azaleas and rhododendrons stop blooming, it is time to prune them as these plants set their buds for the following year right after this year's blooms. Of course, this is prime season for the vegetable garden. Our last frost date is always around Mother's Day, so after that it is usually safe to put out tomato plants (although I did risk it and put mine in already). There is a great chart in VA Tech's Extension website which tells you exactly **when to plant what vegetable**. I use it all the time.

When are there not garden chores this time of the year? It seems as if every spare second is spent in my own garden – weeds galore, seeds to plant, vegetables to baby. Lilacs: As I walk around Boxerwood, I find our lilacs are quite overgrown, tall and somewhat spindly with only a few flowers at the top. Sound familiar? I see many lilacs in town that look like this. The most drastic measure you can take is to cut the lilac down to about 12" or so in the winter when the plant is dormant. In the following spring, the plant will send up lots of new shoots. Regrowth should be thinned and in three years you should see flowers. A less intrusive method of pruning is rejuvenation pruning that takes place over three years. You can do this when the plant is dormant or immediately after it flowers. Cut out one third of the old woody stems the first year; the second year, cut out one half of the remaining woody stems and the following year, cut out the rest of the woody stems. You'll probably need to do some simple shape pruning each year, too.

June:

This is the time of year I **cut back my fall blooming perennials**—asters, goldenrod, perennial sunflowers, mums—about a third to a half. The plants recover quickly and branch out nicely. Cutting them back prevents them from blooming too early (after all, who wants mums blooming in July) and also prevents them from becoming leggy. I highly recommend Tracy DiSabato Austs' book, *The Well-Tended Perennial Garden*, for more of these useful tips. Pruning hydrangeas: There is often confusion about when to **prune hydrangeas**. If a hydrangea blooms on old wood, usually early – mid summer,

prune just as the plant stops flowering. Here you are only pruning for shape or to remove dead wood. Mophead hydrangeas bloom on old wood. If the hydrangea blooms on new wood later in the summer (mid-summer to fall) such as the smooth hydrangea ('Annabelle' and 'Limelight' are two popular ones) or the panicle hydrangea such as 'Tardiva', these should be cut back to the ground in early spring. I don't think there are many shrubs prettier than the oakleaf hydrangeas (*Hydrangea quercifolia*) – and they are glorious right now. I do have a preference for the oakleaf hydrangea over the standard mophead hydrangeas. Why? For one thing, I think they are a lot more natural looking, and unlike the mopheads, they have great fall color. I also like the cinnamon exfoliating bark in the winter. Some of the better cultivars are 'Alice', 'Snow Queen' and 'Snowflake" (double flowers in panicles often 8-12" long). Oakleaves like moisture and some shade and are a great understory plant.

Tomatoes: Staking is always my first hurdle. There are many others, unfortunately. I'll try to address a few. If your tomatoes are splitting, that is a climactic problem and usually happens after a big rainfall. The tomato takes up a lot of water, too much, in fact, and the skin starts to swell and eventually ruptures. There's not much one can do about this. If you see greasy brown spots all over your plant, you have blight. There is early blight and late blight. This is a fungus you see especially when the weather is wet and the spores will travel from plant to plant. There is nothing you can do about this either, except pull the plant and dispose of it, but be sure not to put it in your compost pile. One preventative measure is to make sure when you water your tomatoes – and they need a lot of water – don't water the foliage. If you see holes in the fruit, that is probably an insect. Last year, the stink bugs were particularly bad. With our wet weather, slugs may be a problem. If you wrap a strip of copper tape around the base of the plant it keeps the slugs from climbing up the stem. Black spots on the bottom of the fruit indicate blossom end rot and this is usually caused by a calcium imbalance. Usually consistent watering is the answer to this problem as often fluctuations in soil moisture.

September & October: Take stock of your garden, to look back through the growing season and take notes on what to do (or not to do) next year. It's also a good time to **divide perennials** and **plant** just about anything as the weather cools and the ground stays damp. Plants put their energy into root growth rather than top growth in the fall—and that's a good thing.

Cover Crops: This is a technique used by many commercial farmers, but I have a feeling many backyard vegetable gardeners are unfamiliar with cover crops. We just started using them ourselves a couple of years ago. Cover crops are temporary plantings usually done in the fall to prevent soil erosion from wind and water and to improve the soil. Crops in the legume family, such as peas or clover, are particularly successful because they "fix" nitrogen to the soil, nitrogen being one of the primary components for plant growth. Once your vegetable garden is done for the season, and you have pulled out all the dead vegetation, lightly till the soil and then broadcast the seed. Water it in well. Winter rye and red clover are both popular cover crops and seed is available at the Farmer's Coop. The root growth opens up channels in the soil for water and air movement, so cover crops are especially good for compacted clay soil. In the spring, till the cover crop under before you start your early planting. If it is thick, you may have to mow it first.

November: Keep raking and composting those leaves. You can also continue planting bulbs. Now is also a good time to prepare a garden bed for the spring with sheet

mulching. Lay out the area you will want to plant in, cover the new bed with a layer of cardboard or several layers of newspaper, and add a 6-8" layer of leaves. By late spring, all the layers will have started to decompose and your bed will be ready to plant. Many gardeners nowadays are proponents of no-till gardens. Rototilling your garden every year disrupts the delicate balance of microorganisms in the soil and unearths undesirable weed seeds that have been lying dormant in the ground for many years.

December: Care of live Christmas trees: I have a feeling many of the live Christmas trees sold are not live the following spring. Here are some hints that will help keep that tree alive. First, think about where you are going to plant this tree. Most Christmas trees need full sun and many get to be about 60' or so. Dig the hole now before the ground freezes. It should be about twice as big as the root ball of the tree and as deep. In choosing the tree, make sure it has a central leader (stem) and make sure the trunk isn't damaged. When you run your hand along a branch, the needles should stay intact. After you've chosen your perfect tree and have brought it home, making sure not to carry it by the stem, gradually introduce the tree to the indoor environment. Keep it in an unheated garage for a few days. The tree should only stay in the house for a maximum of ten days with four days being the optimum amount of time. A warm house tricks the tree into thinking it is spring and it will start to break buds. You don't want that to happen. After Christmas, reverse the process and gradually introduce the tree to the outdoors. Then it can be planted in the hole that you've dug. Water and then mulch heavily, preferably with wood chips.

Some of my favorite tools. Walking through the garden, I almost always have a bucket of tools with me, or at the very least a pair of pruners in my pocket. A bucket keeps everything in one place and helps prevent me from leaving tools all around the garden. I have a special fondness for kitty liter buckets and old Preen containers. My bucket usually contains a pair of loppers, an old kitchen knife (great for dividing perennials), a by-pass pruner (Felco pruners are the Lexus of pruners, especially useful if you want to impress someone, but I usually use a cheaper pair), a small pruning saw, a couple pairs of gloves (Atlas nitrile gloves are my preferred brand) and my favorite tool, a small left-handed weeder. The handle is about 13" long and the blade is about 5" wide and very sharp. You can see that it is a Japanese tool by the writing on the handle. For all you lefties out there, you'll appreciate how I feel about a left-handed tool. They are few and far between and when I find one, I buy multiples -- the horticultural supply catalog, A.M. Leonard (amleo.com, #710HW) has started to carry them. Incidentally, both Felcro and Bahco pruners are available in a left-handed version. You'll also find in my tool bucket a small **spray bottle of alcohol solution** used to clean my cutting tools between plants.