



Alamance Gardener

Alamance County Cooperative Extension Horticulture Department

Coming Events



We are working on scheduling classes to begin in February 2021. There will be pruning demonstrations at Buster Sykes Orchard and more online classes, including Healing Gardens, Scree Gardens and classes about the birds and the bees.

We'll all be Thinking Green again next year. Let us know what you'd like to learn in 2021—Just e-mail or call.

Happy Holidays!
~Chris

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Cutting Back



When autumn freezes turn once green and floriferous perennials into a mass of brown stems, it's tempting to mow it all to the ground. It's tempting to whack back shrubs that have lost their leaves and mar the landscape with their twiggy selves. And the topping of trees seems to be a popular activity this time of year.

I joined a group of Master Gardeners last week to help polish up Arbor Gate for a little send-off shindig for Mark. Questions were raised—What should we cut back? What should we leave? And why?

First order of business was clearing the walkways for the expected (socially distanced) guests, so overhanging branches and fallen stems had to be cut back. It's okay any time of year to cut a wayward branch or a broken limb back to a joint.

Next up—the masses of brown stems. Our garden is full of perennials and shrubs that host pollinators, birds and other wildlife year-round, so leaving berries and seeds—even the tiny ones—is a consideration. In addition to seeds, goldenrod is often host to a gall-making wasp and, in turn, the larva inside the gall may provide a nutritious treat for insectivorous birds such as the downy woodpecker.

If it's just too much for you to look at dead plant material until spring, it's okay to cut it and lay it in an open area for the birds to snack on....with a few exceptions.

A Perennial Problem

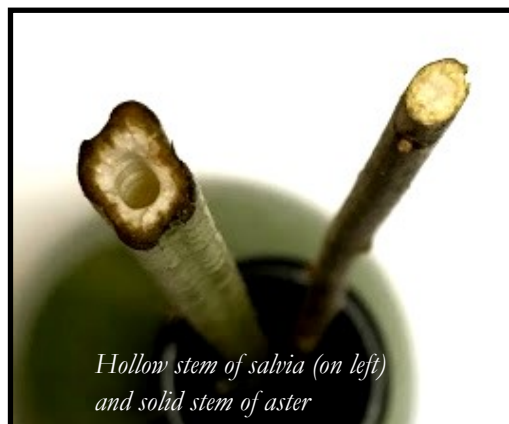
Some perennials could be harmed if cut back now. If the hollow stems of certain plants are cut to expose the open end, water may enter the stem and subsequent freezes could kill the plant. Perennial salvias are particularly susceptible. So-called “hardy” lantanas may prove not so hardy if pruned now.

Dead foliage *should* be removed from some plants that are prone to fungal diseases. Cut the foliage from peonies and rake up the fallen leaves from roses and discard.



Flower bud of deciduous azalea

Cutting back shrubs now could reduce or eliminate flowering for next year. Azaleas, many hydrangeas and the late-winter blooming wintersweet have already formed flower buds, so save the pruning for after they've bloomed.



*Hollow stem of salvia (on left)
and solid stem of aster*



Chimonanthus praecox—wintersweet

Of course, you may want to cut holly or other berry producing plants for holiday decorations, and that's perfectly fine. A few branches trimmed won't harm the plant, but save the serious pruning for late winter.



We like to use the power hedge trimmer on our boxwood hedges this time of year. There is a risk that very cold winter weather could burn the foliage and exposed stems, but cutting back now is less invigorating than pruning in early spring and there will be less rank growth to be cut again in summer. Any winter damage can be pruned out again in spring.

Wait to prune less-hardy plants that often suffer winter damage, such as gardenias. If you cut them back now, you will most likely need to prune away more damaged foliage next spring.

We never recommend topping trees. The witches broom of water sprouts and weak suckers that follow will eventually break off and rain down on the landscape. Many trees will die as a result of this brutal pruning. It may take a few years, but the damage could be fatal.

