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All Connecticut gardeners are “weather resilient”! They have to be, especially when we garden through a summer such as the one we are saying goodbye to right now! But Fall, which used to arrive with a flourish and a snap, now seems to come in more slowly, almost reluctantly it seems, until it settles in and gets serious! So how do we know when fall planting can get started? These days you have to rely on impressions: You don’t hear crickets at night any more, you start closing windows, you reach for an extra blanket, apples begin to appear in bulk at the Farmer’s Markets, you begin to watch for early frost warnings, you pass trucks carrying loads of cut firewood and acorns are falling in the driveway and on the lawn, there don’t seem to be any moths hanging around the outside lights, you spot flashes of red or orange mingled with the green leaves remaining on trees and you start thinking about bringing the house plants inside. When the birds begin to gather and the hummingbirds depart ... it’s time!

One of the things New England gardeners learn to do is to say goodbye to disappointments! Late start this spring? Too hot and humid this summer? Too many rainy downpours coming at the wrong time? Too many bugs and mosquitoes? Too many plants which didn’t reach full potential or which flowered late? Too many plants which grew too tall and looked silly? On to the next season! Remember: New England gardeners learn to go with the flow and we get really good at it!

Now, without the heat and humidity, planting, dividing and general maintenance in the garden becomes a pleasure. As the gardening days begin to wind down, there is something very comforting about repeating the annual ritual of putting the garden to bed. It takes place over many weeks without the urgency and pace of spring gardening and allows us the time to savor these last golden days and to take our time over the chores. Our ground stays warm until almost Thanksgiving and the temperature cool-down is gradual. Sunny days and cooler nights keep the dew on the grass well into the morning and make gardening a pleasure. Indian Summer traditionally only occurs when warm days come after a killing frost ... and that occurs anywhere from mid-October to mid-November. It’s Mother Nature’s last gift to us before we bed down for the winter.

Fall is also the perfect time to reflect on the garden year now ending. What went well, what didn’t? What new plants would you like to try? What plants no longer fit in? Are some of your flowering bushes overgrown? Does your basic garden plan still work for your current life? Nature never sits still and our gardens change too. Fall is the perfect time to adapt the garden to a new design that better suits the way you choose to garden now.

Leaving your garden neat and tidy will pay huge dividends in the spring and give you a jump start on the next season. Many perennials really go dormant on their own schedule and your main role is to tidy up, cutting things back in late October and November. Do not cut back plants too early as it could produce a sudden spurt of new growth. Wait until the plant’s leaves are yellow or brown and, as long as no disease is present, remove everything to the compost pile, layering in some fallen leaves.

A general guide, **Putting Your Garden to Bed for the Winter**, is available on the web site.

Gift Cards and Garden Gifts

Are you looking for that special birthday or anniversary present? Do you need to say “thank you for a wonderful visit” or let someone know just how much you appreciate what they’ve done? Acer Gardens Gift Cards are the ideal answer and are available either online or at the Nursery. A Gift Card can bring many hours of enjoyment and make your life easier at the same time!

Christmas isn’t that far away! What gardener wouldn’t like to find a new pair of garden gloves tucked into their stocking? Or replacement tools for all the trowels/pruners we lost/mis-placed this summer and specialty houseplant aids? Bulbs for forcing are always the gift that keeps on giving! Let us help you make your holidays merry and bright!

Web Site

Our web site is a great resource for current information including all of this year’s Newsletters (and last year’s too) and our Information Handouts which include sheets on Plants, Seasonal, How To’s and Challenges. Take a few minutes to browse through them and print out some easy reading! Follow our activities on Facebook and Instagram. Check the announcements of upcoming activities. Please feel free to send us an email letting us know what else you’d like to see on the web site. Acer Gardens wants our web site to be your on-going interactive partner!

Upcoming Workshops

Acer Gardens will once again hold its annual Holiday Decorating Workshop concentrating on decorating wreaths and containers. Add to your wreath by choosing some of a selection of our decorations. Learn how to bring the beauty of the season into your home and add your own touches to this festive holiday time! Multiple sessions will be held and an Email announcement will be sent out several weeks before so that you will have time to sign-up in advance and reserve your place. Last year’s Workshops were filled with holiday spirit and good cheer ... sign up quickly and don’t miss this year’s fun!

