



# Grow, Know, and Go

November 2023

Gardening in North Texas

## Leave the Leaves: Re-Thinking Responsible Leaf Management

*By Carol Gonzales, Dallas County Master Gardener*

Many homeowners dread the fall season because of the great labor they go through to clear their properties of fallen leaves. And what a shame! By completely clearing our properties of leaves, we are not only creating more work for ourselves, but we are losing a valuable natural resource, robbing habitat and food sources for important wildlife in our environment, and needlessly taking up valuable space in our landfills. This is the perfect time to re-imagine what responsible leaf management looks like on your property.

### **The Many Benefits of Leaves**

Leaves contain 50 to 80 percent of all the nutrients a plant has extracted from the soil and air during the season. This means leaves are basically free fertilizer! If you haul them to the dump, your landscaping plants will miss out on the vital nutrients they spent the year collecting.

Fall leaves also provide effective and cost-free mulch for your landscape, conserving moisture, providing temperature insulation, and preventing soil erosion. In natural environments like forests and pastures, tree leaves carpet the ground and, over time, create a rich topsoil as healthy bacteria and fungi decompose the leaves. We can take advantage of the same process in areas of our landscape.

Fallen leaves also are critical in providing habitats and food sources for pollinators and other creatures that dwell on our



properties. The majority of our native moth and butterfly species spend their winter in leaf litter, and as pollinators, their survival has a big impact on our ecosystem. Leaf piles also foster spiders, worms, nematodes, snails, and other invertebrates. All of these creatures provide food for animals further up the food chain, like birds. When you preserve and manage your leaves, you are supporting an entire ecosystem.

If you enjoy seeing fireflies in the summer, protect them now for the winter. Fireflies are beetles and spend most of their lives as larva in leaf litter, rotting logs, and other moist areas. Firefly larvae are highly beneficial for your garden, eating many soft-bodied insects like slugs and snails. They live in leaf litter as larvae for one to three years before metamorphosing into adult fireflies.

Bumblebees are another pollinator that relies on leaves. Queen bumblebees burrow in the ground in winter, and as the sole survivors of their colony, they benefit from a healthy layer of leaf litter to insulate them from the elements.



### Best Ways to Manage the Leaves

Where you can do it, the best way to manage leaves on your property is to leave them where they fall. If you're worried about what your neighbors might think, post an educational sign like the one pictured left from the [University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension](https://extension.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2022-09/leaving-leaves-and-flower-stalks-for-wildlife-fact-sheet.pdf). This lets your neighbors understand your intentions and could influence them to join your efforts in responsible leaf management.

### Mowing Leaves on your Lawn

Use a mulching lawn mower to handle light leaf drop on your lawn. This technique is probably the most efficient and easiest way to manage leaf accumulation. Leaves that have been mowed will decompose faster and will provide both slow-released nutrition and mulch protection for your lawn.

### Mulching Trees and Beds

Using leaves as a mulch is a simple and effective way to recycle leaves and improve your landscape, and you do not have to shred the leaves to get the benefits. In fact, shredding the leaves can damage the beneficial insects and their larva that live on the leaves. Leaf mulch reduces evaporation, inhibits weed growth, stabilizes soil temperatures, and prevents erosion and soil compaction. As it decomposes, it releases valuable nutrients and builds a healthy topsoil. Mulches are especially beneficial around newly-established plants, greatly increasing their likelihood of survival.

Apply a four-inch layer of leaf mulch in a donut shape around the base of the trees. Do not allow the mulch to rise above the tree's root flair. Leaves piled high against the tree base promotes decay and pests. For shrubs, use a layer from three to six inches of leaves, and for flower beds apply a two-to-three-inch layer of leaves. This helps insulate the roots and resists damage caused by repeated freezing and thawing. For vegetable gardens, a thick layer of leaves placed between the rows provides both mulch and a walkway allowing work in the garden during wet periods.

### Easy Bag Composting

Composting leaves is a great solution, and bag composting is one of the easiest composting methods, though the quality may not be as high as more traditional methods. Some gardeners swear by this method and let the leaf bags compost for six months or more before using them.

