

# Around the Yard

by Reeve Hobbie

I'm being lazy about authoring a new article, so I have revived one I wrote during the fall of 2015. Everything in it is still applicable. I added a paragraph about mistletoe and ball moss that I failed to include in the "Ps of Trees" article which may now be found in Around the Yard Archives.

Don't let these cooler days of fall and early winter keep you from working outside. There are so many things one can be doing around the yard so you and your gardens will be better prepared for spring.

## November

**Lawn Care** Keep mowing your St. Augustine lawn on the high side, Bermuda grass on the short side, as long as it keeps growing. Perhaps mowing every other week is sufficient. It's too late to fertilize. Now you have to wait until April around the time your income tax is due.

**Roses** Prepare beds now if you plan on growing new roses. December through February are the ideal rose planting months in Central Texas. There is much less shock to the plants if they go in the ground during this dormant time of year.

**Indoor Gardening** If you want to enjoy home-grown flowers in the winter, this is a great time to purchase the bulbs of paperwhites, amaryllis, tulips and daffodils in the stores or nurseries. Simply put the bulbs into pots or vases, suspended off the bottom, and start watering. No need for soil. No need to chill the bulbs beforehand. Enjoy 'forced' blooms to brighten your winter days. Kids love to watch the daily growth of the leaves, stems and finally the blooms.

For your regular house plants, like African violets, philodendrons and ferns, ease off on the fertilizer you give them until mid-March.

**Winter Annuals** Continue to set outside cool-season bedding plants, such as pansies, violas, stock, snapdragons and dianthus. Plant where you can enjoy the color while at the same time animals, like deer and rabbits, are not tempted to eat them.

**Prune Woody Plants** Don't get over anxious to prune crape myrtles, lantanas and other woody shrubs just because they've dropped their leaves and it feels cool outside. Not until after two hard freezes or late January do you want to get out there with loppers and clippers. Let the plants go into a bit of dormancy or you'll be cutting sap-filled twigs and branches if you prune too early.

**Spring Flowering Bulbs** It's not too late to plant bulbs outdoors. Some should be pre-chilled in the refrigerator for at least six weeks or more. Be sure to plant them to the recommended depth usually found on the bulb packaging.

**First Frost Protection** The average date range for a first frost or freeze in our area of town is between November 21 and 31. When temperatures are predicted to fall below 32°F, covering delicate plants with blankets or sheets will trap the heat rising up from the ground. Do not use plastic. If you haven't applied a new layer of mulch, consider adding a few inches around plants to help insulate their roots from a possible freeze.

**Tomatoes** Large, almost mature tomatoes may be picked just ahead of the first frost. Store them in a cool dark area until ripe. When you want one or two to ripen for use, place the tomatoes in a paper bag. One source I read even suggests a ripe apple be placed in the same bag to speed up the tomato ripening process.

## December

**Last Bulb Planting** Hyacinths or tulips may now be taken from the refrigerator, where hopefully you have been chilling them for the past 8 to 10 weeks. They may finally be planted in the garden. All other spring-flowering bulbs should have been planted in October or November.

**Prepare Soil** Spring will be just around the corner, so any nice day in December would be a good time to get outside to prepare garden beds for spring planting. Clean out dead and spent plants, leaves, and mix in compost to enrich the organic content of the soil.

**Fallen Leaves** With the exception of the live oak tree leaves, most other deciduous trees will have dropped their leaves by now. It's a good idea to get them up and off the lawn and either put into your compost pile or distributed into your garden beds as an added layer of mulch to protect your plants. Leaves left on the lawn all fall and winter may cause disease problems if a layer of them keeps the grass too dark and wet.

**Planting & Transplanting** This month and next is truly the best time of year to plant new trees and shrubs. It's also the best time to transplant roses, shrubs, trees, groundcover and vines so that they get established before warm weather arrives next spring. Be sure that any major landscape project is pre-approved by the BVS Architectural Control Committee.

**Pruning Oaks** Because oak wilt is such a threat to our precious oak trees, pruning in the dead of winter (December and January only) or on the hottest days of summer is the best time if your trees truly need pruning at all. Fungus-carrying sap beetles are active from early February through June and could infect your trees with this dreaded disease. That's why we have warning signs posted around the neighborhood in the spring. Even in the "safe" months, cover all oak tree cuts with pruning paint – and we're talking within 10 minutes of making each cut! Please consider employing a professional arborist. Travis County Master Gardeners have a list of about 20 certified firms.

**Mistletoe & Ball Moss** Oak trees, yaupons, crape myrtles and many other deciduous trees may be harboring mistletoe and/or ball moss. Mistletoe is a parasite that feeds on the

nutrients and water of its host tree. It is also poisonous. It should be removed from your trees and that can be a challenge. I suggest you call in an arborist to help you eradicate the parasite.

Ball moss, on the other hand, is not a parasite, but can smother the tree's foliage and possibly kill it. Trees with large amounts of ball moss should have the grey epiphyte removed. Calling in a certified arborist at this time of year could prove to be beneficial.

**Tools & Equipment** In December, if you are no longer mowing your lawn, consider taking your mower into the shop for repairs (tune up, blade sharpening) and avoid the spring rush! Also, hand tools may be cleaned up, sharpened and oiled if you are retiring them for the rest of the year.

**Prepare for a Hard Freeze** When our weather forecasters warn us of a deep or long freeze, it's advisable to water everything well before the freeze actually hits. Water increases the heat-holding capacity of the soil by as much as 50 percent. Then cover delicate plants.

---

If you have questions about your yard or garden, please call Travis County Master Gardeners at 512-854-9600. If they don't have an immediate answer, they'll research it and get back to you.