The Plant of the Month

The plant of the Month is available at the nursery checkout table from the first of each month on. These plants are carefully chosen to showcase current bloom and are featured at the nursery from April through October.

October : **Heuchera (Coral Bells)**

Zone: 4-9 Height: 12 to 24” Spread: 12-18”

Are you looking for striking foliage, minimal maintenance, long-lasting flowers? Coral Bells have it all! One of the easiest perennials to grow, Heuchera’s foliage comes in almost every color imaginable! Leaves can be patterned, ruffled, wavy or smooth which is why it combines so well with other late-blooming flowers. The flowers ... in hues of coral, red, white or pink ... are especially attractive to the last of the butterflies and are very long-lasting in arrangements. This plant does well in partial shade, prefers a well-draining, humus-rich soil and is even happy in containers ... move the plants into a garden bed before winter and, as a true perennial, they’ll return next year!

It's Not Too Early to Plan Ahead for the Holidays

Holiday Flowers, Wreaths and Containers

Wreaths, containers, bows, arrangements, mixed greens and assorted decorations (all weather-proof) will be available at the nursery starting the week before Thanksgiving. Gift certificates are available at the nursery and on-line but we have many other Holiday gift options available at the nursery. Prepotted paperwhites in pebbles will be available ... just take them home and water them to start them growing! We also have many indoor house plants available to keep your gardening spirits up all through winter!

Specialty poinsettias in unusual colors and shapes are real attention getters. Amaryllis will be planted (in different stages of development) and ready to go. Consult with us well in advance if you have something special in mind ... there's a wealth of dried material and decoration available to truly personalize your gift. We love to work with you to bring that holiday glow to your home and to make your presents really special!

Poinsettia

Some poinsettias can remain in bloom for 2-6 months! They prefer a day temperature of 67 degrees, hate drafts and like a humid environment and the bright, indirect light of an east window. Our poinsettias will be ready for sale just before Thanksgiving.

Amaryllis

Acer has a remarkable selection of amaryllis bulbs available this year, including a wide selection of unusual shapes and color combinations in # 1 size for you to plant in your own containers. Allow 8-12 weeks from potting to bloom and start them at 10 day intervals so that you will have flowers all winter long. Plant one bulb, firmly, to a pot and place in indirect sunlight at room temperature. (Be sure to place a saucer under the pot.) Water after potting and then only when the soil is dry to the touch. Do not mist.

As the flowers fade, cut off the entire stalk. You may get lucky and get another bloom! Amaryllis should spend the summer outdoors in the sun. Around Labor Day, stop any watering, cut off the leaves and store the bulbs in their pots in the cellar, away from any sun. Do not water them until you are ready to start the forcing cycle again.

Christmas Cactus

This cactus doesn't come from the desert but from the rainforests of southern Brazil ... it therefore prefers more humid conditions. Available in 8 different shades, including rosy red and pink, it is fairly easy to grow as long as you satisfy its basic needs. Place it in bright, indirect light and water when the top soil feels dry. The plants prefer to be in the dark at night in the weeks before they flower but they don't like to get too chilly (between 60 and 70 degrees is about right). Fertilize lightly every 2-3 weeks.

Rex Begonia

These beautiful and dramatic semi-tropical plants are grown primarily for their variegated foliage. Their blooms tend to be small and are usually ignored. Rex Begonias like bright, indirect light and will flourish even under artificial lights. Give them fast draining soil and let the soil surface dry before watering. A dose of half-strength liquid fertilizer every 2-3 weeks will keep them happy.

The Really-Must-Do-Now List

Leave grass clippings on the lawn to decompose. Re-seed areas as needed. Around the second or third week in November apply fertilizer.

Prune any deadwood from trees and shrubs to control storm damage.

Tie back long climbing rose canes to prevent wind whip during the winter.

Give your compost pile a good turning before winter sets in.

Don't prune Rhododendrons and Hydrangeas now ... they set next year's flowers right after they bloom and you could lose next spring's blossom.

Do your transplanting and moving now in order to give plant material time to settle in. Hosta, Daylilies, Black-Eyed Susan and Bearded Iris can all be divided now. Keep the new transplants well watered throughout the rest of the growing season and make sure your transplants are lightly mulched going into the winter.

Leave ornamental grasses in place ... they will act as a bird refuge in the winter and bring interest to the winter landscape. Cut down in the spring.