To produce compost in a bag, simply collect the leaves and place them in heavy-duty, plastic trash bags. As with other methods of composting, shredded or crushed leaves work best. Into each bag





full of leaves, put one to two shovels of garden soil and either two shovels of manure or about one-half cup of a high nitrogen fertilizer. Apply enough water to thoroughly moisten the leaves. Punch 10 to 15 holes in the plastic bag to allow for air circulation through the leaves. Turn the bag once or twice and add water, if needed, to keep the leaves moist. Store your bags of composting leaves out of sight. Check on the composting process every few weeks, turn the bags a bit and add water, if needed. Under most circumstances, the compost will be ready for use in about 6 to 8 weeks.



### Soil Improvement

If you have a bit more energy, another recommended strategy for using leaves is to improve the soil in vegetable gardens and annual planting beds. Simply collect the leaves and work them directly into the soil during the fall. They will have enough time to decompose before spring planting, and adding a bit of fertilizer will speed up the decomposition process. A six-to-eight-inch layer of leaves tilled into the soil can improve its drainage, aeration and nutrient-holding capacity.

For more information about responsible leaf management, learn about Texas A&M's Earth-Kind® [Don't Bag It Leaf Management Plan](#).

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## Preparing Our Gardens and Landscapes for Winter

*By Katerina Graham, Dallas County Horticulture Agent*

It is that time of the year! As we get ready for the winter months by switching out our closets, adjusting our thermostats, and even preparing heartier meals than summer's light fare, let us not forget about our gardens and landscapes.

Before plunging into the list of things we should do, it is helpful to take a step back and understand why a freeze can spell a disaster for our plants. First, plants will die if not acclimated to the cold temperatures, but it is hard to figure out if a plant you are purchasing is hardy enough to withstand our winter *unless* you check the plant tag. Thus, before you decide to buy a plant, become aware of the minimum temperature the plant can endure.



The second reason plants freeze is that we forget to pay attention to the weather forecast. Even if plants can tolerate subzero temperatures, they may only withstand such temperatures for a few hours or only a few degrees below 32 degrees. Plant cells hold water: if the water cools enough to form crystals inside the cell, those crystals can cut through the cell membrane or cut through important internal cell structures. If crystals form on the outside (between plant cells), there will be a change in salt concentration, causing the water inside the cell to move out to balance the concentration, and this results in cellular dehydration. All three scenarios will kill the plant. Thus, keeping an eye on the details of expected nighttime, and sometimes daytime temperatures, is key to taking action.

The third reason our plants die in the winter is that, sometimes, we think or wish (Groundhog Day anyone?) that spring

would arrive already. After a couple of warmer days, we excitedly decide to transplant our veggie starts or sow the first seeds of the season. All is well until mother nature reminds us with a sudden cold front that winter is not over, and we lose our first crop due to our eagerness.

### **How do we prepare our gardens for winter?**

- Harvest everything in the vegetable garden that will not tolerate low temperatures. Cut vegetable plants down to the crown of the root, but do not pull up the roots. A decomposing root will provide microorganisms in your soil with the organic matter they need to continue living and reproducing through the winter.
- Place in a bag and throw in the trash any vegetable plant debris, fallen and rotting fruit, diseased leaves, and stems. This process is known as sanitation, and it is an extremely crucial step to prevent plant diseases the following year. Many pathogens hibernate in the leftover debris at the end of a growing season; removing it prevents or at least decreases the likelihood of early spring diseases.



- Aerate and loosen the soil using a tool such as a grelinette broadfork, shown left; do not “turn the soil.” The latter is a practice that disrupts the beneficial soil food web and has the disadvantage of exposing and waking up weed seeds.
- Add a 2-4 inch layer of mulch to both your vegetable gardens and your landscapes. Take advantage of fallen leaves, or purchase hardwood mulch. Mulch not only protects your plants by buffering the soil temperature, but it also enhances your beautiful landscape.

