

Floral City Garden Club Horticulture Hints for March 2018

February has been an unusually warm month with record and near-record high temperatures. Looking at the long range forecast, it appears that we may have had our last frost/freeze for winter 2018, even though the historic average has March 17-20 as the last cold spell in our area. This means that the plants that have leafed out and blossomed will probably be safe from another bout of frost. While you are trimming back all the damaged material, check the stems that are still leafless by scratching the bark. If you see green, the plant is alive at that point; just trim off the parts farther along each stem. If the stem is brown and brittle, cut it off because it won't regenerate. If you cut too many branches too severely, you may still lose the plant; a good guideline is to cut off no more than 1/3 of the total at a time.

March 24 is our plant sale, so now is the time to clean up any damage to any homegrown plants you are donating to the sale, so that we can get the best price for these high-profit items. Remember, to let Mary Graff know how many of which plants you will be bringing. If a plant is known for its blossoms but is not in bloom, indicate what color it is. If you can, identify each plant with a stake in the pot. Also, if you are producing any garden-related crafts, get them finished soon.

Did you know that there is a monthly program at the Floral City Library presented by a Master Gardener? These are always the first Wednesday of the month at 2pm in the community room. Each month they present a different gardening topic of interest with time at the end of the program for questions from the attendees. Even if your question is not on this month's topic, take advantage of the knowledge of these Master Gardeners. Have a plant problem? Bring in a sample of the plant (or pest) for expert advice. This also avoids the 20-mile trip to the Extension Office to get the same question addressed, saving time and gas.

We often think of insects in our gardens as pests, but many of them are very beneficial (think pollinators) and others provide natural control of the insect pest varieties. So don't hesitate to invite the predatory ones to live in your landscape. Did you know that ladybugs love to eat aphids? Lacewing larvae eat aphids, scale insects and whiteflies. Hoverflies and parasitic wasps are other forms of natural pest control. And ground beetles attack slugs, snails and some caterpillars? So how do you attract these critters? Plant dill, fennel, rosemary, mustard, Queen Ann's Lace, yellow coneflower, calendula, cosmos, purple poppy mallow, prairie sunflower, yellow giant hyssop and hairy vetch for nectar-feeding adults to eat and they will lay their eggs on or near the plants that are attacked by the pesty ones. And watch out for when and where you spray or sprinkle insecticides so that you don't get rid of the good along with the bad.

Why not use some new containers to fill in spaces left by the plants that were killed by this winter's freezes? In a shady spot you can pair begonia with torenia for a pink/red and blue color combo that will last through the spring and summer. Or mix Persian shield's purple foliage with lime green sweet potato vine. Try coleus along with English Ivy or Swedish ivy. For a sunny spot you could plant million bells along with zinnias or French marigolds. Perhaps succulents would fit in your sunny spot container. Look at the plant information tags to be sure you are putting plants with the same light, water and soil requirements together to ensure success and remember that container plants need more frequent watering than the same plant would need if in the ground.

Planting a spring vegetable garden? NOW is the time to start so that you can harvest before the high heat and humidity of summer sets in.