

## Horticulture Hints December 2019

My "boat garden" is doing very well so far this fall. As soon as I removed the severely overgrown zinnias and (non-dwarf) marigolds, the angelonia took off again and are blooming in beautiful shades of purple and white. I also planted Persian shield and celosia for a somewhat cohesive color combination. An alamanda in the corner provides a little yellow contrast, while the dwarf marigolds that weren't overgrown from the summer got to stay a bit longer, providing even more contrast.

It's official: it was a very warm October. Tomato seedlings grew into very nice plants during that time. Usually, temperatures for October begin with an average of 87 degrees, slowly winding down to an average of 80 degrees on October 31. This year, fully half the days of the month were 88 degrees or warmer, with 10 of those days being over 90. Great for tomato seedlings! November has stayed fairly warm until Wednesday the 13th, when it (mercifully!) cooled off a little. Stay tuned! Sure to be an interesting winter!

Speaking of winter, now is the time to plan for those possible freezing nights that are very likely to happen pretty soon. If you still have houseplants outside, better bring them back in soon. Be sure to check for bugs and other pests before you bring them in, though. A thorough spray with a hose, or a quick wash with insecticidal soap will rid them of any unwanted passengers. Also check the soil for lizards or frogs. You don't want them running around the house, getting into the silverware drawers while your Christmas guests are setting the table for you (I don't speak from experience on this at all!). Remember to cut back on watering your plants during the cooler winter months. If you plan to cover any plants for a possible freeze, remember that you don't want the covering to touch the plant (or touch it as little as possible) since the spots where it touches will transfer the cold to the leaves and freeze them anyway. Lightweight covers are the best as they don't weigh down the plant. A good plan for small palms and some small trees is to wrap the trunks with incandescent Christmas lights, then cover.

The lights will provide just enough warmth to keep them cozy under their covers. And remember to take the covers off in the morning, especially if the plant is in the sun. Even if it's going to stay cool for the day, it can become surprisingly steamy under that cover during the day. Given another cold night, the moisture accumulated can become killing frost.

Some annuals to plant now for winter color include: petunias, pansies, snapdragons, alyssum, begonia, plectranthus (Mona lavender), mint, and creeping Jenny. There are some herbs that will grow nicely in cooler weather, too: parsley, thyme, dill, sage, fennel and cilantro. Of course, one of the most beautiful plants of this time of year is the poinsettia. If you wish to keep it after the Christmas season is over, be sure to remove it from the foil wrapper that it came in (leaving the foil around it will almost certainly guarantee its death), and place it in a saucer for drainage. Protect from cold over the winter months, then plant it in the garden in the spring. Amaryllis is also a popular flower in the big box stores this time of year. They can be forced to bloom right now, or planted outside and allowed to bloom naturally in the spring.

This is a great time of year in which to mulch your landscape. With the native trees soon losing their leaves, they are a great option to use on the garden. More than 2" of any kind of mulch is not recommended, especially next to the house. This is due to the problems that can occur with a thicker mulch: moisture and bugs, mildew or mold. But the benefits definitely outweigh the possible drawbacks. Retention of soil moisture is a big one. Also, discouragement of weeds gives your aching back a break. But then there's another one for the winter months: mulch will protect your plants' roots in case of a killing freeze, and may mean the difference between seeing little shoots again in the spring, or digging up a frozen, dead root ball.

Have a great holiday season, everyone, and Happy Gardening!