### **Once freeze warnings have been posted...**

- Thoroughly water your landscape. Moist soil stays warmer than dry soil, and the air above moist soil will be about 5 degrees warmer than the air above dry soil.
- When you've finished watering, turn off automatic watering cycles and, if a hard freeze is expected, drain the pipes. Plants need less water in the winter, so use manual settings on your sprinklers to water only when needed. Plant diseases will be kept at bay with less watering, especially those caused by fungal spores that ‘wake up’ in humid and cool conditions. You will also save money!
- If you have plants in containers and pots, move them indoors. If you can only afford to move them into a garage or covered area, push them as closely as possible to each other and consider covering them with a sheet.
- If you have a vegetable garden, take advantage of the greenhouse effect! Use frost protection fabric to cover your edible crops to increase the temperature under the cover between 2 to 4 degrees, depending on the thickness. You may place row covers directly over the crops or over PVC low tunnels. If you use plastic instead of fabric and add a string of C7 light bulbs (large Christmas lights) inside of the low tunnel, temperatures may be increased as much as 18 degrees.
- Wait until freezes are over before pruning or cutting back perennials.

### **Prioritize Your Efforts**

There are three ways to prioritize your efforts to help save the highest number of plants during a freeze event. Focus first on saving perennials over annuals. Then, focus on plants that take the least effort to winterize. Finally, prioritize recently planted over older, more established plants, which have a better chance of pulling through a cold spell. Take note that if you keep losing certain ornamentals to winter weather, it's time to do some homework and find replacement cultivars that are adapted to our North Texas climate.



Ready to winterize your landscapes and gardens? Grab a warm coat, wrap on a scarf, and don't forget the gloves! Check out the Earth-Kind® Plant Selector tool [here](#) to find plants that are well-suited for our region.

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## No Worries, No FOMO: We Don't Publish a December Issue

Just a reminder that the DCMGA does not publish a December issue of the *Grow, Know, and Go* newsletter.

**Happy Holidays and Happy New Year!**



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## Upcoming Events

**November 16, 2023 11:30am -1:00pm** [DCMGA Monthly Meeting: Texas Invasive Species](#) Room H125, H Building, Brookhaven Campus, Dallas College, 3939 Valley View Lane, Farmers Branch. Speaker is Ashley Morgan-Olvera, who received her M.S. in Parasitology from Sam Houston State University in 2011. Shortly thereafter, she joined the Texas Invasive Species Institute (TISI) as a Field Biologist; directing multiple invasive beetle, snail, honeybee pest and parasite surveys throughout the years. Knowing public education is vital to the management and prevention of invasive species, she acquired the TexasInvasives.org program from the Wildflower Center in 2020 to reignite statewide invasive species outreach. Now, she is the Director of Research and Education for both entities, and looks forward to continued outreach and prevention of invasives in Texas. She will be speaking on Invasive Species: How to ID, Report and Remove Texas Invasives.

We will be having a Seasonal Cookie Swap. Please bring your favorite recipes for us to share.

**November 17, 2023 10:00am - 11:00am** [Meet Hummingbirds in Your Yard](#) Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church, 9800 Preston Road, Dallas. Learn more about our lovely ruby-throated hummingbirds: their biology, migration, courting, nesting and chick rearing. Also learn how to make your yard one of their favorites. Speaker is Janet D. Smith. Sponsored by

the Growing Saints Garden Club. Contact Elizabeth Small: stanliz96@gmail.com.

**November 17, 2023 11:00am - 12:00pm** [Asian Inspired Gardens](#) Dallas Arboretum, Test Pavilion, 8525 Garland Rd., Dallas. The Asian style can create calm, tranquil gardens. There are techniques any gardener can use to give a sense of expanded space, contemplative pauses, and harmonious arrangements to whatever style is preferred. Plant selection for Dallas, hardscape, and ornament is covered in this presentation. Speaker is CA Hiscock. All Dallas County Master Gardeners may attend this presentation free of charge.

**November 20, 2023 11:30am -12:30pm** [Water Conservation Gardening](#) Room H125, H Building, Brookhaven Campus, Dallas College, 3939 Valley View Lane, Farmers Branch. Speaker is Ruth Klein. Covers the 7 principles of water conservation gardening, and how one can use them in one's landscape. Topics include design ideas, soil preparation, using plants suitable for this area, using mulch, watering techniques, and maintenance.

