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December Gardening Calendar

The weather was wonderful in October and November. We can only hope it will continue.

It is going to freeze sometime this month or next, so be ready to protect your tender plants. Bougainvillea, plumeria and oriental hibiscus should already be in the greenhouse or other shelter. Have blankets or the new product “planket” ready to use when freezing temperatures are in the forecast.

Cover citrus, tomatoes, avocadoes and cyclamen. Tomatoes are most sensitive; a short spell at 32 degrees will end their life for the winter. Depending when the freeze comes, you first may want to harvest all this fruit. The full-sized fruit will ripen in the house and you can use the small fruit for relishes or fried green tomatoes. Cover cyclamen at 30 degrees to preserve the blooms. Lemons, limes and grapefruit need to be protected at 28 degrees. Satsumas may survive 26 degrees.

If the forecast temperatures are low enough to require heat, use a mechanics light, a poultry heater or Christmas lights.

This may be the year you want to consider a live holiday tree that can be planted in the landscape after it does its duty as a holiday decoration. Aleppo pines, Japanese black pines, deodar cedars and sheared rosemary work well in that dual role.

Remember how heavy a tree in a container is, so plan your move well. It should only stay in the house for two weeks and there needs to be a sunny location in the landscape for its permanent planting site.

In the vegetable garden, protect the broccoli and other greens from cabbage loopers by applying a Bt product (Dipel, Thuricide, or BioWorm Control) to the underside of the leaves as soon as you see any leaf damage.

Onion transplants can be planted now. It is also a good time to plant spinach transplants.

In the flower garden, protect the pansies, primula and other low-growing flowers with slug and snail bait.

We have discussed the snapdragons, stocks, cyclamen and pansies in this column. Also consider calendula, dianthus and alyssum.

Calendulas have light green, tongue-shaped foliage that produces daisy-like flowers in gold or yellow. The colors warm up the winter garden and they make good cut flowers for short bouquets. Grow calendula in full sun. They are a favorite butterfly plant.

Dianthus also attracts butterflies. There are several selections on the market, but most grow to about 8 inches tall with lavender, white, red, pink or bicolor blooms. Use dianthus on the sunny flower beds or in containers. They produce a strong root system that allows them to last until June if you trim back the tops in April.

The main claim to fame for alyssum is the fragrance of the flower. It is pleasant and potent enough to detect when you get near the garden. Alyssum are short flowers (4-6 inches) that are covered with tiny blooms in lavender, white or pink. Use them in containers or as borders for the sunny garden.

Prepare the soil for calendula, dianthus and alyssum by incorporating 2 inches of compost and a cup of lawn fertilizer per 50 square feet of bed area.

To reduce squirrel feeding at your bird feeders, consider using a steel bird feeder with a weight sensitive perch. They can also be set to discourage white winged doves. Another option is to feed safflower seed instead of sunflower seeds. Cardinals, chickadees, titmice and other desirable birds like the safflower seed nearly as well as sunflower seeds but squirrels are not fond of it.