New trees and bushes can be planted in the fall but established trees and shrubs should only be transplanted in the spring.

Do not compost leaves of Roses, Iris, Peonies or Phlox as they can carry disease.

Start to apply deer repellents now. Creatures of habit, deer quickly get used to certain scents and are lazy about changing established routes so it's a good idea to change repellents often.

It's Bulb Time!

This year, Acer Gardens has many different kinds of bulbs available, with a greatly expanded selection. Tulips are here in many vibrant colors as are the familiar Daffodils and Hyacinths. Bulbs are an easy way to add color and diversity to existing beds and will provide welcome color after a long winter! It's a good idea to plant a few unexpected/unusual bulbs in areas you can see from the house. Try tucking them in under low, spreading evergreens so that they will poke through the branches. Adding small bulbs to your established gardens is a quick way to enhance your spring plantings and a fun way to experiment with "new looks". Daffodils and Paper Whites for forcing and large-sized Amaryllis bulbs, some pre-potted, will also be available a little later in the season. (Check the web site.)

Some bulbs have proven to be resistant to vole damage. Try growing Alliums, Muscari, Daffodils, Scilla, Hyacinths and Hyacinthoides.

Photograph your garden before you plant your bulbs and mark the photographs so that you know where the new bulbs have been situated. Many gardeners keep a special "bulb" album to help them remember plantings.

Location counts ... bulbs need sun even after they have bloomed in order to develop next year's flowers. After you plant, fertilize and then water the bulbs. It's a good idea to mark the location with a plant stake. You can plant bulbs almost anywhere in the garden as long as the soil drains well. Planting bulbs in clumps will give you an abundant look ... inter-planting them among established perennials allows your perennials to disguise the dying foliage of the bulbs after bloom. Always check the height of the bulbs when planning: taller bulbs at the back, shorter bulbs at the front!

Don't be afraid to mix-and-match your bulbs and to plant in drifts. Careful planning can give you bulb bloom from March to May. Naturalizing gives an informal look and is a particularly useful technique for bulbs that multiply easily. Once flowers fade, the foliage keeps growing so choose a site that doesn't need early spring mowing. Bulbs want well-drained soil. Avoid planting bulbs in areas that remain wet for a long time as they may rot.

Before planting, store your bulbs in a cool, dry place with low humidity away from heat and strong sunlight. Wait to plant until the ground has cooled down to around 55 F so that they don't grow unnecessary top growth and waste their energy. Late October to mid-November is optimum planting time for this area although Lilies should not be planted until well into November. The simple rule is to plant bulbs at a depth of 2 or 3 times the height of the bulbs... measure planting depth from the bottom of the bulbs. As you plant your bulbs, add Bulb Tone fertilizer before back-filling the dirt. When the bulbs have bloomed in the spring and the foliage has died back, top dress the bulbs again with Bulb Tone. Some newly planted bulbs may bloom 2 weeks later than established bulbs but they'll catch up and be on time the following year. All Acer Gardens bulbs are winter hardy in this area.

Seasonal Reminders

Keep weeding and dead-heading. Many Connecticut weeds routinely live through the winter!

The bees will continue to pollinate late-blooming perennials: Anemones, Asters, Buddleias, Dahlias and Sedums are particular favorites.

Don't fertilize or prune roses --- wait until spring. Hill-up soil and mulch around the base of Hybrid Teas, climbers and ramblers before the ground freezes. Rugosas are very hardy and need no attention other than trimming back exceptionally long canes which might be damaged during the winter.

Don't cut back these plants/bushes until spring:

| | | |
|-------------|------------|-----------------|
| Artemisia | Guara | Montauk Daisies |
| Bergenia | Hellebore | Perovskia |
| Buddleia | Heuchera | Sedum |
| Campanula | Hydrangeas | Shasta Daisies |
| Caryopteris | Lavender | Stachys |
| Dianthus | Lobelia | Tiarella |

If you're adding mulch to flower beds wait until the ground has frozen so as to discourage pests from making it a cozy winter home.

Remember to store Wilt-Stop, insecticides, fungicides and other "goosey" products in the laundry room or a frost-free cellar. Granular fertilizer and seeds can be safely stored in the garage.

Amending Soil

Fall is the ideal time to amend your garden soil. The first step is to have your soil tested. Go to www.soiltest.uconn.edu for complete instructions on the process. You will receive a report which will include both analysis and recommendations for improving your particular soil. Some gardeners test soil from different parts of the garden and act accordingly.

