

HORTICULTURE HINTS FOR DECEMBER 2017

Here we are in the late fall and the best part for Florida gardeners is that we have lots of color in our yards. The cranberry hibiscus I started from a cutting about a year ago is over six feet tall and has masses of blossoms every day. The stems are weak, so it is surrounded by a cage but the burgundy foliage and flowers are impressive. Some of the bromeliads have blossomed beautifully and have good color in their foliage too. A neighbor's bougainvillea is putting on a fuchsia-colored show. Beautyberries have their purple berries now. Crotons have their brightly colored foliage and my roses are blossoming better than during the heat of summer. I even have a couple of poinsettias left from last year that turned color this fall. Pansies and snapdragons that were planted a few weeks ago have flowered out nicely and ornamental kale has its ruffly green, purple and white leaves decorating the bed in front of the house. The feathery blooms of muhly grass are done now, but put on a month-long show in November. Alyssum, geranium and petunia are also good cool season flowers.

Lawn grasses are taking a rest now, so your mower can take some time off too – except to keep cool season weeds from flowering, going to seed and taking over the lawn. Now would be a good time to run the gas tank dry and get the mower serviced and blades sharpened.

Be prepared to protect any tropical or cold-sensitive plants starting this month and through mid-March, although if we have a warm winter they may not even get nipped. Know which plants are damaged by cool temps (below 45) and which ones can withstand a light frost (28 to 32 degrees). Better yet, choose plants that can survive any normal temperatures during our winters in zone 9.

You can bring the outdoors inside during the winter with a large variety of plants. Inspect them carefully to make sure you don't bring pests in along with those plants you had in the yard all summer. You may want to re-pot with a clean pot and fresh soil too. Give them enough bright light, perhaps shifting from part shade outside, to a porch, to the interior in stages. Don't over-water indoor plants or you will invite pests and root-rot; some plants actually like to dry out between waterings, others like an evenly moist pot. Check an online resource for best results. Some good candidates for houseplants are pothos, schefflera, peace lily (spathiphyllum), oxalis, mother-in-law tongue (sansevieria), dracena, croton and aloe. Cryptanthus, a tiny bromeliad, mixed with hawthoria makes a good terrarium. You can force bulbs, like paper-white narcissus, in a container of gravel with water up to the base of the bulb. To keep the stems from toppling over, slow the growth by putting 1 part gin or vodka to 7 parts water in the pot.

Veggies love this cool weather, including all the cruciferous (cabbage family) varieties. Herbs and beets are also cool season plants. Remember that even though fall is dry, the cooler weather means that most plants in the garden don't need as much water to thrive as they do in the heat of summer. Irrigate accordingly.

Don't forget to start and keep your homegrown plants for our plant sale healthy over the winter. Small pots dry out faster than large ones. Newly rooted plants are more sensitive to cold than long established ones. A little weak fertilizer can fortify new plants. Match the light requirements of the plant to their spot (don't burn shade-loving plants with too much sun and likewise don't put sun lovers in deep shade).