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December is for Poinsettias, Native Wintergreen and Black Vultures





Poinsettias



Poinsettias must have at least six hours of bright, indirect light daily. Keep plants away from drafts and heat sources. Keep moist but not too wet. Make sure water can drain out of the container after watering, and do not allow pots to sit in water. Poinsettias that dry out droop dramatically and drop their flowers. There are many cultivars of poinsettias in a variety of colors, but the most popular are the reds.

[Raising Poinsettia Video](#)

Native Wintergreen - *Gaultheria procumbens*



Image: Robert Benner



Image: Jason Hollinger

Native wintergreen is a low-growing, creeping, woody evergreen that is found in forest understories, especially in mixed hardwood forests. It can be used as a groundcover in shaded areas. Berries are a waxy red with a wintergreen flavor and are edible. Flowers are an inverted urn-shape and are white. These plants are available at many garden centers, and they are suitable for shade gardens.

Native Wintergreen

Black Vultures - *Coragyps atratus*



Image: Anonymous- Macaulay Library



© Pamm Cooper

Black vultures can be distinguished from turkey vultures by their slightly smaller size, charcoal head and white wing tips. They are social birds and often fly and roost together. Normally they are a more southern species. However, now there is a population of over 60 black vultures in Manchester, Connecticut that began with one breeding pair in 2016. They often turn up where turkey vultures have found carrion, and both turkey and black vultures may use chimneys to keep warm in the winter.

Black Vultures

Plant Highlight - Oak and Beech Leaves Persist In Winter



Oaks and beeches have lower leaves that, although dry and brown, may persist on lower branches through winter. This is a physiological juvenile trait called marcescence, where leaves are not shed at the normal time of year. Forest ecologists are not entirely sure why the trees do not shed these leaves but have considered reasons why this occurs. One is that these trees are usually found in dry areas and some leaves left to shed in the spring will provide a fresh “mulch” to help retain water in the soil. Another reason may be to deter flower and leaf bud loss by hiding them from browsing deer or other animals that can only reach lower branches. Whatever the reason, it is an interesting aspect of forest ecology.

Marcescence

Insect Highlight - Grass-carrying wasp



Grass-carrying wasps, *Isodontia* ssp., are solitary wasps that are common visitors to garden and landscape flowers. Females collect dry grass blades or similar material and stuff it along screen window tops, in windowsills or in tracks of sliding doors. Individual nests are made and provisioned with a

paralyzed tree cricket upon which an egg is laid. Larvae feed and eventually pupate over winter inside these nests. Adults emerge the next spring. These are not pests, and if cocoons are found when taking out screens, they can be put under a light layer of leaf litter for the winter.

[Grass - carrying Wasp](#)

Animal Highlight - Hermit Thrush



Image: Evan Lipton

Hermit Thrushes forage on the forest floor often picking up leaves in search of insects and other invertebrates. Similar to wood thrushes, the hermit thrush has a duller body color, but its tail is a rusty brown. They migrate in the fall, but occasionally may be found remaining here for the winter. During the winter birds are found near streams or bogs where snow does not persistently cover the ground, and near any sources of fruits and berries.

[Hermit Thrush](#)

Tips on Making Holiday Wreaths



Many garden centers, like Cropley's Garden Center in Bolton Connecticut where these images were taken, not only make and sell holiday wreaths and other decorations, but also sell all the materials needed to make your own. Some people have access to evergreens that they harvest. For tips on how to prune and keep greens fresh, see link below.

[Holiday wreaths](#)

Winter Care for Rhododendrons and Azaleas

Water as needed if dry weather occurs and the soil is not frozen. Do not prune azaleas, rhododendrons, or other spring-flowering shrubs because they have already set their buds for next year's blooms. If you feel these shrubs do need to be pruned, however, you can prune them now, but you will sacrifice next spring's flowers production. Keep these as well as any recently planted trees and shrubs watered if dry conditions persist and soil is not frozen. Late fall watering may only be necessary this year in the drier parts of the state. A couple of inches of bark mulch would be good to use around azaleas and rhododendrons all year, but is especially helpful during the winter.

