

## Haddam Garden Club

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Garden Blog Article

by Terry Twigg



### Cold December

Finally, a hard frost! It was a long time coming, but it's really winter now, at last. The long grass in the back meadow is frosted over, there's a skim coat of ice on the pond, and forgotten flowerpots, which showcased bright geraniums throughout the summer, now hold only solid blocks of frozen potting soil. In another month I'll gather seed catalogs and start making wish lists, but just now there are still a number of garden chores needing attention. The gentler the Indian summer, and the longer autumn holds its warmth, the more I get lulled into thinking I still have plenty of time to finish my to-do list. It is ever thus.

First priority, always, has to be getting any homeless plants into the ground. It isn't frozen yet, but with a string of 20-something degree nights in the forecast, that will soon change. A couple of blueberry bushes I picked up at the end-of-season sales; a few dozen daffodil bulbs from the library.

Next, I'll take a deep breath and cut down the peach tree in the middle of my vegetable garden. It quickly grew to three times its advertised size, overwhelming the beds. And anyway, the critters strip all the fruit just as it ripens. I didn't get to taste even one peach this summer, so no loss. Last winter the pyracanthus was loaded with berries, so I left it untouched. This year, overgrown and straggly, there are no berries at all. Must remember to wear my heaviest gauntlet gloves to tackle that one.

You may not have a fruit tree to sacrifice, or pyracanthus to chop into obedience, but winter dormancy is the best time to prune your shrubs. Make sure your tools are clean and newly sharpened. Pro tip: place a wheelbarrow nearby before you start cutting; otherwise there may be a pile of brush reproaching you all winter.

I used to fill my sunniest spots with overwintering plants and holiday favorites, but the addition of cats to my household put an end to that. Mistletoe, amaryllis, yew, and holly are all toxic to pets, and even the smallest bit of lily is fatal to cats. Even poinsettia can cause problems, though its reputation is worse than the reality. No more cyclamen or geraniums taking refuge indoors. I do have some Christmas cactus, which my cats don't nibble on and is only mildly irritating to pets anyway, though that doesn't make up for having to clean up the mess when my youngest cat starts digging around in it. She is fond of gardening.

Nothing cheers up a cold dreary day like watching the antics around a bird feeder, so make sure yours is kept clean and well-filled. Remember that birds need water, too. My pond makes a bird bath redundant, but fresh water, even if it's just in a shallow dish, will be welcome throughout the winter. If you're feeling fancy, a bird bath water heater will keep it open for business even during the coldest of cold spells.

One of the most fun winter gardening projects is gift shopping for your gardener friends. Even if they have enough gloves, shears, sun hats and plants to last a lifetime, there are so many thoughtful options to choose from:

- Books. Sure, when I need a quick answer to a basic question like "How much sun does this plant need," nothing beats the internet. But gardeners, especially in winter, still savor a cozy hour or two with a lavishly illustrated book in our uncharacteristically soil-free hands. We dream, we learn, and sometimes we even take notes. For ideas, check out "The Best Gardening Books in 2024," <https://www.gardensillustrated.com/garden-equipment/gardening-books/best-gardening-books>. You'll find titles for the idealists: "One Garden Against the World: In Search of Hope in a Changing Climate," (Kate Bradbury); the romantics: "Pastoral Gardens," (Clare Foster and Andrew Montgomery), and the pragmatists: "Compost," (Charles Dowding). If none of those appeal, make sure every one of your acquaintance has a copy of Doug Tallamy's "Bringing Nature Home," the Bible of back yard conservation.
- Donations. For friends who have sworn off accumulation of more "things" and have no shelf space to spare, consider a donation in their honor to one of the many conservation organizations. Sierra Club, The Nature Conservancy, American Forests, and The American Chestnut Foundation are just a few worthy of your support. Closer to home, give a membership to a botanical garden or arboretum. For an even more memorable gift, plan a day trip there with your friend.

Winter days can be bleak for those of us who find tranquility in the garden. Take heart: the solstice is only three weeks away, bringing longer days. Seize the warmer days to finish up odds and ends outdoors, and spend the colder days escaping to the always-sunny, always-perfect gardens in your head.

Wishing all of you the happiest of holidays.