<https://zoom.us/j/813827563> or Dial by your location: 1- 877 853 5247 or 1- 877 369 0926 | Meeting ID: 813 827 563

Zoom thru Methodist Health Systems/Generations Program. GloriaCristales@mhd.com

**December 2, 2023 2:00pm -3:00pm** [Get Plants for Free](#) Dallas Public Library - Fretz Park Branch, 6990 Beltline, Dallas. Learn how to create new plants from seeds, cuttings, and other plant parts. Speaker is Barbara Gollman. Contact: natalie.stigall@dallas.gov.

**December 8, 2023 11:00am - 12:00pm** [Planning a Vegetable Garden](#) Dallas Arboretum, Test Pavilion, 8525 Garland Rd., Dallas. Learn when and how to grow your own veggies. Speaker is John Hunt. All Master Gardeners may attend this event free of charge.

**January 15, 2024 11:30am -12:30pm** [Japanese Maples for Your Garden](#) Methodist Medical Center, Main Lobby located at Beckley & Methodist Drive, 1441 N. Beckley, Dallas. The reds, oranges and golds of Japanese Maples are breathtaking in the spring and fall. These trees can be easily grown in the shade here in North Texas and they are perfect understory trees. Learn about the vast variety of sizes and colors and how and when to plant them. The talk addresses other shade plants as well, and how to add serenity and beauty to the shade garden. Registration required. Speaker is Cindy Bolz

[View More at the DCMGA's Current Calendar of Events](#)



## December

Warning! Average Date of First Freeze in Dallas County: November 21st - 30th

### Planting

- Plant shade trees, fruit trees, and evergreen shrubs.
- Relocate established and plant new "balled & burlapped" trees and shrubs while they are dormant.



- Plant pre-chilled tulip and hyacinth bulbs (late December/early January). Plant daffodil and grape hyacinth immediately after purchase.
- Plant pansies, flowering kale and cabbage, dianthus, cyclamen, violas, and other cool season annuals.
- Select holiday season plants such as poinsettias, cyclamens, amaryllis, and paperwhite narcissus.

## Plant Care

- Water live Christmas trees as needed and water holiday plants such as poinsettias as needed.
- Check houseplants for pests such as scale, mealy bugs, fungus gnats, whiteflies, and spider mites.
- For areas of lawn with just a light covering of leaves, simply mow over them. Use excess leaves as mulch for shrubs and beds.
- Replenish finished compost and mulch in planting beds, preferably before the first freeze.
- Water thoroughly before a hard freeze to reduce chances of plant damage.
- Fertilize pansies and other winter annuals as needed.
- Water lawn and all other plants once every three weeks or so, if supplemental rainfall is less than one inch in a three-week period.
- Protect tender plants from hard freezes. Switch sprinkler systems to "Manual" mode for the balance of winter.
- Be sure to clean, sharpen, and repair all your garden and lawn tools. Now is also the best time to clean and have your power mower, edger, and trimmer serviced.
- Be sure the mower blade is sharpened and balanced as well.
- Provide food and water to the area's wintering birds.

## Pruning

- Prune evergreen trees such as magnolias, live oaks, and wax myrtles to minimize possible ice damage, if needed.
- Re-shape evergreen shrubs, if needed.
- Do major re-shaping of shade trees, if needed, during the winter dormancy.

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**New this month on our DCMGA Website:**

## Tips for Bringing Potted Plants Inside for the Winter

By Betsyanne Tippette



When fall weather sets in and temperatures drop to 50-55 degrees, it's time to think about moving your potted plants indoors for the winter. However, to prevent shocking your plants' systems, gradually transition them to your home by placing them in the shade for a week or two before taking them inside. [Read more...](#)

## How to Use Vinegar as an Herbicide

By DCMG Help Desk Team, Margaret Ghose



Does vinegar make a good weed killer? In order to use vinegar and other acetic acid herbicides effectively, it is important to understand what they are and how they work to kill weeds.: [Read more ..](#)

## Plant of the Month - *Scutellaria wrightii*

By At Home Botanist Team




Wright's Skullcap, scientifically known as *Scutellaria wrightii*, is a captivating perennial herb that boasts an array of fascinating characteristics, making it a valuable addition to residential gardens across North America. This plant hails from the mint family, Lamiaceae, and originates from various regions within the continent:

[Read more...](#)

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