Gardening Gift Ideas From Members of the UConn Department of Plant Science and Landscape Architecture

Squids 3400 Glove Clip Holder with Dual Clips - clip gardening gloves and other items to a belt loop to keep at hand and prevent misplacing or losing them.

SIX COLORS AVAILABLE

GRANITE, BLACK, BLUE, LIME, ORANGE, RED



Steel Compact Shearing pruners are ideal for deadheading or cutting flowers, plus work well for cutting down perennials at the year's end.



A **Hori Hori tool** has a serrated blade on one side ideal for cutting open bags of mulch, potting soil or other materials, plus can be used as a pruner and as a trowel.



Okay... this is a toy Kubota bucket loader and backhoe, which may have to do for one of our staff members, a true dreamer who really wants the real thing.

Other ideas - bulb augers, gardening books, houseplants,

wide-brimmed sunhats, rain gauges and kneeling pads.

Gardening Tips for December

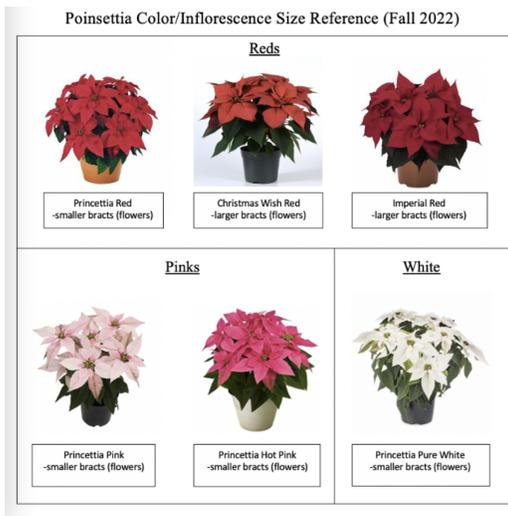
1. Be sure to keep poinsettia away from heat sources, drafts, and cold air. Keep soil consistently moist, but not soggy. Poinsettia that dry out droop dramatically and drop their flowers. Try something a bit more unusual like a cyclamen or kalanchoe for holiday plants.
2. Check corms and tubers in storage. Sort out any that show signs of disease and dispose of them.
3. Many holiday cacti now have extended blooming periods and come in large variety of colors.
4. Decorative foil around the roots of holiday plants can hold water and drown them. Either remove it when you water, or poke drainage holes in the foil and use a saucer.
5. Harvest any leeks and root vegetables such as carrots and parsnips that are still in the garden.
6. Use garden notes, photos and sketches to plan out your garden for the upcoming season.
7. Don't walk on frozen grass, especially if there is no snow cover. Without the protection of snow, grass blades are easily broken causing die-back in your lawn.
8. Be sure to keep bird feeders stocked with seed and suet for the winter months.
9. Replace the plants in hanging baskets, containers, and window boxes with evergreen boughs, berries and pinecones.
10. If you have friends or family that like to garden, think of gardening gifts for the holidays. Books, gloves, hand tools, weather instruments, and fancy pots are some fun ideas to consider.
11. Store your opened bags of fertilizer in a sealed plastic bag or plastic waterproof container with a snugly fitting lid in a dry location to avoid caking.
12. Turn compost piles one more time before they freeze for the winter.

See more [December Gardening Tips](#)



This deer is sleeping in a back yard, so browsing landscape plants might be its next activity. Safeguard plants that you know it likes by exclusion netting or wire mesh or by spraying with a suitable repellent.

Events and Things To Do



The **UConn Horticulture Club** will be holding its annual poinsettia sales this year, with sale dates being held on **December 2, 5, 7, and 9** in the Floriculture Greenhouse (times TBD).

Our pot sizes are 4 inch, 6 inch, and 8 inch:

- 4 inch pots will be \$6;
- 6 inch pots will be \$12 or 3 for \$30;
- 8 inch pots will be \$15 or 3 for \$40.

