

Gardening Calendar for January

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January is an excellent time to plant shade trees and shrubs in Central Texas. The temperatures are moderate enough that the plants can develop a root system that will be useful when the plant must face the challenges of our demanding summer weather.

In the vegetable garden it is time to plant onion transplants. Area nurseries offer as many as 8 different varieties of transplants. My favorites are 1015 mild yellow onion and for a little more onion taste, the red creole. The Legend variety that is offered is pitched as an improved selection of the 1015. Prepare the planting bed by incorporating 2 inches of compost and 10 cups of slow-release or "winterizer" lawn fertilizer per 100 sq. feet of bed. Onions are high nitrogen users so be prepared to side dress the row every 3 weeks with one of the high nitrogen fertilizers described. Two examples are 19-5-9 and 18-6-12.

The onions are sold in bundles of about 60 plants. If you plant them every 4 inches in an eight-foot row that means you will have enough plants for 2.5 rows. It also means that you can use every other onion for a green onion. Use the green onions up by March 15 and the spacing of the remaining onions should be just right for full development of the bulb on the mature onions. If you plant the onions in early January, the bulbs will reach full size about May 30. Recognize that the plants are ready to harvest by the size of the bulb and that the stalks will go from upright to laying over.

In late January it is time to plant potatoes. Obtain seed potatoes from an area nursery. You may have to call around to find a source, not all nurseries offer seed potatoes. I have the best luck with red potatoes such as Pontiac. They are sold by the pound. Select medium sized potatoes (baseball size) with at least two eyes positioned so you can cut them in half to make two seeds. After cutting them, let them dry for a day before planting. Potatoes are not as dependent on fertilizer as onions are. One option that works is to prepare the soil with 10 cups of slow-release lawn fertilizer and forego the side dressing.

Dig a trench 12 inches deep and lay a piece of the seed potato with at least one eye every 18 inches in the trench. Cover the seed potatoes in the trench initially with 3-4 inches of soil. The potato stems will soon emerge. As they grow upwards add more soil to cover all but the crown once or twice per week until you run out of soil. It works well to fill the trench with soil, but it is even better if you can "hill up" the soil over the trench. To accomplish the "hilling" you will have to borrow soil from other parts of the garden. Compost also works well.

You can begin to harvest your potatoes when the plants begin to bloom. Finish harvest by the time all the plants have browned. Potatoes left in the ground during a wet period after the plants decline are likely to rot.

Potatoes grown in Central and South Texas do not store well. Use them in recipes for new potatoes.

The winter color plants have fared very well this year. If your cyclamen and primula receive enough sun to cause some wilting, a quick application of water to the base of the plant usually corrects the situation. Sometimes the root systems don't expand enough to take advantage of drip irrigation. The mild weather this fall, and winter so far means that some zinnias and milkweed are still blooming. We have also not yet experienced any bloomless period for the snapdragons and other winter annuals.

Just in case the freezing temps show up, expect bloom reductions and have your plant covers and heat sources available. The lemons and limes are especially vulnerable to freezing temps.