Soil is usually evaluated on three components: fertility, texture and pH. Fertility delivers essential nutrients to plants; texture refers to the size and composition of the soil particles; pH defines the acid level in the soil. The nutrients plants need the most are nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium.

Nitrogen produces healthy leaf and stem growth but it does not stay in the soil very long and can be washed out by rains. (This summer's rainy pattern may have altered nitrogen levels in your garden beds.) Too much nitrogen in the soil will cause excessive foliage growth. Phosphorus is needed for root growth. Adding bone meal when planting bulbs in the fall helps in producing flowers next season. Potassium contributes to overall good plant health and is necessary for plants to flower and fruit. It is water soluble and needs to be replenished from time to time.

The ideal garden soil texture is a sandy loam which allows for air and water movement. Adding organic matter to soil encourages beneficial microbial activity and provides a nutritional benefit. Excellent sources of beneficial organic matter are composted peat moss and manure. How well your soil absorbs the organic matter will determine what supplemental feeding will be necessary to keep your plants happy.

Acer Gardens carries many products which can help you add to your soil's general health. Stop into The Garden Shed and discuss your needs with one of our knowledgeable employees.

Fall Planting

Fall planting is a great time to get a jump on the next season and to plan for fuller and longer bloom periods in the garden ... it is the perfect time to plant or transplant most perennials, shrubs and trees. The combination of warm soil and reasonably dependent rain leads to good root growth and will give your new plantings a strong head start. In fact, fall planted perennials develop larger, better-established root systems and start to make quicker growth in the spring. Plants with the head start of fall planting actually appear to adapt better to summer heat.

As you look at your perennial beds now, you can identify current "gaps" and add something to extend the season. The nursery has many fall-blooming perennials available, such as Japanese Anemones, Sedum, Boltonia, Cimicifuga, Dendranthema, Asters, Eupatorium, Lirope, Kirengeshoma and ornamental Grasses. The fall is also a good time to consider adding a few native plants. Many natives have an "open" look to their growth habit which blends particularly well with perennials currently in bloom and their sun/shade requirements are very adaptable. Think about adding New England Aster, Coneflower, Cardinal Flower, Bee Balm, Tradescantia, Persicaria or Spiranthes.

All early-spring blooming perennials should be planted in the fall including Phlox subulata (Creeping Phlox), Iberis (Candytuft), Hellebore (Lenten Rose), Primulas and Pulmonaria.

Come to the nursery and see how full the plant tables are with fall-bloomers!

Berries in a fall garden bring their own burst of color, often lasting into early winter. Adding garden color you see from the house is a good way to connect the indoors to the outdoors all season long. Consider planting purple Beauty Bush, Snowberry, Winterberry and Hollies.

Fall Dividing

Fall is the ideal time to divide those perennials which tend to form large clumps. The soil is warm and the new divisions will have time to form a strong root system before winter. Water the new plants well as we head into winter.

Daylilies

Daylilies are adaptable and tough, requiring very little on-going maintenance and care but they will produce their best blooms if they are routinely divided every 3-5 years. Division is good for the plants and an easy way to expand your plantings.

Use a garden fork to lift the clump from the ground. Start by inserting the fork into the ground 6-12" away from the base of the plant. Push down on the handle and pry the clump up and out of the soil. Work your way around the plant, doing this, until the clump is free. Lift the clump from the hole and lay it on the ground or on a tarp. Pull the clump apart, discarding the center. You should have at least 2 distinct clumps remaining. A really large clump can be divided and then re-divided if necessary. Replant the divisions and keep well watered until the new daylilies settle in.

Hostas

Hostas can be divided in the spring or fall and there is no particular advantage to which you choose. It is helpful to pick a time when the weather is cool and moist and in a year of drought that is not easy!

With a sharp spade, cut around the outside of the Hosta clump. Disturbing the roots as little as possible, pry and lift the entire clump out of the ground. With the spade, hack off smaller chunks, no smaller than 5" in diameter. Replant the divisions at the same depth as the original clump was growing. Water well, but do not fertilize. Mulch lightly.

