



Extension Gardener

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

NORTH CAROLINA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

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Empowering
gardeners.
Providing
garden
solutions.

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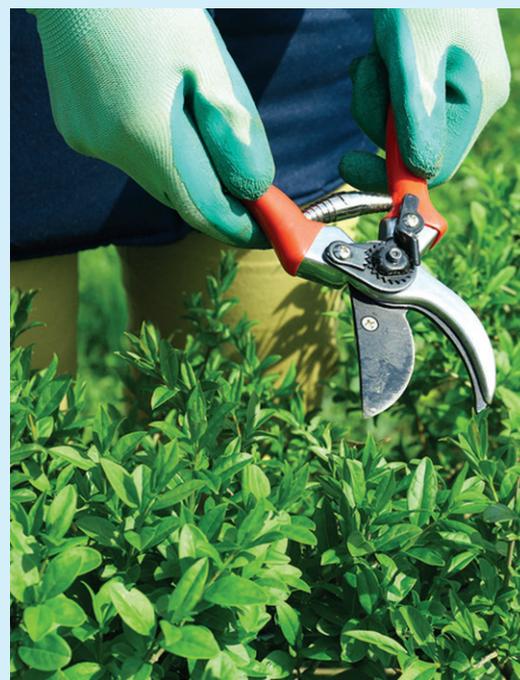
Winter pruning: know when and where to cut

We prune for many reasons. Some are good, and others are not so good. The primary goal of pruning should be to enhance a plant's natural form, not to change a plant's size or shape. Yes, sometimes pruning is done to improve the shape of a shrub or tree. However, we need to remember we cannot force a plant to grow in a spot where there is not enough room. The task of keeping a camellia that naturally grows 8 feet tall pruned to a height of 4 feet is never going to end well.

Timing is another issue that frequently occurs. Although few plants have ever been permanently damaged by pruning at the wrong time of year, bad timing can result in disappointment due to lack of flowers and fruits produced by the pruned plant. Before pruning, determine the proper pruning time for the plant you seek to prune.

Many gardeners like to prune in winter because there isn't much else to do. Also, during winter many trees are leafless, making broken or damaged limbs easy to spot. It is important to remember, however, that not all plants benefit from winter pruning. Summer-flowering trees and shrubs such as crape myrtle and rose of Sharon are good choices for late winter pruning. Early flowering trees and shrubs such as azalea, forsythia, and lilac should never be pruned in the winter. This is because the flower buds that will become spring blossoms are already formed; winter pruning will remove these buds, resulting in a lack of spring blooms.

Certain trees such as maple, birch, dogwood, and elm are referred to as bleeders. When pruned during winter, they will drip large amounts of sap. This doesn't harm the tree, but can be unsightly. To avoid heavy bleeding, prune bleeder trees during the summer months.



Know when and where to cut before you prune.
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Good, sharp tools are necessary to make clean, precise cuts. Quality tools are expensive. They pay for themselves, however, by producing clean cuts that heal quickly. Take time to learn how to make proper cuts to cause the least damage to the plants you are pruning.

When unsure about the proper time to prune an unruly tree or shrub, contact your local Cooperative Extension center for advice. Also, recognize that some jobs are too large for a homeowner. When the job is too big, call an experienced, licensed arborist who has the proper tools to get the job done safely and properly.

— Donna Teasley

Extension Showcase

Pickling Pixies Food Preservation Group formed in Stokes County

Stokes County Cooperative Extension has tapped into the resurgence in food preservation by helping form a new group focused on the art and science of preserving food.

Today's food preservationist is younger and more likely to be technologically savvy. As such, the Pickling Pixies Food Preservation Group is a child of social media.

Interested parties began connecting via Facebook and created a buzz around their idea for a local food preservation group. Extension Master Gardeners, local farmers' market vendors, and friends of Cooperative Extension were all encouraged to get involved.

Members adopted a monthly meeting format. Topics chosen are seasonally appropriate and mimic what the experienced food preservationist would likely be doing at that time of the year.

For instance, the first meeting, held at the height of deer season, addressed how to can meat safely. Attendees also made venison sausage balls, then cooked, tasted, and canned them in broth. The venison was donated by a local deer processor, and a local Extension Agent demonstrated correct techniques and addressed proper food safety measures.

The Pickling Pixies will be making yogurt in December and taking advantage of fresh citrus in January by making marmalade. Future topics include drying, herbal seasonings, and pickling.

—Kris Dearmin

Smart Gardening — Putting the garden to bed

Even though cooler temperatures and a few frosts have ended the summer gardening season in the NC piedmont, several tasks remain that, if performed in a timely manner, will greatly improve next year's garden performance.

