



Sallie Lee
Urban Regional Extension Agent
News Release

Gardening in the Jaws of January

Question: This weather has really activated my gardening “itch;” I want to plant and prune and fertilize! However, I’m pretty sure this is NOT the best time for these activities in most cases. So what can I do that’s not going to result in potential harm to my landscape and garden but will provide a productive outlet for me? By the way, what is going on with this crazy weather?

Answer: Gardening activities suited for winter months range from those chores best done when cooler temperatures make long-sleeves, long pants and gloves feel really good this time of year. It means we can go outdoors and tackle the vines or undergrowth that has gotten out of hand without overheating. It means we can combine a good workout with noticeable improvements to ornamental beds and gardens and feel a sense of accomplishment and a sense of sore muscles, when reviewing our work. Some gardeners use this time when fewer leaves hide the structures of trees and shrubs to remove the three D’s: dead, damaged or diseased limbs and branches. With the seeming increase in stormy or windy weather, this may be an increasingly important activity as we can better inspect the tops of tall trees for signs of damage or dead material. Once deciduous plants have leafed out in the spring, it is more difficult to locate damage high up in taller trees, so use this season of dormancy to do some investigating.

It’s also a good time to note where our landscapes have gaps in their structure and determine what might be added to increase the value, functionality, aesthetics, or all three of our property. As example, perhaps a tree has been removed, either due to old age or damage, leaving a sunny gap where there was a shaded area. Possible replacements include attractive flowering plants that can be utilized as food for wildlife, humans or both. Flowering crab apples, fig, pear, pomegranate or Jujube provide shade, flowers and edible fruit, and are attractive small trees in the landscape. Using some sort of marker, locate a good spot or spots in your landscape, ensuring that proper soil, sufficient sunlight and good drainage are identified. If soil testing is desired or amendments need to be added, there is still time for these activities without being rushed into the “planting” step before the “planning” piece is in place.

While we can more or less control the timing of these activities, there are other aspects of gardening that are outside our purview. These are weather patterns that influence the “crazy weather” referenced in your question. And whether we’re experiencing global warming, climatic change, or increasingly unpredictable weather systems, many groups are concerned about the short and long range impacts. While we aren’t in control of these patterns, there are resources

available that can provide some guidance and if nothing else, offer potential conversation topics when politics have worn us out.

Both the Farmers' Almanac and the U.S. Drought Monitor offer predictions for the country; our interest is primarily in the southeast. While neither of these publications claim to be 100% accurate (Farmer's Almanac has traditionally said to be in the 80% accuracy range), they both offer information based on scientific and historical data.

The Farmer's Almanac, originally called "The Old Farmers' Almanac," has been around since first published in 1792, during George Washington's first term as president. Of course the Farmers' was not the only almanac on the market, but it prevailed and over time came to be known as the foremost almanac in the country. Based on the observations of Robert B. Thomas, the almanac's first publisher, a complex series of natural cycles was used to devise a weather forecasting formula that produced very accurate results. Even during wars and the Depression, editors of the Farmers' Almanac kept the publication alive, never missing a single year. And for the winter of 2011-2012, the Almanac is forecasting an unusually cold, stormy winter although the southern and eastern U.S. will experience higher than normal temperatures and the chance of drier than normal conditions in some parts of the southeast.

While the U.S. Drought Monitor was unveiled some 200 years later (August 1999), it has quickly become a formidable means of communicating drought conditions to local and state agencies and populations. This map is updated weekly using multiple drought indices and indicators, making it useful to farmers, ranchers, beekeepers and gardeners. It offers short and longer term predictions, including one for January 19 – April 30, 2012, that mentions La Nina and the potential return of drier weather as the season progresses.

None of these predictions are 'carved in stone,' and we're not going to cease planning and planting regardless of our conditions. However, as winter planning activities segue into spring planting, keep in mind that healthy soil, the 'right plant in the right place,' and other common sense gardening practices will go a long way in supporting our gardens and landscapes, regardless of which predictions materialize.

For additional information regarding these or other gardening-related topics, please contact Urban Regional Extension Agent, Sallie Lee, at the St. Clair county Extension office at (205) 338-9416 or email leesall@aces.edu.

"Timing has a lot to do with the outcome of a rain dance."

