

Haddam Garden Club

December 2019 Garden Blog Article

by Terry Twigg



A Gardener's Holidays

Hello, Haddam gardeners! This is my first article for the Garden Club blog, and I'm more than a little intimidated to be stepping into Cindy Tillson's shoes. She's a hard act to follow! I came to Haddam two years ago from Branford, where I was (and remain) a member of the Branford Garden Club, so I have a double perspective on club activities. Branford has one of the largest garden clubs in Connecticut, with over 140 members, while Haddam's roster hovers around 36, so the two have very different personalities. I was touched by the warm welcome I received as a new member, and so impressed to learn that, with only a fraction of the membership, my new club still manages to maintain at least as many municipal gardens. Those gardens have been put to bed, but this week you'll be seeing holiday decorations all around town: in the library and municipal buildings; on the Greens, and brightening up the "Welcome to Haddam" signs. All are made by members, using materials gathered from our own gardens. It's just one piece of the club's tradition of giving back to our community.

One of my priorities when I moved here was signing up for the [Master Gardener course at the Agricultural Extension Center](#), and I just graduated in October. I expected the course to focus on 'Gardening' in its narrowest sense—planting flower borders, choosing vegetable seeds, maybe an hour on the mysteries of pruning. We studied those, but also learned how our practices affect, and are affected by, the larger picture. We were introduced to principles of soil chemistry, water quality, plant diseases, and pest management, and so much more. In my articles, I'll do my best to share what I've learned (trying not to preach!) because insects, pollutants, and invasive plants don't care about property lines.

And now, to make sense of the title, some thoughts on being a gardener in December:

First, there may still be plenty to do outdoors. Even in December, if the last few weeks haven't been especially cold, the ground may not be frozen solid, so it's not too late to plant those last few bulbs you didn't get around to. While you have your shovel out, dig a hole now if you plan to buy a live Christmas tree, and cover the soil with a tarp. Your tree will have the best chance of survival if it spends the winter in the ground.

Then, walk around the yard, taking the time to notice interesting bark, the shapes of branches, and the overall layout of your gardens. All these will be obscured by colorful summer flowers, but you want it to look good through the cold months, too. Admire the peeling bark of birches and the colorful stems of red twig dogwood—and if you have none, put them on your spring shopping list. Take note of winter food sources for wildlife: Do you have holly, beautyberry and winterberries, all good natives? Did you leave your coneflower seed heads standing, and let rose hips and crabapples linger? Some people like to clear everything away for winter, while others, like me, are happy to let it stand until spring. If you're on Team Neatness, please try to leave one corner a little bit wild, to provide food and

winter cover. Keep your bird feeders filled. A water source is important too; most of us in Haddam are not very far from water, but if there's none nearby, birds will appreciate your help.

After Christmas, don't just haul your tree to the transfer station. Cut it up and use the branches for mulch. Or, set it up near a window, spend an afternoon with children making birdseed 'cookies,' and hang the ornaments for the birds (be sure to remove every bit of tinsel first). All your evergreens will need some help after a heavy snow. Don't shake off the snow, which could cause already-stressed branches to crack. Instead, gently brush it off.

Holiday house plants are a joy, but if you have young children or pets, you need to be alert to possible poisons. Poinsettia has a bad reputation, but some recent research concludes that its dangers are overrated because the toxins aren't very concentrated. Christmas cactus and African violets are safe choices. Berried plants, like holly, mistletoe, and yew, are all toxic to some degree. ALL lilies are fatal to cats. If in doubt, check out a good online resource.

Gifts for gardeners: For a very different gift, book a trip to a holiday-themed horticultural event, such as the [New York Botanical Garden's Holiday Train Show](#). None of us would ever turn down a houseplant, a gift certificate to a local nursery, or a new pair of gardening gloves, but why not take it a step further? Every gardener-- every household—should have a copy of Douglas W. Tallamy's book, [Bringing Nature Home](#). In straightforward, easy-to-understand language, Dr. Tallamy suggests simple and easy ways to give our co-habitants on this planet a fighting chance, and why it matters. Most of the time, doing it right takes no more work or money than doing it wrong. I can't recommend this book highly enough.

How about membership in an organization like the [Connecticut Horticultural Society](#), the [Connecticut Botanical Society](#), the [Connecticut College Arboretum](#), or [Friends of Connecticut State Parks](#)? How about a donation to the [Haddam Land Trust](#)? (Full disclosure: I receive no benefit whatsoever from recommending Dr. Tallamy's book, except the knowledge that I've shared something important. However, I did recently join the board of the land trust.)

Since we've all chosen to live in a small town with a lot of open space, most of us probably already know that our connection to the natural world is central to our well-being. We garden, we farm, we hike, hunt, fish and play on the river. My holiday wish for all of us is that we each take a step closer to safeguarding the irreplaceable.