If you're still in doubt about cutting back, please don't hesitate to contact us! Just ask for a Master Gardener when you call 336-570-6740, or e-mail askanemgee@gmail.com

NC STATE**Extension
Master Gardener***December Garden Tips*

Overwatering is the number one cause of houseplant death in December. Be sure the soil is dry before you water, allow for drainage and save the fertilizer for spring. This goes for that favorite holiday houseplant - the poinsettia - as well. If you observe the watering rules and keep poinsettias in bright, indirect light but away from cold drafts and excessive heat, they will hold on to their cheery, colorful bracts all season.

Take inventory of your leftover and saved seeds. If the seed has been stored under cool, dry conditions, you can expect a good stand of healthy seedlings as follows: Seeds one year old or less: onions, parsley, parsnips and salsify. Two years: corn, okra and peppers. Three years: beans, southern peas and peas. Four years: beets, fennel, mustard, pumpkins, rutabagas, squash, Swiss chard, tomatoes, turnips and watermelons. Five years: Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, collards, eggplant, muskmelons, radishes and spinach.

Not sure if your seeds are still good? Fold 10 seeds into a moist paper towel, wait a few days then check to see how many have sprouted. This number will let you know approximately how many of the remaining seeds will germinate. 7 seeds sprouted? That's a 70 percent germination rate and you will need to plant 30 percent more seeds (13 instead of 10) to get ten plants. It's garden math!

Whether it's fir, pine cedar or spruce, if yours is a fresh-cut Christmas tree, remember these basics: Make a fresh cut of at least ½ inch from the base before standing the tree in water. No additives are necessary, but keep that water reservoir full at all times – the amount of water a fresh-cut evergreen can absorb may shock you. You may need to refill the reservoir more than once each day for the first few days!

Going with a live tree this year? While this is a great time of year to plant a new tree outside, it's not a great time to store a living evergreen tree indoors. Hot (more

than 60 degrees), dry indoor conditions are just bad for a tree's health. Keep your tree's indoor time at a minimum, turn down the thermostat and make sure the root ball stays moist.

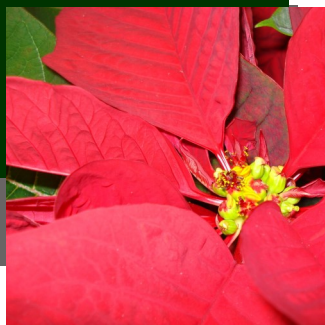
In between Zoom holiday parties, take a few minutes to evaluate your garden's performance this year. Decide what worked and what didn't and take a few notes. Do a little garden research here:

<https://alamance.ces.ncsu.edu/>

When those catalogs start rolling in, you'll be ready!

Fertilize pansies and other hardy annuals and remove spent flowers. Apply a layer of mulch to prevent frost heaving.

Keept bird feeders clean and filled with seed and suet. Use a hot pot or kettle to melt any ice that forms in birdbaths and change the water at least once a week.



Arbor Gate Plant of the Month



Butcher's Broom

Looking for a trouble-free evergreen to plant beneath windows and discourage would-be intruders? Butcher's broom may be just the shrub for you! Tolerating even deep shade and drought, this sturdy contender has few natural enemies—no known pests or diseases affect it and deer steer clear of those spiny tips. Bonus! Although most varieties are dioecious (requiring a male pollinator to produce berries on a female plant), there are a couple of varieties, such as this one at Arbor Gate called “Wheeler’s Variety” that bear fruit without a partner.

Interestingly, the tiny flowers and bright fruit are borne on what look like leaves, but are actually modified stems called ‘cladophylls’, each sporting a vicious spiny tip. Gathered together, the branches made an effective scrub brush for a butcher’s block, scouring away the day’s work and providing the common name for this attractive and useful plant.

Read more here: <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/ruscus-aculeatus/>

Ruscus aculeatus

