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Cover Photo: Most nurseries will have onion transplants available in January or you can order them by mail. Check out Dixondale Farms for more info.

by: Bruce Leander

Right: Christmas cactus
by: Sue King

December Meeting - Holiday Party

Annual Christmas/Holiday Party

It’s that time again! Bring your food items and Holiday spirit for a fun evening with gardening friends. Awards will be announced, and newly certified Master Gardeners will be introduced.

Master Gardener Meeting information:
Wednesday, December 4, 2013 starting at 7 pm
Zilker Botanical Garden

Master Gardener meetings are open to certified Master Gardeners and trainees.
Hello, December – how did you get here so fast?! Time seems to pass more quickly this time of year, and before you know it we’ll be welcoming a new year and a new gardening season. December usually brings a mix of perfectly mild days and cozy-up-by-the-fire chilly days, so here are a variety of garden-related chores to tackle, depending on the weather and your mood:

• Take advantage of December’s slower pace to organize garden supplies, clean tools, chunk the junk and repurpose, repair or recycle unused garden gear.
• If needed, take equipment such as tillers, trimmers or mowers in for maintenance or repairs.
• Inventory your seed supply, and order new varieties for the upcoming spring season. Most seeds lose viability as they age, so I usually discard seeds that are over five years old; corn, okra, onions, peas and peppers should be replaced every 1-2 years.
• Hearty greens - lettuce, spinach, collards, kale – can be transplanted to the garden during December, but be sure to protect newly planted transplants if freezing weather threatens.
• Mid-month is a good time to seed broccoli, cabbage, collards, Swiss chard and other greens indoors under grow lights so they will be ready for transplanting in January. When they are 4-5 weeks old gradually expose them to outdoor temperatures before planting them in the garden.
• Check out the onion varieties at Dixondale Farms (www.dixondalefarms.com) and order transplants for setting out in January. This Texas company has been in the onion business for 100 years, and is the largest grower of onion plants in the USA. Go Texas! All of their short day onions are well-suited for Central Texas gardens, including their latest introduction, ‘Texas Legend’, which matures one to two weeks before the popular ‘1015Y’.
• Hoe or pull winter weeds that pop up, before they have a chance to go to seed. Feed the leafy green tops to your compost pile.
• Take a few moments to contemplate your garden successes of the past year, evaluate your failures and make a plan to do it bigger and better in 2014!
Weeds don’t stop growing just because it’s cold outside; spend a few minutes with a hoe each week to keep them from getting out of hand.

It’s easy to grow your own transplants in the middle of winter with a simple fluorescent light set-up. Start seeds of cool season greens indoors this month for transplanting to the garden in January.

Photos: Bruce Leander
Bagworms
by Wizzie Brown

Bagworms are a type of moth. They form small cases that hold larvae, pupae or female adults and eggs. These cases are often found on evergreen trees and shrubs such as cedar, juniper, cypress or pine. The bags may also be found on broad-leaved trees such as elm, apple, boxelder, maple, persimmon, sycamore, willow and others.

The cases are constructed from silk and plant material. Plant material is generally laid down similar to shingles on a house, by overlapping plant material in layers. Different species of bagworms utilize different plant materials to create the bag.

Newly hatched larvae spin a silken thread, and are either carried to a new plant by wind, or attach themselves to the plant they are on. They then begin to build their own silken bag. The bags become longer as the larvae inside grows. Bags are transportable; the larvae will carry their bags along with them as they move along the plant.

A simple way to manage bagworms is to handpick the bags off the tree. Double bag and dispose of them. If this method is impractical due to tree size, insecticide can be used. Choose a product labeled for trees. Possible active ingredients include things such as Bacillus thuringiensis var. kurstaki, spinosad, insecticidal soap, neem (azadirachtin), pyrethrins, pyrethroids or carbaryl.

For more information or help with identification, contact Wizzie Brown, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service Program Specialist at 512.854.9600.
Houseplants as Gifts

by Sue King

Last month, our speaker Robin Howard Moore, told us that she likes amaryllis a lot. I sure do agree with her. Last year I bought ten ‘picotee’ amaryllis bulbs from Brent and Becky’s Bulbs, and gave them, all potted up in pretty pots, to my mother and my sister. I told them though, that when the bulbs were through blooming, I wanted them back (They didn’t mind, I’m pretty sure). The amaryllis spent the summer in a bed off my back patio; just plunked down any old which way among iris, ajuga, and garlic chives. I don’t know if they got enough sun to store up enough energy to bloom nicely again this year, but at least they’re all still green and growing. I don’t think I can give them again this year, but that’s ok. This year I splurged and bought twenty-five ‘ziva’ paperwhites! I can’t give them to my mother, though. Although she loves them, my father thinks they smell like dirty socks. Peace in the household requires that she admire them outside.

Inspired by Robin’s demonstration of putting bulbs in rocks, I tried her technique last week. One bowl is doing just fine, but the bulbs in the other bowl pushed themselves completely out of the rocks altogether! I ended up putting the entire bowl into a larger bowl so I could keep the roots from touching water. The effect is certainly not a designer’s dream! I think I just needed to get the bulbs down deeper into the rocks. Last week, when I took a couple of sacks of books to Half Price Books to sell, I found a copy of Forcing, Etc: the Indoor Gardener’s Guide to Bringing Bulbs, Branches, and Houseplants into Bloom. I snatched it up, of course! So I’ve got some help in figuring the whole thing out before Christmas.

I might give my mom a Christmas cactus this year. Last year I bought three white ones for a quarter each at a box store. They were little, and the blooms were spent, and I just thought, “Why the heck not? I’ve got a buck to spare”. I repotted them, stuck them in my daughter’s bathroom window, and let them grow up a little. I have now moved the big guy (an older pink one) to the living room, moved two of the little white ones into the kitchen, and gave one as a “Welcome to Texas” present to a family who just moved here from Arizona. The pink one is blooming its fool head off now, and both the white ones have buds. I think the kitchen may be just gorgeous fairly soon. I’ve got white Christmas cactus, three poinsettias, and a good pot of paperwhites in my kitchen window. Sad but true: two of the poinsettias are actually in the cache pot that my mother’s amaryllis were in last year!

I like to give houseplants as gifts ...but mostly to people I love and see regularly. That way, if the plant’s not doing well, I can reclaim it. I figure an ugly plant’s not much of a gift, right?
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Daphne Richards
1600-B Smith Road, Austin, Texas 78721
512-854-9600 drichards@ag.tamu.edu
This issue of the Compost Bin has been published thanks to the contributions of the following Travis County Master Gardeners and Wizzie Brown — Texas AgriLife Extension

Photographers:
Bruce Leander

Contributing Writers:
JaNet Barkely-Booher
Wizzie Brown
Sue King
Patty Leander

Editor and Layout:
Liath Appleton

Webmaster:
Paula Middleton

The Compost Bin Submissions
We are always looking for Master Gardeners who are interested in writing for our monthly newsletter, and we would love to see your articles, photographs, book reviews and gardening ideas.

General Guidelines
- Please first email the editor to discuss potential article ideas.
- Email contributions as attachments (preferably in Word with a .doc or .rtf suffix).
- Please send images as separate attachments (preferably .jpg suffix). Don’t forget to include photographer acknowledgments and captions.

Send your submissions, announcements, questions and suggestions to: editor.compostbin@gmail.com

“The gardening season officially begins on January 1st, and ends on December 31.”
- Marie Huston