Using Grasses to Extend the Season

Ornamental grasses are almost the only maintenance-free plant a gardener can grow! Their beauty and diversity is remarkable, they thrive in diverse soil conditions and are usually free of insect and disease problems. Combining well with other flowers and bushes, grasses offer a wide range of height, texture and drama. They ask only for full sun, good drainage and plenty of spreading room. In return, they provide 12-month landscape interest, a safe winter home for birds and a focal point in your landscape. Planted as a specimen plant or in drifts, grasses bring an almost architectural quality to your garden and are an effective backdrop all year long. They even manage to look good in snow! Consider using:

Fountain Grass (*Pennisetum*)

H: 2-3'

Prefers full sun

Well-drained soil

This grass features a compact growth habit and finely textured foliage which will sway in every passing breeze. Fountain grass works well in mass plantings and is considered trouble-free and reliant with no pest problems. Deep water during drought periods. This plant will tolerate wind and salt spray, can be divided in the spring and will do well in containers. Deer resistant, it will attract songbirds.

Little Blue Stem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*)

H: 1-3'

Full sun only

Well-drained soil

A finely textured clumping grass from the prairies and an excellent choice for native plantings. Grown in full sun, it will add structure and is very adaptable to most soils. Emerges late in the spring but many cultivars grow to 2-3' over the summer. In the fall, this grass turns a rosy-rust color that lasts all winter.

Maidengrass (*Miscanthus*)

H: 4-6'+

Full sun

Well-drained soil

This ornamental grass will form large clumps with silvery-green blades which turn bronze after the first frost. This plant can be used in groups as a screen, growing 3-5' wide, but also shines as a specimen plant in mixed perennial or shrub beds. *Miscanthus* will handle salt or drought as, once established, it needs only occasional watering.

Switch Grass (Panicum)

H: 2-3'

Full sun to part shade

Average to wet soil

This grass is clump-forming but retains its columnar shape for much of the season. The foliage is topped in mid-summer by pink-tinged panicles which hover over the grass like a cloud. Seed plumes persist well into the winter with seeds a good food source for over-wintering birds. Masses well and may naturalize.

Getting The Garden Ready for Winter

Last spring, New England gardeners discovered, once again, what a long, wet winter can do to trees, shrubs and perennials! Extreme cold isn't always the biggest problem. Early cold spells can damage plants that haven't gone through the normal "hardening off" period. Dry winds can "burn" conifer needles and broadleaf evergreen foliage. Unexpected midwinter thaws can fool plants into breaking dormancy too early, leaving them vulnerable to the next cold snap. Freeze/thaw cycles can heave plants out of the ground. Deer, chipmunk, rabbits and other critters will gnaw bark during the winter and leave evergreens and shrubs damaged. Snow is actually a friend! A constant layer of snow cover provides moisture and helps insulate soil and roots against fluctuating temperatures. Gardeners, as well as skiers, hope for snow!

Healthy plants are more likely to survive winter unscathed. Start your winter protection routine in autumn. Don't prune after midsummer. Pruning can stimulate new, tender growth and can delay dormancy. Stop fertilizing plants 6 weeks before the first fall frost to help plants harden off. Water thoroughly until the ground freezes.

Perennials

Most plants need to be cut back after heavy, killing frosts to prevent disease and pest problems in the spring but doing this too early can deprive roots of gaining energy from the fading leaves. Any diseased or bug-infested leaves should be bagged and put in the garbage, not the compost pile. Compost is a soil conditioner, not a fertilizer, so apply it now to get a jump on spring. Do a final weeding. Edge your beds and start the next gardening year looking neat and tidy. A light winter mulch will help keep the soil temperature even. Waiting until the ground is frozen to apply mulch will discourage rodents from making nests and building condos.

Shade Plants

Ferns. If your ferns are growing in a natural, woodland setting, you can leave the dying fronds in place. They will decompose naturally and the new fronds will be able to easily push up through the spent foliage in the spring. The spent fronds will protect the fern's crown throughout the winter and you can tidy up the plant in the spring. Some gardeners wait to tidy up ferns in the spring until the deer have lost interest in new fronds.

Hosta. Hostas are very low on the fall maintenance scale! After a hard frost, cut the entire plant back to the ground. (Removing the dead leaves will discourage slugs.) Don't compost the dead leaves as you could spread disease. Light mulch (only an inch or two) will discourage pests and protect the root system. Hostas can be divided in the fall before the first frost. Each new plant should be watered well but not fertilized until early spring.

