

The Green Thumb

Lawn and Garden News You Can Use

February 2008

Plan Your Vegetable Garden Now!

Elizabeth Wahle, horticulture specialist

Planning your vegetable garden during the winter months is a great way to prepare for the coming growing season. All you need is a piece of paper, a ruler, a pencil, eraser, and all your new seed catalogs. Consider these suggestions as you plan your garden:

- Run the rows north and south in order to give plants the maximum amount of sunlight throughout the day.
- If you have a slope in your garden, plant the rows across the slope, rather than along the slope, to help prevent damaging water and wind erosion.
- Plant tall crops like corn, amaranth, and trellised plants along the north side of the garden so they will not cast shade on nearby plants in the garden.
- Plant straight rows since they are easier to mechanically cultivate and harvest.
- If you want to include perennial crops like rhubarb or asparagus, it is best to plant them to one side of the garden so they will not interfere with the cultivation of the annual crops.
- For herbs and leafy crops that are harvested often, place them where they can be conveniently gathered for cooking—and provide a decorative effect for your garden.
- Don't forget to add flowers to your vegetable garden. Not only do they add an attractive feature, but also many

flowers such as calendula, pansy, nasturtium, rose, and daylily are edible. Other flowers such as marigold and fritillaria are thought to repel pests.



- Group early maturing plants together. This allows you to plant one part of your garden at a time. Grouping in this manner also makes succession planting easier to maintain.
- Some crops can be intercropped to save space. For example, carrots and radish can be planted together. Because radish germinates and matures much faster than carrot, the radish helps break the soil crust for carrot germination. In addition, the radish marks the carrot row. After the radish has been harvested, the carrots are left to continue maturing.
- Remember that succession planting can be accomplished in two ways. You can have multiple plantings of one crop variety over time. This is a good method if you have a particular variety that you really like. Or, you can have a single planting of a crop using multiple varieties, each with different days to maturity. This is a good method if you want to try lots of varieties and extend your harvest season at the same time.

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Ready for a Touch of Spring? Force Branches into Bloom

David Robson, horticulture educator



This time of year, the winter blahs start to hit. But, you can help ward off the blahs by bringing spring into your home. How? Just snip some branches from your flowering shrubs and force them into bloom.

By now, many shrubs have flower buds that are formed and ready to bloom. That's partially due to the warm spell in early January. There has been sufficient cold weather to break dormancy, and now the buds just need warmth, moisture, and a little time to burst open.

The procedure to force buds into bloom is quite simple.

Start by selecting branches that are loaded with flower buds. You can identify the flower buds because they are plumper and rounder than leaf buds. Select branches that have curves or bends in order to create interesting blooming arrangements. Or, if you prefer straight stems, cut those. Don't worry about slanting cuts or shredded stems. Ordinary cuts work fine.

Submerge the branches overnight in a deep pail or tub of warm water; or wrap them in a damp cloth and put them in a plastic bag for a few days. This moistening/soaking

process loosens the bud scales and helps them fall away as the flowers expand.

After the moistening process is complete, stand the branches in a pail of water and place where the temperature can be controlled; 60 to 70 degrees is best for the developing flowers. Although the branches will force at higher temperatures, the color, size, and keeping quality of the blooms will be reduced. For this reason, it is also best to keep the branches out of direct sun.

As a general rule, plants that bloom early are easiest to force indoors. Also, the closer to the natural bloom time you cut the branches, the faster they will open.

Try some plants other than the old favorites of forsythia and pussy willow. Red maple has beautiful, red flowers. Catkins are also flowers, so try alder, birch, or hazel. The foliage of some trees is spectacular when forced indoors. Try horse chestnut, birch, or oak.

The chart below outlines the length of time it takes to coax flowers on branches of trees and shrubs. Start some every two weeks for a continuous display of color until spring.

Bloom Chart

| | | | |
|---------------------------------|---------|----------------------|---------|
| Shadblow (<i>Amelanchier</i>) | 1 week | Honeysuckle | 3 weeks |
| Forsythia | 1 week | Bridal Wreath Spirea | 4 weeks |
| Redbud | 2 weeks | Flowering Quince | 4 weeks |
| Pussy Willow | 2 weeks | Lilac | 4 weeks |
| Privet (from an unpruned bush) | 2 weeks | Cherry | 4 weeks |
| Spicebush | 2 weeks | Crabapple | 4 weeks |
| Magnolia | 3 weeks | Pear | 4 weeks |
| Deutzia | 3 weeks | Peach | 4 weeks |
| Flowering Almond | 3 weeks | | |

Question Corner

Answer provided by Martha Smith, horticulture educator

Q. Last summer, I planted a red maple. It is only 10 feet tall. A neighbor said there was a problem with planting young red maples because they get frost cracks. What is a frost crack and how do I protect my tree?

A. Young thin-bark trees such as red maple (*Acer rubrum*) are more prone to winter injuries called frost or freeze cracks and sunscald. There is confusion regarding what each exactly is.

Frost or freeze cracks are longitudinal cracks in the trunks of trees. They occur when air temperatures drop substantially during the dormant period. These cracks appear on the south or southwest sides of trees where winter sun is strongest. The sun-side of the tree warms up during the daytime; then when shaded by a cloud or the sun setting, the cold air causes bark temperature to drop suddenly. The inner bark remains relatively warm while the outer bark rapidly contracts, causing vertical cracks or splits in the trunk.

Once a freeze crack occurs, it often appears annually, opening in winter and closing in spring, forming a frost rib. These cracks appear as raised black lines on the trunk.

Research has shown that cracks form along weak areas such as an old wound, a poorly pruned stub, or some type of internal decay. According to the Morton Arboretum, trees susceptible to cracks are London Plane, oak, Norway and red maple, horsechestnut, crabapple, walnut, linden, and willow.

Sunscald appears as an elongated canker on the trunk. It is also caused by rapid temperature fluctuations in the winter and develops on the south or southwest side of trees. Bark exposed to freezing temperatures at night can be injured when warmed during the day. On sunny winter days, the sun-side of the trunk may exceed air temperatures by as much as 20 degrees.

Sensitive cambial cells located directly under the bark are killed, causing the bark to eventually separate from underlying wood. At first, this area turns reddish-brown. The bark lifts and peels back in chunky patches exposing inner wood. Sunscald damage is wider than thin frost/freeze cracks.

Wrap the trunks and major branches of newly planted trees with burlap or commercially available tree wraps. Remove the wraps in the spring. Depending on the age of the tree, continue to wrap the tree for two to four seasons.

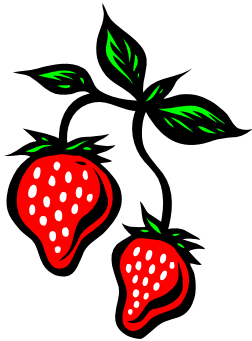


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Small Fruits Seminar to be Held in Marion



If you want to learn how to add small fruit plantings to your home landscape, plan to attend this seminar on February 28 at the U of I Extension Williamson County Office, 1306 N. Atchison Avenue, Marion (just east of Kroger).

The program starts at 1 P.M. and will be presented by Jeff Kindhart, senior research specialist from the U of I Dixon Springs Agricultural Research Center. Kindhart will offer practical advice on growing blackberries, blueberries, grapes, raspberries, and strawberries in the backyard.

There is no charge to attend, but registration is needed by February 22. Call 618-993-3304, or email your name, address, and phone number to williamson_co@extension.uiuc.edu.



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