Pre-orders will be taken for UConn departments or faculty who wish to buy in bulk (18 or more plants) with a discount.

To place orders, or for more information, email uconnhortclub@gmail.com

[Science @ Home Activity Kit: Winter Wonders](#)

Connecticut Science Center Science @ Home Activity Kit is a do-it-yourself at-home program with all of the materials provided. Program ends December 14.

[Wadsworth Atheneum Festival of Trees and Traditions](#)

From December 1- 11 enjoy trees and wreaths decorated by community members, artists, and organizations. All items are for sale

[Guilford Farmer's Market](#)

Open on Saturdays through December at the Dudley Farm at the junction of Rtes. 77 and 80. Hours are 9:30- 12:30, but they may have extended holiday hours.

Mythic™ Red Secret Jewel Alocasia (*Alocasia cuprea*)



Photo from: www.provenwinners.com

Now that winter weather has set in, we can turn our attention from outdoor plants to indoor ones. Houseplants have gotten more of the attention they deserve over the last couple of years and more new and unique species and cultivars are available both locally and through mail order.

Many Alocasia species grow larger than the average home can accommodate but not 'Red Secret', an upright selection reaching about 18 inches. The leaves are truly stunning, a mixture of black, red and green. Keep plants in bright, indirect light and they can even take some east morning direct sunlight during the winter months. All Alocasias grow from bulbs. For this plant, moisture is key. Plants should not dry out nor should the medium be saturated so use a well-draining potting mix perhaps with some orchid bark or extra perlite thrown in. Plants do best when temperatures are between 60 and 80 degrees F and with high humidity. During periods of active growth, fertilize once each month at half strength. Look for 'Red Secret' at your local garden center.

[Fertilizers limit pollination by changing how bumblebees sense flowers](#)

Pollinators are less likely to land on flowers sprayed with fertilizers or pesticides as they can detect electric field changes around the flower, researchers at the University of Bristol have found.

Have Your Soil Tested for Macro & Micro Nutrients

Send your soil sample in for testing now. For details on submitting a sample, go to soiltesting.cahnr.uconn.edu

Be sure to bookmark the new URL



Our standard nutrient analysis (which includes pH) is \$15/sample. For all soil test pricing, see link below:

soiltesting.cahnr.uconn.edu/price/

KNOWLEDGE TO GROW ON - Read our latest Ladybug blogs



Mixture of cereal rye and daikon radish. Photo by Nora Doonan, UConn
[Cover Crops Offer a Number of Beneficial Ecosystem Services](#)



Dahlias by Marie Woodward
[Overwintering Dahlias](#)



© Pamm Cooper

[Outdoors in November](#)

Food For Thought

[Chocolate science and fun facts](#)

Motechzoma Xocoyotzin (Montezuma II), the ninth emperor of the Aztecs, was known as the Chocolate King. At one time he had a stash of nearly a billion cocoa beans.

[Earth stars - the mushrooms that move](#)

Earth stars are fungi related to puffballs, are found on the forest floor, and are named for the body consisting of a center ball-like spore capsule surrounded by rays that resemble a star.



Earth Star image: University of Florida

WHAT WE DO AT THE UCONN HOME AND GARDEN EDUCATION CENTER

Plant, insect, plant disease identification and control options

Advise clients on plant selection and cultural requirements

**Accept samples for diagnosis either by drop-off or mail
(Physical sample diagnosis has temporarily ceased until
January when the Plant Diagnostic Lab reopens)**