Evergreens

Evergreens need to be well-watered before the start of winter but not fertilized. Do not cut back your evergreens in the fall. If an evergreen has really exceeded its limits, take a few cuttings for Christmas decorations. A late November application of an anti-transparent (such as Wilt-Stop) will help to protect your evergreens from winter desiccation and can also be sprayed on hydrangeas and Japanese maples. For best results, re-apply after a warm winter period in mid-February.

Fall is the perfect evergreen planting time. If they are visible from the house, evergreens can add a strong vertical accent to the landscape and give you “green” to look at through the dreary days of winter. Firs, Pines and Cypress offer a wide range of color shades, shapes and sizes to choose from. They also provide a level of privacy which deciduous trees and bushes cannot offer.

Often-Asked Questions

This is a busy time of year. What do I have to do to the lawn and when?

Let grass clippings stay on the lawn to decompose. Around the second or third week in November, apply a high nitrogen fertilizer. Now is the time to put down grub control.

What’s the best way to store my tender tubers and bulbs for the winter?

After a frost, cut off the leaves and dig up Dahlias, Gladioli, Cannas, Caladiums, Colocasia (Elephant Ears) and Acidanthera. Do not wait for these tubers/bulbs to freeze before you dig them up. Clean off the soil (do not wash) and store the roots on their side in vermiculite or the cedar shavings used at the bottom of gerbil cages. They do well stored in boxes in the basement, protected from temperature extremes and dampness. Label by type and color. If mice routinely get into your cellar, ask your supermarket produce manager for an empty fine-meshed red onion bag. Line the bag with several layers of newspaper, add the cedar chips and layer the bulbs/tubers in. Pull the bag closed, label by type and color, and hang high on a hook in the cellar.

Can I keep some of my herbs growing in the kitchen this winter?

Many herbs can be re-potted and brought indoors to winter in the house. They may need misting from time to time as they react to the natural loss of humidity in the air. (Many people take fresh cuttings of basil, for instance, root them in water, plant and use the new plants as their winter herb supply.)

Should I rake the leaves off the ground around rhododendrons and azaleas?

Many gardeners prefer not to rake leaves out of shade gardens. Fallen leaves act as a natural mulch for broad leaf evergreens such as Rhododendrons, Azaleas and Mountain Laurel and help prevent moisture loss during a dry winter. As the leaves break down they will enrich the soil and form a good base for spring mulch. It’s a good idea to let leaves stay around the base of hydrangeas too.

Is it a good idea to “hill up” roses before winter comes?

With our winters no longer reliably cold for uninterrupted periods of time, it’s best to hill up climbers, ramblers and hybrid tea roses. Use good soil or compost to add about 6” of protection (a little “hill”) around the main stem, over the crown on the plant. Put some shredded leaves over the top of the hill. Remove the hill gradually in the spring.

Will my houseplants give me a “sign” that something is wrong with them?

There are several ways house plants will let you know that something is not going well for them! Not enough water almost always produces drooping leaves and dry soil. Not enough light shows in leggy new growth, a definite leaning toward the light source and very small new leaves. Indoor air circulation and general humidity levels are also factors in how your houseplants will grow. A garden outside changes as the season advances; your houseplants and their needs will change indoors too.

Can I safely cut evergreen branches for Christmas decorations?

Yes, but keep a few considerations in mind. Going into winter is not the optimal time to trim/prune evergreens (you will be leaving a wound which could harbor disease) so harvest your greens with a light hand. Consider the natural shape of the bush before you cut. Especially if you are going to use your cuttings inside the house, treat them with an anti-desiccant spray (Wilt-Stop is available at the nursery) to help the foliage retain moisture.

Houseplants and Light

By the middle of October, your houseplants should all be back in the house after their summer outdoors. Inspect the plants carefully before you bring them in and treat for any bugs or pests. Cut back or prune the plant if necessary and re-pot with fresh soil. Grouping plants together is an easy way to generate humidity (especially if all the plants are on a water-filled humidity tray) and to showcase diverse foliage and plant forms. Fertilize the houseplants every 2 weeks.

