

## FLORAL CITY GARDEN CLUB HORTICULTURE HINTS, JANUARY 2019

Happy New Year! Just think, a year from now we will all have perfect vision. Unfortunately that 2020 vision won't predict the weather, so we still have to depend on meteorologists to give us warning when the temperatures dip from the 80s to the 30s. January is our coldest month on average and January is normally wetter than December, but our record-breaking rains in December 2018 mean that this month will likely be drier than last.

A friend of mine is the president of her garden club in the mountains in western North Carolina. They take the winter months of December through February off and have their main events in July and August. Fortunately we can enjoy our gardens year-round; winter bloomers here include Encore azaleas, camellias, hibiscus (if unfrosted), poinsettias, tea olives, some bromeliads, and many of the spring flowers from temperate climate zones.

At my house we often use the winter to do landscape projects that just don't appeal when the weather is hot. This year we plan to redo the entire front-of-the-house foundation planting. We will start with raking all of the mulch out, potting those small shrubs and perennials that we want to reuse there or elsewhere, while leaving the larger plants that are still in the landscape plan, removing the old weed cloth, removing some of the soil that has built up against the house to discourage insects like ants and termites from getting into the house, grading the remaining soil to assure good drainage away from the house, trimming the shrubs that will remain and then replanting, mulching and checking that the sprinklers reach the places they should. This is a good opportunity to redesign the look, within the constraints of space, mature size of the plants, seasonal light variations, and a plan for rotating annuals.

I noticed that the queen butterfly caterpillars have been very active recently, stripping most of the foliage from my milkweed and leaving their beautiful pale green (with a ring of gold spots) pupae hanging nearby. I often see the adults flitting around my garden too. They look like a monarch, but are smaller.

Have you tried a stack of "tipsy" terra cotta pots in your landscape? I saw an example recently that was very eye-catching. Start with a length of rebar and pound about 1/3 of the length into the ground, then thread a large pot onto the stake through the drain hole with the bottom flat on the ground and put potting soil in it. Next thread a smaller pot on and tip the pot to one side, then add another pot above that one, but tipped in the opposite direction. Add more pots until the top of the rebar is just below the rim of the top pot. You can use even smaller pots toward the top, but be sure the drain hole is big enough to go over the rebar. Also, use an even number of small pots for balance. Add potting mix to each pot using a water-holding type because these will dry out easily. Next add small annuals and foliage plants to each pot. Remember to use plant material that has similar light and water requirements in all of the pots. Try using a variety of plants with complementary colors. Plants that will spill over the edge of pots make a nice visual connecting line between the layers. If you have a drip irrigation system, drip heads could be tucked into each pot to keep the arrangement vibrant through the winter and spring dry season. Most annuals will need to be replaced then with those that can withstand the heat of summer.

If you have a kitchen garden, you can improve the long-term yields by practicing crop rotation. Different plant groups need different elements in the soil and have different pests that attack them. The idea is to move your plant groups to new locations each season so that the pests don't get a chance to thrive to the detriment of your garden plants. Common plant groups include "nightshades" including tomatoes, peppers and eggplant; "legumes" all varieties of beans; "cabbages" including kale, collards, broccoli, and cauliflower; "carrots" including parsley, dill and cilantro; "mints" including basil; "grasses" including corn; "mallows" like okra; "asters" which include lettuces; "beets" which include swiss chard and spinach. Try a "cover crop" like marigolds in each plot one season of the year too. Your plants will thank you by giving more garden goodies to eat!