



Winter Work

Cabin fever might lure us outside

There are two months in the year when I regard gardening as strictly optional. One is August. The other is January. Unless you have fruit trees on a strict spray regimen, it is hard to think of anything you really *should* do this month. But with filberts shaking out their catkins, bulbs emerging and witch hazels in full bloom, it's easy to develop a false sense of urgency, especially if the weather is nice. January sometimes produces a mild, dry spell to lure me outside. Some people just get cabin fever and even go out in the rain. You can count on the garden to provide some task worth doing when you can't stand to be inside.

Take a look through your windows before you go out. Any moldering pot plants or hydrangea heads you would be better off without? Any storm-blown twigs or tree limbs spoiling the view? Once outside, check on plants and bulbs (both in and out of containers) that are protected from the rain. Water them if they look dry, but don't water containers in freezing weather.

Liberate small bulbs from smothering tree leaves. Bulbs should be able to pierce leaf litter, I know, but some leaves, such as maple leaves of whatever size, can form tight, moisture-trapping sheets that easily defeat snowdrops, hardy cyclamen and early crocus.

Remove matted leaves from lawns, evergreen azaleas, gravel paths and your favorite mossy rocks. Leave leaf drifts where you can, however, because friendly insects, salamanders and other living things could be sheltering there.

Remove last year's leaves from Lenten roses (*Helleborus x hybridus*) as soon as possible by cutting them close to the ground. They probably still look fine, I admit, but flowering stems are already lengthening and old leaves get in their way. If you commit to removing old foliage every winter, moreover, your hellebores could emerge through a drift of small bulbs. Pure white snowdrops make a wonderful contrast with the subdued colors of hellebore flowers.

Want to do some real gardening? You can transplant snowdrops and primroses just about any time if the soil is workable. You might even get a head start on some new raised beds. If necessary, stand on wooden planks to protect subterranean shoots and to avoid compacting damp soil.

I use 8 or 10 inch boards, one inch thick, cut in handy four foot lengths.

The most important job you can tackle in winter — pruning deciduous shrubs — can be done in almost any weather, if you happen to be in the mood. Sure, you could leave it for a month or so, but there is so much else to do in February and March. Why not at least make a start on any roses, vines and shrubs that are easily accessible from paths or patios? Cut down summer-flowering clematis to one or two feet. Long, whippy new growths on wisteria should have been removed last summer, but you can do it now.

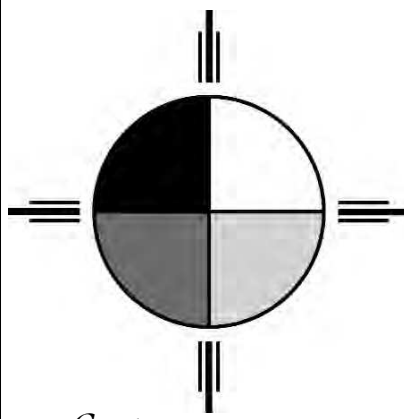
Remove spindly growth and dead wood from roses, then cut back hybrid teas by half or more, shrub roses by a third. Consider cutting out a few of the older branches that don't have many healthy green stems emerging from them. Many people don't prune their roses hard enough, in my opinion. They can take it! They will be healthier and more vigorous. Really! Totally neglected roses of almost any type can be cut down to about 15 inches. Reduce what's left to 3-7 well-spaced limbs by removing dead and older wood. Prune the remaining stems just above an outward facing bud or leaf base.

Deciduous flowering shrubs that bloom in spring or early summer carry their flowers on twigs that grew last year. They are usually pruned right after they bloom; prune them now and you'll lose some or all of their flowers. Many shrubs that bloom after mid-summer are slightly tender and are best pruned in March or April. That leaves cold-hardy woody plants that are grown for some feature other than their flowers (structure, screening, foliage or colorful stems) and shrubs so desperately in need of a trim you are ready to sacrifice bloom.

Pruning is a huge subject, and it's a part of gardening that can be intimidating at first. That's a pity, because it is also creative and should be extremely satisfying. It also happens to be something that you can easily learn from books. An excellent place to start is Cass Turnbull's *Guide to Pruning* (Sasquatch Press). This is now in its second edition, but if you find the first edition in the library or a used bookstore, it will do just fine.

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