

IN THE DIRT

When to Prune Fruit Trees?

Wait to prune fruit trees until late February-March. The best time for pruning fruit trees for fruit production is in late winter, into early spring, depending on the weather. Contact your local Extension Office for more information on fruit tree pruning or visit <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2035&context=extensionhist>.

Winter Watering of Trees & Shrubs

By Nicole Stoner, UNL Extension Horticulture Educator

January and February are often the snowiest for Nebraska, but just as often Nebraska experiences winter dry conditions with little snow. Trees and shrubs also experience winter "drought" when the ground is frozen and roots cannot pull up water.

Winter Watering

Most people believe that once winter weather begins, plants no longer need watering. And if we consistently have snow cover on the ground throughout winter, there is no need to worry about watering our plants.

However, if we don't receive much natural precipitation or snow, and the weather is warm enough to thaw the ground during the day then supplement water is beneficial.

Some plants that are most affected by winter desiccation include the following.

- Evergreens like arborvitae, yew and white pine.
- Broadleaf evergreens, including boxwood, holly and mahonia.
- Deciduous trees with thin bark, such as young

maple trees, lindens, dogwoods, willows, and paper birches.

It is most important to water newly planted trees and shrubs throughout the winter, versus watering all of your older, more established plants. However, if it is a very dry winter, all of your trees and shrubs would benefit from a watering at least once a month throughout the late fall and winter months.

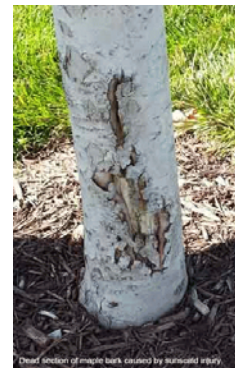
There are a few factors you need to keep in mind when watering in the winter months.

- Water only when the temperatures reach 40 degrees Fahrenheit or above, and the ground is not frozen.
- Water during the middle of the day to allow it to soak into the soil prior to freezing at night.
- Make sure to water only with a hose, watering can, or bucket. Do not use your irrigation system or you will have to drain the pipes again to prevent them from being damaged due to freezing water.

Prevent Sunscald

If you didn't this fall, there is still time to wrap the trunk of young, thin barked trees to prevent sunscald. Sunscald is a problem that occurs when tree bark on the south and west sides of thin-barked trees are warmed by winter sun. The bark can be warmed by direct sunlight shining on the tree, or reflected light from snow. The bark cells warm up and become active, losing their winter hardiness. At night, when temperatures drops, the active cells are killed. Sunscald causes a dead section of bark to develop on the trunk of the tree the following summer.

Fortunately, wrapping the trunk of thin barked, young trees can help prevent this problem, by keeping the bark cooler, and shaded on warm, sunny winter days. It's particularly important for trees planted or transplanted in fall.



Houseplant Care

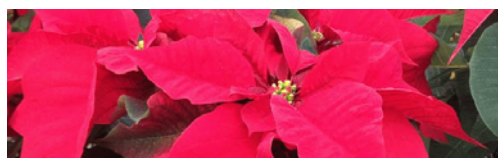
■ Unless you are breeding amaryllis, remove the blossoms as they fade. Seed pod formation reduces the available energy for bulb enlargement. The larger the bulb, the more flowers the plant produces.

■ Christmas cactus is a tropical plant that likes a brightly lit location, but not direct sun. Water it well, adding fertilizer once a week while it is blooming. Some flower buds may fall off if there are too many for the plant to support or if the plant has been underwatered or overwatered. Turn the plant often so it receives even light. In the summer months when the plant is resting, keep the soil almost dry.



■ Fungus gnats are small fly-like insects that may be noticed flying around houseplants. They are commonly associated with overwatered houseplants or those grown in poorly drained potting mixes. If a houseplant pot is harboring fungus gnats, treat the soil with insecticidal soap or incorporate diatomaceous earth in the soil to kill the maggots. Another management approach is to cut back on watering so the soil dries out between watering. Any maggots present in the soil will dry out and lack of water will reduce fungal growth, reducing the food supply for adult fungus gnats. A third option is a combination of letting the soil dry between watering and then watering with a solution of water and insecticidal soap.

■ Depending on several cultural factors, your poinsettia will do one of two things after the holidays- hold onto its leaves or drop its leaves. If the plant holds its leaves, treat it like any houseplant. Leave it in a sunny location and apply a complete, water-soluble, blooming-plant fertilizer once every two weeks. If the plant loses its leaves, place it in a bright, cool location (50-55 degrees), such as on a basement window ledge, but avoid locations with temperatures above 60° F degrees. Let the soil dry out, but never let it get so dry that the stems start to shrivel. Allow the plant to rest in this condition until spring. In late April or early May cut back the stems to 3-5 inches from the soil and place it in a bright, warm location, watering whenever the soil dries out. New growth will begin to emerge. Pinch the new shoots back when they reach 4-6 inches in length to encourage bushiness.



■ If you've succeeded with African violets try these related plants, both commonly known as lipstick or goldfish plant- *Columnea banksii* (smooth waxy leaves) and *C. gloriosa* (hairy leaves). These vining plants, with tubular yellow, orange or red flowers, require bright light, but no direct sun, and average room temperatures. Provide high levels of humidity with frequent misting, a pebble tray, or by placing the plant in a bathroom or kitchen.



■ Don't fertilize houseplants this month unless they are under high light intensity. Leaves of split-leaf philodendron will not split under low light intensity.

For more information contact your local Extension Office or visit

http://lancaster.unl.edu/hort/articles/2005/winter_houseplants.shtml.