Rex Begonia (fabulous foliage), Ferns, Coleus, English ivy, Pilea and Peperomia are all good choices for indoor color all winter long. Most houseplants don't like the direct sun of a windowsill although Cyclamen, Gardenia, and Geraniums actually prefer a south facing window. East and west facing windows are fine for most plants but you need to understand the growth habits of your plants. Leaves that are pale green or stems that are weak or too long indicate that your plants need more light. Placing your plant properly is key to growing healthy house plants and light levels are important. And remember ... you may have light coming in through a window now but the angle of the sun is very different in the winter so make adjustments as needed when you place your plants. Changing back from Daylight Saving Time can make a huge difference in a room's light!

Standard light definitions:

Bright light: a sunny southern or western facing window with bright, direct light all day.

Indirect light: an eastern facing window or the interior of a room that faces south or west.

Low light: rooms with north facing windows provide little direct light.

Grow lights are often helpful and some plants thrive when placed under ordinary house lamps. Watching your house plant's performance and monitoring its growth will tell you what it needs. As the days begin to lengthen, those needs may start to change.

Growing Ferns Indoors

Growing ferns indoors sounds difficult ... but as long as you meet a few basic requirements it's actually no harder than keeping orchids growing. Many of the ferns which grow happily in your garden make attractive house plants. Ferns have been growing and thriving for 300 million years. They are low-maintenance house plants but they do have some definite requirements: light and moisture.

Humidity is essential for ferns. Misting your ferns is essential for success (some people pop them in a shower!) Standing the fern pot on a tray of pebbles and keeping those wet is a definite plus! Most ferns live happily in the understory of forests and rain-forests so they need to be well-hydrated and prefer an evenly moist soil with regular watering. Don't let the soil dry out. Bathrooms and kitchens are ideal fern homes.

Ferns are not deep shade plants. They need bright, filtered light to grow well so a room with north or east windows is generally ideal. Keep them out of strong sunlight. During the growing season, feed your ferns occasionally with weak fertilizer but let them rest in the winter. Most fern house-plants will happily summer outdoors.

Try these:

Boston Fern (*Nephrolepis exaltata*)

One of the most effective plants for removing air pollutants, Boston Ferns need room for their beautiful fronds to hang down and must never be allowed to dry out. Mist them daily for the best performance.

Bird's Nest Fern (*Asplenium nidus*)

This fern responds to light conditions: more light makes the leaves crinkle, less light makes the leaves flat. It does not require as much humidity as other ferns but doesn't like to be brushed against.

Dallas Fern (a miniature Boston Fern)

Increasingly popular, this fern takes up less room than its parent and is a little less fussy about moisture and light. It's considered the ideal "starter fern".

Rabbit Tail

Rhizomes that resemble a bunny's foot, this fern prefers bright but indirect sunlight ... an eastern window will keep it happy. Water the plant enough to keep the soil lightly moist and fertilize at half strength every 2 weeks.

Enjoying Winter Containers

Containers can also make the switch to winter very easily. Think about adding small evergreens which can be transplanted into the garden in the spring. Back them with colored stems for a little punch. Use branches with berries and add pine cones as the holidays approach. Place the winter containers where they can be seen from the house as a way to connect the outside landscape to the inside.

The Vegetable Garden

Leave carrots, leeks, parsnips, radishes, beets, kale, Swiss chard and turnips in the garden so that you can harvest them through the fall. If you are storing root crops, cut down the tops to about ½" but don't wash the vegetables. Keep them in a dark, cool place, above freezing. When you harvest your onions, let them dry outside in the sun for a few days before cleaning them and bringing them inside for storage. When its foliage turns yellow, dig up potato plants. The potato vine can act as the host to late tomato blight so be careful to discard all parts of the potato plant in a bag in the garbage can, not in the compost heap. (In fact, tomatoes and all squashes should also be discarded in bags.) After a killing frost, pull up tomato, squash and bean plants.

Clean out the vegetable garden. Remove all old plants and fruits (roots, leaves and stems) but do not put them in the compost bin ... burn or put in garbage bags to help prevent the spread of disease and insects. Double dig the empty bed and add compost to be ready for early spring plantings. Cover your strawberries lightly with straw not hay (which harbors weeds). Remember to make a chart of the layout of your vegetable bed so that you can rotate the crops next spring. Re-assess your plantings to decide if you grew the right "mix" for your family's eating habits and leave room to try something new and different.

