As we move into the 2014 year, many families and individuals enjoy the winter months perched near their woodstove or fireplace while watching old timey movies such as “White Christmas,” playing cards or exploring the latest Wii game. If you’re a gardener instead of roasting chestnuts by the open fire you may be perusing seed catalogs, gardening books and contemplating outdoor landscape plans for 2014. Before making decisions about this years garden beds, consider visiting the National Gardening Bureau’s website http://www.ngb.org. Here you will find a fun list of the latest vegetable, herb and flower varieties for 2014. While looking over this website and others, along with catalogs too, remember to consider improved insect and/or disease resistance and watch for drought-tolerant types. Make sure to reorder successful varieties as well as those you wish to try again and order early, as new and popular varieties sell out early!

As we transition into 2014, there may be lulls in the day when you find yourself dreaming of a mature home orchard, beds filled with bright vegetables colors, fragrant herbs and eye busting berries. If so, remember to take advantage of these mild spells and check on indoor and outdoor plants with the following suggestions.

Plan a visit to some of our local nurseries or the Asheville Arboretum where you can observe trees and shrubs in their winter phase. Some have quite lovely shapes, handsome and distinct features and colors that may enhance your landscape.

For those who love to propagate, now is the time to take hardwood cuttings of forsythia, spirea, Japanese quince, wisteria, mock-orange, trumpet-vine and viburnum. Yews, junipers, holly, boxwood, broad-leaf evergreens, and many deciduous trees and shrubs can be propagated too. Insert evergreen cuttings in vermiculite or sand in a cool greenhouse.
With February quickly approaching, the urge “to be” outdoors pruning, preparing and planting in and around our garden and landscape areas comes instinctively to most individuals as temperatures reach Hi-Low (F) averages at 26 and 53 degrees with precipitation around 4.79 inches around the Bryson City and Sylva area. For Cashiers, average Hi-Low temperatures range at 27 and 48 degrees with an average precipitation of 7.18 inches.

As our wintery days slowly lengthen, buds begin to unfold, flowers start blooming and varying ground covers and weeds pop up and or turn varying shades of brown to green. As a result, the impulse to take care of one’s lawn, flowers, vegetables, fruit and berries and favorite shrubs, builds with the onset of warmer days. The following suggestions are typical gardening tasks to consider for the month of February.

**Fruits & Berries**

Now is the time to plant fruit trees, along with blueberries, strawberries, caneberries (blackberries and raspberries), and grape vines.

Keep in mind, producing insect and disease free fruit trees requires a thorough spray program, proper pruning, and good cultural practices. Give thought to this before planting a backyard orchard. Fruit trees, such as peaches, pears, apples, and plums, can be sprayed now with dormant oils to reduce insect problems.

For already established fruit trees and grapes, February and or early March is a fine time to prune after the worst of the winter cold is passed, but before spring growth begins. For disease and insect control, cut out dead wood and dispose of the prunings.

Peaches grow best when maintained with an open center (no central leader). Keep three or four strong, scaffold branches evenly distributed around the trunk. Limbs that branch out at a 60-degree angle are preferred, but spreaders can be used to widen narrow crotch angles.

Blueberries are somewhat self-sterile. Be sure to plan for more than one variety to enhance the pollination necessary for fruiting. Highbush blueberries make attractive ornamental hedges with bright red, fall color.

Fertilize fruit trees as soon as possible after the ground thaws, but before flowering begins.

**Vegetables**

Send off seed orders this month to take advantage of seasonal discounts. Some companies offer bonus seeds of new varieties to early buyers.

Break up soil in garden beds and turn under cover crop when soil is not too wet. Gardening in a raised bed improves drainage and gives an earlier start in areas with cold, wet soil.

Season Extension - an easy way to hold floating row covers in place is by stretching wire or string at ground level and using clothes pins to attach it. This makes for easy loosening for harvest or just to check the progress.

This year plan to grow at least one new vegetable that you’ve never grown before; it may be better than what you are already growing.
February - March Horticulture Tips

Lawns
- Think Spring! This is the month for the spring application of slow releasing fertilizer to the lawn.
- If you have bare spots that did not recover from drought, late February or early March would be a good time to put down grass seed.
- Check your lawn mower. Sharpen and tune it up if you missed this chore last fall.

Vegetables
- Soil Sample now if you haven’t done so already. The test is free you just need to sample and mail off to NCDA’s lab in Raleigh. You can pick up soil boxes at your local Extension office.
- Start Planning this years garden. Sketch the garden and fill in rows for rotating crops and planning space.
- Check notes from last year to see which varieties performed well and which are not worth planting again. Start shopping for seeds at garden centers and seed catalogs.
- Go ahead and start planting English and edible-pod peas, spinach, kale, onions and a few other cold hardy crops in late February through March.
- Plant an asparagus bed.
- Mow cover crops and turn under if the soil is not too wet to work.

Fruits
- Prune grape vines. The sap may drip from cuts during warmer temperatures but not too worry.
- Check and repair your trellises for grape vines and blackberries.
- Mature apple and pear trees can be pruned, but do not prune young fruit trees, peaches or plums before March unless the buds are swollen and ready to flower.

February Mountain Gardening Chores continued..

If the pH in your asparagus bed is too low, you can apply lime or wood ashes. The ideal pH for asparagus is 6.0 to 6.8. For potatoes look for an ideal pH around 5.5 -5.8.

Later in the month, when soil is dry enough to work, begin sowing shelling and snap peas, snow peas, onions, radishes, spinach and herbs such as chives, thyme and parsley.

Don’t be too quick with starting your vegetable plants indoors. Six weeks ahead of the expected planting date is early enough for the fast-growth species such as cabbage. Eight weeks allows enough time for the slower-growing types such as peppers.

Lawns
Now is the time to fertilize cool season lawns. Use a slow-release fertilizer at a rate of ½ to 1 lb. of nitrogen per 1000 sq. ft.

Henbit patrol – look out for henbit and other broadleaf weeds to emerge, pull them while they are small or spot treat with a broadleaf herbicide.
Remove snow from evergreen shrubs to prevent breaking. Tap the branches gently. If an ice storm damages your trees, prune the broken branches. If left alone, the wood fiber may not grow back, and the branch will die.

How energy efficient is your landscape? Do you have evergreen trees or shrubs blocking a window where the sun's warmth would normally enter? Consider replacing them with deciduous plants that would let sun in during winter, but cast cooling shade in summer.

Check stored fruits and vegetables such as potatoes and apples for bad spots that may lead to decay. Remove and use those that show signs of spoiling. Separate others into slotted trays or bins to increase air circulation and reduce decay possibilities.

Add garden record keeping to the list of New Year’s resolutions. As the season progresses take notes of which varieties of flowers and vegetables do best and which do poorly in your garden.

Sincerely,
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