Remove all spent plant debris and dispose of it away from the garden. Several fungal disease organisms can survive the winter on tomato plant debris, as well as on old squash and pumpkin vines. Insects gather underneath plant debris to wait out winter's chill and resume feeding on your newly planted crops next spring.

Sow a winter cover crop such as winter rye or hairy vetch. Ground left bare is susceptible to erosion. Winter winds can blow precious topsoil away from the garden. Cover crops are a great way to fight erosion, improve soil structure, and provide nutrition for next year's crops.

Know your soil's pH. When was the last time you tested your garden soil? Routine soil testing provides vital information for gardeners, including current pH and lime recommendations, nutrient analysis and recommendations for future crops, and the amount of humic or organic matter present. Testing soils now allows



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for several months to add amendments and adjust soil pH.

Sharpen your tools and perform maintenance on your equipment. It's easy to toss that rake with a broken handle aside until next spring and to ignore the tiller that developed a pronounced sputter. Ignored problems, however, tend to overwinter as well. You'll be glad you addressed these issues now rather than waiting until next spring only to find your tiller won't start and yes, that rake still has a broken handle. Bears get to hibernate, but gardeners always have jobs to do!

— Randy Fulk

Food Production — Soil testing and amending soils for spring

For many Piedmont gardeners, winter is a time to rest from our long summer toil in the garden. We sit by the fire, browse seed catalogs, and vow to do better next year. One important yet often neglected item is the long-term condition of our garden soil. Assessing your soil's condition begins with soil sampling. Samples submitted during the peak season (December through March) are charged \$4 per sample to process. For most gardens, one sample is all that is needed.

Soil collection boxes, sample submission forms, and sampling instructions are available from your local Cooperative Extension center. Winter is a good time to sample because many soil amendments move slowly through the soil profile. The sooner you sample and make the recommended adjustments, the more time these materials will have to get down to the root zone so next year's crops can benefit. Lime is

often recommended for acidic NC piedmont soils, and it moves very slowly through the soil profile. Lime is critical to maintaining a proper soil pH, which allows maximum uptake of soil nutrients.

Winter is also a good time to incorporate organic matter into your garden soil. Many NC piedmont soils are low in organic matter. Compost, leaves, and disease-free plant debris are all good sources of organic matter. Summer cover crops can be turned into the soil to provide an organic matter boost and, depending on the cover crop grown, can also provide a source of nutrients for next year's crops.

Remember, taking care of your soil now can yield big dividends when spring comes around again. It's already closer than you think!

— Randy Fulk

Pest Alert — *Where have all the stinkbugs gone?*

Brown marmorated stinkbug numbers in the NC piedmont have taken a plunge this season. What happened to them?

We can thank the weather. Last winter was colder than has been the case in recent years, and this helped reduce stinkbug numbers. A slower, cooler start to spring has also been a factor.

In cooler weather, it takes stinkbugs longer to reach maturity. As a result, only one generation matured this year instead of the two generations observed in recent years.

If stinkbugs, ladybugs, or other home invading insects are causing problems in your home this winter, take steps to insect-proof your home by sealing any cracks and crevices through which they may enter.

Check for air coming underneath doors, and replace the door sweep. Recaulk cracks around win-

dow frames, and repaint or reseal places where baseboards have come loose.

Pesticides have little effect on stinkbugs, but a vacuum cleaner can make a powerful ally in removing any insects that make it indoors. Just remember to empty the bag after you're done.

— Randy Fulk



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Carolina Lawns — *Walking on frozen grass*

The leaves have fallen, the air is cold outside, and your fireplace is roaring. The time has come and gone for mowing and seeding, but lawn care is still relevant during winter. In winter, lawn grasses do not need nearly as much attention as they do during the spring and summer months. This is also the time when major damage can be done to your yard without you even realizing it is happening.

The greatest concern for lawns during the winter months is physical damage. It is very common for turf to be damaged by people walking across lawns during periods of frost. The damage occurs when pressure from foot traffic causes the ice crystals in the frost to puncture grass leaves. The damage may remain several weeks or months and can result in weaker turf in the spring. Make sure that you do not walk, drive, or park on your turf in the early morning and overnight during cold, frosty weather.

It is also important to keep your driveway and walkways cleared to ensure that visitors are not tempted to take a shortcut through your yard on their way to your door. For those of you without mailboxes at the street, make sure your mailperson is considerate when choosing their path between houses.

Fallen leaves are a beautiful sight, but leaving leaves on your turf can shade out and destroy your grass. Make sure leaves are removed from your turf and properly composted. An alternative to raking is to shred your leaves with a mulching mower. This chops the leaves into small pieces that can be left on the lawn.