Take a moment to think about ways to expand next year's vegetable garden by re-arranging space. More abundant harvests are possible by not planting just in rows. Peas, cucumbers and tomatoes can all be grown on stakes or trellises as long as you allow for the weight of the mature plant. Adding a raised bed can expand your options. Many new varieties of vegetables have been developed recently to accommodate gardeners who grow vegetables in containers on the patio. Small-sized vegetables currently available include bush cucumbers and patio tomatoes but new varieties are constantly being introduced.

Now is the time to plant both hardneck and softneck garlic. Pick a new area in the vegetable garden with fertile, well-drained soil. Take the garlic cloves apart and plant 4-6" apart 1 ½-2" deep. Mulch lightly with straw. The garlic will start to grow now. In the spring, you will see more growth and the bud will form scapes. Cut that stalk off ... it's delicious sautéed. After the foliage yellows and browns in midsummer you can start to harvest and dry the garlic. Store the garlic in bunches in a cool location. The nursery has 5 different kinds of garlic bulbs available ... all will do well in this climate.

Forcing Bulbs

Forcing and growing bulbs indoors gives us a way to have flowers blooming even with snow on the ground and makes a great family winter project. "Forcing" is simply a way of making a bulb produce leaves and flowers ahead of its natural outdoor schedule. You speed up the process by manipulating time and temperature.

Almost any container can be used for forcing bulbs but you will need a run-off saucer under the container if it has drainage holes. Fill the container 2/3 full of soil and moisten. Place the bulbs (close together but not touching) and gently press down. Add soil to the top of the container, water, and put in a cool, dark place like a refrigerator or unheated garage/cellar. Chilling for at least 6-8 weeks will imitate dormancy. Flowering will take about 12 weeks for snowdrops, crocus and daffodils and about 16 weeks for tulips. When you see shoots about 3" above the soil line, bring the bulbs into a cool location. When the foliage and buds are well developed, move the pots to a bright, sunny window.

Forcing paper-whites is particularly easy because the bulbs do not require a chilling period and need only 5-6 weeks from planting to bloom. (Because so many daffodils are being harvested earlier these days, many gardeners have returned to the old practice of keeping the yet to-be-used paper white bulbs in brown paper bags in the bottom of the refrigerator.) You'll have Christmas flowers if you start your paper-whites by November 10. Plant at 2-week intervals and enjoy blooms from Christmas to Easter.

Paper-whites grow best using the stones and water method: take a waterproof bowl and fill it 2/3 full of gravel or small, decorative stones, usually white. Insert the base of the bulbs so that they sit firmly and add more stones but do not cover them. Pour in water up to the base of the bulbs, replenishing as needed, and store in a cool, dark place (usually 2-3 weeks) until first growth appears. Some people add 1 Tb. of vodka or plain gin to the paper-white water after the bulbs come out of their storage period. This helps keep the stems short and prevents toppling but will not interfere with bloom. Do not fertilize the bulbs.

Forcing is very hard on most bulbs and they will not bloom again. Tulips and paper-whites should just be thrown out. Amaryllis will usually re-bloom successfully but it can take them longer to bloom than you think!

Acer Gardens' information sheet on **Forcing Bulbs** is available on the web site and at the nursery.

Last Chores

Clean out the bird feeders and prepare them for the coming season. Store bird seed in metal garbage cans with tight-fitting lids to discourage access by mice and chipmunks.

Empty containers, clean and place in the garage. Some alpine troughs (Hypertufa) can be left out if placed near the house but stone planters are not winter-proof and should be stored in the garage. Fortunately, there are many winter weather-proof containers now available.

Clean out the wheelbarrow and discard any damaged garden gloves/tools. Clean and sharpen garden tools. Leave everything tidy on the garden shelves. Some gardeners claim an open jar (or small Ziploc bag) of dried mint leaves left near the house entrance from the garage helps to discourage mice from entering.

Drain and store hoses. Turn off all outside water faucets and cover them.

Visit your local Library and make a note of all the garden books you could read this winter ... take a tour of some of the world's great gardens and botanical destinations! Read up on how other gardeners have solved problem garden situations or develop an entirely new interest!

Finally, keep checking Acer Gardens web site for on-going announcements. Enjoy our Instagram photos and Facebook entries and remember, Spring will come and we'll all be back in the garden!

General Reminder

Acer Gardens will close on 12/22 and, weather permitting, will re-open at the end of March 2025. Check the web page for the exact date as get closer to the end of winter!

Acer Gardens
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