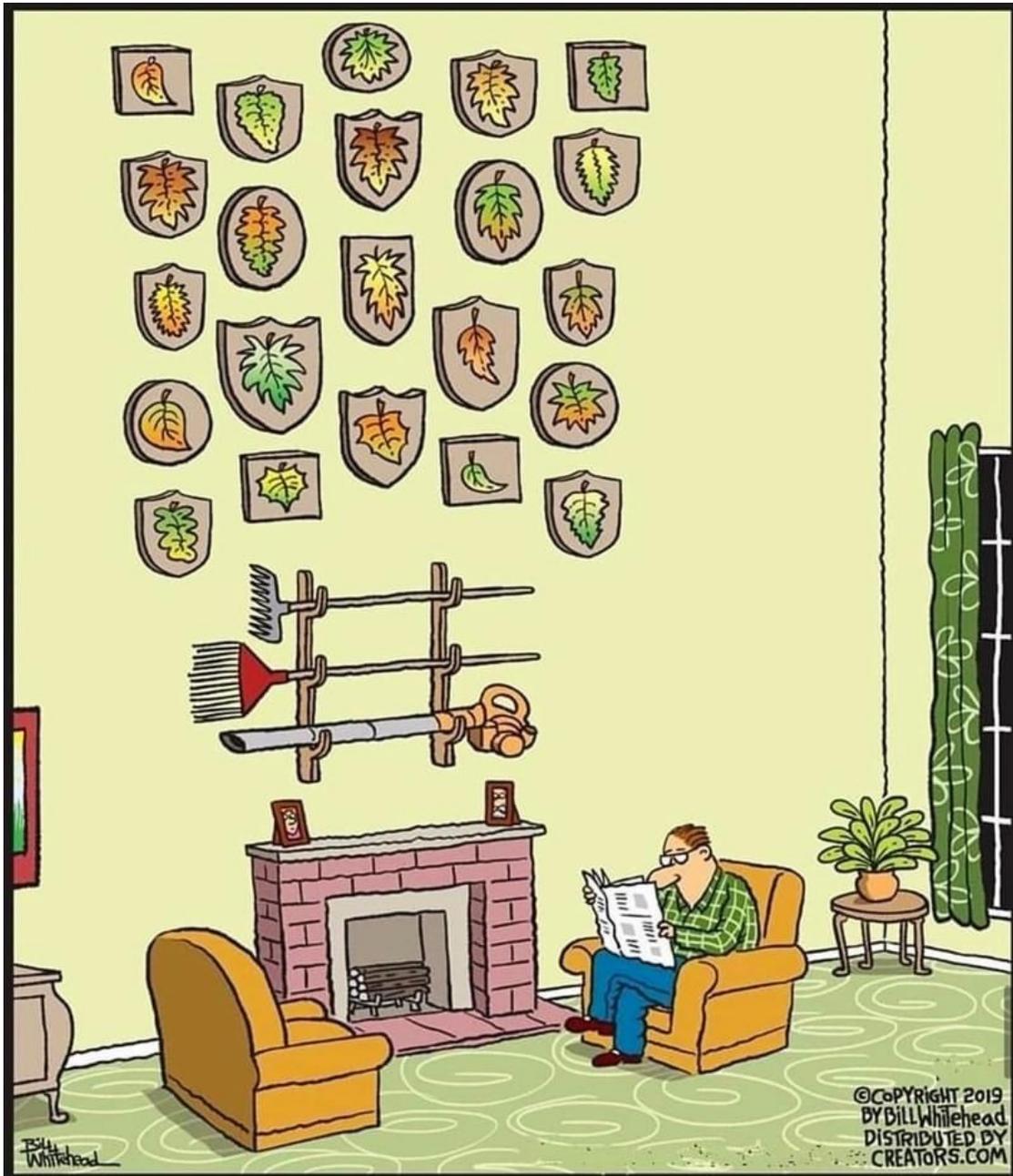
Present on gardening topics including IPM, pollinators, lawns, invasive plants and insects, landscaping and gardening with native plants, soils, compost, gardening to support bees, birds and wildlife

Staff a booth every year at the Flower and Garden Show - bring in your gardening questions and soil samples for free pH testing

Publish weekly blogs and a monthly newsletter. Please subscribe!

Publish fact sheets, newspaper, and magazine articles

Provide media support and publish a monthly e-letter for the Department of Plant Science





Helpful Links

[Home & Garden Education Center](#)

[UConn Plant Diagnostic Laboratory](#)

[Soil Nutrient Analysis Laboratory](#)

[Master Gardener Program](#)

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