



AgriLIFE EXTENSION
Texas A&M System



A Newsletter for the Environmentally Conscious Homeowner

Winter 2008

Merry Christmas and Joyous Holidays

*From Your Rockwall County Master Gardener Association
and Texas AgriLife Extension Service - Rockwall County*



Meet Me Under the Mistletoe?

Linsley Srygley

Rockwall County Master Gardener

Being caught under the mistletoe and kissed by the boy of my dreams was part of the Christmas magic. But, never in all my years, has someone said, "Come kiss me under the life-sucking parasite"! Mistletoe is an extremely poisonous parasite that can kill a tree. Are you feeling the love yet?

Mistletoe is spread by birds who eat the berries and move the seeds from tree to tree. The mistletoe roots itself into a tree and takes all of its nutrients from its host. Hackberry and Live Oaks most frequently serve as hosts.

When you find mistletoe in your tree, you can cut or break it out of the tree but it will grow back. The only way to permanently remove mistletoe from the tree is to cut it out of the branch or cut the branch off.

Okay, so you really want to decorate with mistletoe? Place mistletoe in a plastic sandwich bag or netting before using it for decoration. Pets and children often eat mistletoe by accident when bits of it fall from its hanging place on to the floor. Watch out for those white berries, too!

Still need a kiss?

-Ancient Celts hung mistletoe over their childrens' cradles to protect them from being stolen by fairies and replaced with changelings, which are the offspring of fairies, trolls, elves or other legendary creatures, according to European folklore.

-Some cultures say if an unmarried woman is not kissed under the mistletoe, she will remain single for the rest of the year.

Homemade Treats for Birds

Janie Squier

Rockwall County Master Gardener

Make your own bird suet to attract different wild birds during our cool months in Texas. This recipe is popular with chickadees, titmice, sparrows, cardinals, and blue jays. Serve the birds this homemade suet during the winter and spring – our hot summers can cause bird suet to melt or turn rancid. The recipe is below:

1 cup crunchy peanut butter

1 cup lard

2 cups quick-cooking oats

2 cups cornmeal

1 cup all-purpose flour

1/3 cup sugar

Raisins, seeds, dried fruit or hulled sunflower seeds

Melt the peanut butter and lard together. Stir in the remaining ingredients. Pour into square freezer containers until about 1½ inches thick. Cool completely and cut into squares. Store the extra squares in the freezer. Place the suet squares in the holders attached to your bird feeders. You can also place the homemade suet on small plates and place on shelves and benches in the garden.

This next treat is fun to make with children. Take a pine cone and make a hanger around the top of it using yarn, twine, or wire. Simply spread peanut butter over, under, around and through all the cracks and crevices of the large pine cone. Roll the pine cone in birdseed and you are ready to hang your treat from a tree branch!

Winter Gardening To Do List

Janie Squier

Rockwall County Master Gardener

Just because it is cold and gray outside doesn't mean that gardeners don't have some important seasonal chores. Here are timely tips for these dreary winter months:

December

Water the entire landscape at least once in December, in the absence of significant rain, in order to prevent freeze damage and the death of leaves and twigs.

If a hard, prolonged freeze (24 hours or more) is predicted, protect freeze-sensitive plants by covering them with cardboard boxes or blankets. Extra heat from a utility light or Christmas tree lights may also be needed.

Since soil temperatures have cooled, spring flowering bulbs should be planted this month. Remember, don't plant the bulbs too deep.

Cool season annuals planted in the fall may not look great right now, but be patient. Most likely their root systems are still expanding and getting ready for brighter days.

If your mower or trimmers need a tune-up or repair, take them now to the local small engine repair shop before the spring rush begins.

January

Water the lawn thoroughly at least once if rainfall does not exceed 2 to 3 inches for the month.

Take time to plan new additions to the landscape: a new flowerbed, a birdbath, or a well-placed tree.

Review the garden magazines and catalogs for creative ideas for your outdoor living area. Remember to research items that are good for your planting zone.

Prepare the soil now for future planting by adding organic material such as compost, aged manure, fallen leaves, pine straw and wood chips.

EnviroSmart

Linsley Srygley, EnviroSmart Editor

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This gives the soil time to break down the organic material before spring planting.



Tend to these colorful cool weather annuals: cyclamen, dianthus, ornamental kale and cabbage, pansies, viola, petunias, and snapdragons. Cut off dead portions of perennials killed by freezing weather. While you are there, pull weeds and remove plant debris (dead leaves, flowers, and twigs) from planting beds.

Plant newly purchased trees following recommended guidelines. Delay pruning on trees and shrubs until early spring. The freeze-damaged plant material actually provides some insulation for healthy plant tissue.

Choose, purchase and plant bare-root roses.

February

Be prepared. February can be the coldest month in Texas. If heavy freezes occur, protect your cold-sensitive plants. Also, realize that winter drought can be devastating to landscape and garden plants, especially combined with wind and freezing weather. Water at least twice this month in the absence of rain – this includes lawns and landscape plants.

Remember to mulch before spring. Mulch will help retain soil moisture built up throughout the winter. Mulch should be 2 to 4 inches deep. Do not pile mulch up around trees.

Recognize that February is pruning month. Prune roses on (or around) Valentine's Day. Trim off dead and winter-damaged portions of perennial flowers. Major pruning, training, and shaping of shade trees and large shrubs are best done this month.

In established flowerbeds, replace any winter-damaged or unhealthy plants now. Don't expect your unhealthy plants to miraculously recover before spring

For information contact:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Todd Williams". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'T' and 'W'.

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The Texas A&M University System, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the County of Commissioners Courts of Texas Cooperating.