By avoiding unnecessary injury to your turf during cold weather, you can rest assured that your grass will be vigorous and healthy when spring arrives.

— Ben Grandon

Tips & Tasks

Composting Leaves and Garden Debris

Don't assume that cold weather rules out composting. A few modifications to your composting techniques will keep microbes active through the winter:

- Supply adequate amounts of nitrogen-rich “green” materials. “Greens” include manure, coffee grounds, and fruit and vegetable peelings.
- “Browns” include straw, fallen leaves, shredded newspaper, and sawdust. While equal amounts of browns and greens work best for spring and summer, the pile needs more browns in winter.
- Shred materials into pieces smaller than 2 inches before adding them to the pile. This helps sluggish microbes decompose material faster, and creates a shielding mat to hold in heat.
- Resist the urge to turn the pile. It is more important to conserve core heat. The outer portion of the pile will remain cool, but don't worry. As long as a healthy balance of greens, browns, and moisture is maintained, microbial activity will resume in those areas as temperatures warm.
- Winter winds and low humidity can dry out a compost pile. Build a shelter out of cinder-blocks or cover the compost with a tarp to form a barrier from the frigid air and snow.

— Aimee Colf





©/J Raulston Arboretum

New from NCSU — ‘Raulston Hardy’ viburnum

V*iburnum obovatum* is an evergreen shrub native to the southeastern United States. The cultivar ‘Raulston Hardy’ was selected for its dense, compact habit and cold hardiness to Zone 6. Flat clusters of white flowers bloom in April, as well as sporadically throughout fall and winter. ‘Raulston Hardy’ viburnum grows best in moist acidic soil in full sun, but will tolerate partial shade. Once established in the landscape, it can be quite drought tolerant. In sandy or alkaline soils incorporate organic matter into the soil before planting. The habit of ‘Raulston Hardy’ viburnum is similar to that of dwarf yaupon, making it a great substitute for Japanese holly or dwarf boxwood in foundation plantings. The combination of small size, tidy habit, tough constitution, and four-season appeal make ‘Raulston Hardy’ a great native plant for the landscape. — Shawn Banks

Helping You Grow

The General Store

Having trouble finding agricultural products or services? Visit The General Store, a new website from the NC Department of Agriculture. The purpose of The General Store is to bring all NC agricultural businesses together in one place. This site can help you find sources of local honey, gardening supplies, equipment, produce, meats, agritourism, and much more.

Visit <http://www.ncagr.gov/NCproducts/> to check out all the local items that can be purchased in North Carolina. This site is user friendly, easy to navigate, and even allows you to narrow your search to a specific county or product category.

— Amie Newsome

Edibles — Pawpaw

Though native to the eastern United States, the pawpaw is not widely cultivated. Pawpaw trees have large leaves, giving them a tropical appearance. They can be found growing wild near creek banks and in river bottoms. Pawpaws grow best in slightly acid (pH 5.5 – 7.0), deep, fertile, well-drained soils and are rarely bothered by deer. Keep plants well watered and partially shaded the first year or two. Fruit production begins after five to seven years. When planting pawpaws, two genetically different trees are needed to ensure cross-pollination. Pawpaws can fruit in the shade but perform best in full sun and with some wind protection. Their ripe fruits are soft, thin-skinned, and have a banana-mango flavor. Fruits ripen from late August to early October depending upon the variety and are eaten fresh.

— Karen Neill

Sustainability — Composting with worms

Composting with earthworms, or vermicomposting, is an excellent way to turn food scraps into nutrient-dense fertilizer that can boost plant health and increase flower and fruit production. Vermicomposting is similar to the conventional method of composting, but it requires less space and can be done indoors. And of course, you get to tell your friends and family that you have worms.

Red wigglers are the typical species used in vermicomposting and can be purchased online by the pound. To get started,

you will need bedding, food scraps, and a bin for the worms to live in. The size of the bin depends on the amount of food scraps your household generates. A plastic box that is 2 to 3 feet wide and 12 inches deep is good for most families. Drill several small holes in the bottom of the bin, and place a second box underneath to capture any liquid that seeps out.

Add 6 inches of damp shredded newspaper bedding, a handful of garden soil, and a pound of worms to the bin. After one week, add a 1-inch layer of food scraps

and cover with another 1-inch layer of dampened shredded newspaper. Store the bin out of direct sunlight and where it will not freeze.

Avoid feeding your worms meat, greasy or oily foods, onions, garlic, bones, and acidic foods such as citrus peels. Before adding waste to your bin, chop food scraps into smaller pieces to make them easily digestible. Bury scraps in the bedding to prevent odor. Learn more here: <http://www.bae.ncsu.edu/topic/vermicomposting/>

— Sam Marshall

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