Violas

Neva Wood

Rockwall County Master Gardener

What is music to the winter gardener's ears? Violas! Violas or Johnny Jump-Ups, look like small pansies. You may have seen them in the gardening centers and passed them over, thinking they were small pansies and not nearly so showy as the giants. At first sight, they're not as showy, but their virtues are many. Violas can look wilted for a day after a snow and freezing temperatures, but will jump right back up and start blooming again. They were voted Flower of the Year for 2007 by the National Gardening Bureau.

Violas will outlast any other cool weather blooming plant in the garden, blooming profusely from October until April or May. A four-inch transplant in October will grow and mound into an eight-inch plant covered in blooms, and once planted requires very little care. They do need good organic soil, full sun, light fertilizer and watering when they dry out. They do tremendously well in pots or flowerbeds and come in many colors. Plant Violas with ornamental kale or cabbage for a dramatic display and let your garden sing!

While the weather is cold and dreary is a great time to order your plants and seeds for your Spring garden. Mail order catalogs start coming out in late Fall in time for you to curl up in your favorite chair and peruse all the beautiful pictures. But, be careful! Not everything offered for sale by nurseries and seed companies will grow well in this area. Rockwall County is in USDA Hardiness Zone 8. Be sure to check any plant or seedling you are considering ordering to ensure that it will grow well in Zone 8. The hardiness zone is an indication of the coldest weather a plant can take. You should also take into consideration whether the plant is suitable for our hot, dry summer weather as well.

A good place to research whether a plant you are interested in will do well here is on the Rockwall County Master Gardener web site: http://www.rockmga.org/recommended_plants.htm. Proven varieties are listed here: <http://texassuperstar.com/>. And additional information can be found here: <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/extension/TCEHomeVegFruitNut.html>.

Consider ordering your vegetable seeds from a reputable seed company instead of buying them from a seed rack in a department store. Seeds shipped directly from a seed company will be of better quality since they are in temperature controlled storage until shipped to you.

Vegetable Gardening

Glenn Stinson

**Rockwall County
Master Gardener**



Well, the gardening gods were not smiling on me, because my potatoes never came up, and the corn didn't develop. Better luck next spring! That's the beauty of gardening in North Texas - you always get another chance, sometimes in the same year.

December

This is the slowest month of the year for gardening in North Texas. It is just as well, with all the holiday activities taking up much of our time. If you haven't had a soil test in two years or more, now is the best time to get one and avoid the spring rush. Without a soil test, you will be "flying blind" in regards to the fertilizer needs of your garden. Kits are available at the Texas AgriLife Extension Office. Mulch around your cool-season plants to protect them from the cold and to conserve moisture. Pull up and mulch the spent plants and put them in the compost pile, to get the garden ready for planting next year.

January

January is much like December, as far as the pace of gardening is concerned. Onions, English peas, and asparagus may be planted the latter half of the month. If you want to harvest asparagus early, look for two-year crowns. They will mature a year earlier than one-year crowns (one-year crowns take three years; two-year crowns mature in two years). You cannot rotate asparagus. Dedicate an area in the garden (preferably a northern corner) because asparagus beds will last ten or fifteen years or more.

February

The cool-season vegetable planting gets into full swing in February. Root crops (radishes, carrots, beets, turnips, potatoes, etc.) and leafy greens (lettuce, cabbage, mustard, spinach, broccoli, etc.) may be planted now. February is also a good time to start warm-season transplants indoors from seed (especially tomatoes, which are very easy to grow). You can save a lot of money growing your own transplants, compared to the cost of transplants in the nurseries in April and May.

Happy Gardening!

Winter Care for Palms

Jackie Lindsay

Rockwall County Master Gardener

The use of palms in the landscape has increased since more people are putting in pools and outdoor living areas with kitchens. With the unpredictable winters in North Texas, it's always best to be prepared for whatever Old Man Winter might bring. Below is a list of cold hardy palms with cold tolerance thresholds of 20° or lower.

[California Fan Palm Trees](#) (*Washingtonia filifera*)

[Canary Island Date Palm Trees](#) (*Phoenix canariensis*)

[Mediterranean Fan Palms](#) (*Chamaerops humilis*)

[Mexican Fan Palm Trees](#) (*Washingtonia robusta*)

[Pindo Palm Trees](#) (*Butia capitata*)

[Queen Palm Trees](#) (*Syagrus romanzoffiana*)

[Sago Palms](#) (*Cycas revoluta*)

[True Date Palm Trees](#) (*Phoenix dactylifera*)

[Texas Sabal Palm Trees](#) (*Sabal mexicana*)

[Windmill Palm Trees](#) (*Trachycarpus fortunei*)

Frost or freezing temperatures can damage the tissue of a healthy palm. This damage limits the conduction of water through the trunk, slowing down the growth of your palm and reducing root activity, which weakens the plant.

Here are some preventative measures one can take:

- When planting a palm, choose a warm sunny spot that is well protected from north and west winter winds. Place your palm on the south or east side of your house and also near a fence or wall with some air flow. An evergreen screen would work as well.
- Beware of cold snaps! To prevent frost damage, cover small palms with a box or blanket weighted down. Larger palms need their trunks tightly wrapped with burlap, blankets or similar materials and removed once weather warms up.
- Other proactive measures include treating your palm with a fungicidal copper spray before the onset of freezing temperatures to prevent harmful bacteria. Also, proper fertilization in late summer and early fall will help insure your plant remains stronger through the winter months.

Before digging up your palm, wait for it to produce new leaves in the summer. If there is leaf damage, remove the leaves and shoots and apply a copper based fungicide. Consistently spray with the fungicide until the plant is strong again.

The key to saving a palm is patience because an injured palm will require an entire spring and summer to begin recovery. Just remember, it's well worth it!



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