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Zone Report February 2016

Winter is not over, and who knows what is in store for us. Pay attention if we have ice or snow and protect your plants as much as possible. When plants are frozen, try to avoid any contact with them as they will be brittle.

Shrubs:

While February is a great month for pruning, pay attention to weather conditions. Last year, we didn't prune until mid-March because of the cold winter weather. When you do prune, be sure you know which plants should be pruned now and which one should not. Anything that blooms in the spring should be left alone or you are removing the flower buds they set last fall. Prune them AFTER they bloom. Plants that bloom in the summer—crape myrtles, roses, althea, butterfly bush (buddleia) and summer spireas should all be pruned now if needed. They bloom on the new growth, and correct pruning can actually increase summer flowering. Some plants like buddleia and spirea need to be pruned hard each season to keep them more compact and freely blooming. If weather conditions are still cold, you can wait until March to prune. Non-blooming evergreen plants that simply need a little shaping or shearing can be pruned a little at any season, but if they really need severe pruning, do that now or early next month so that the recovery process happens quickly. Roses need specialized pruning. Know what type of rose bush you are growing. Hybrid tea roses need to be pruned back to within 8 – 18 inches from the ground every February with a more regimented pruning schedule. Knockout and other shrub roses should still be pruned to at least 18 inches, but they can be sheared if you choose to. Climbing roses should be allowed to bloom in the spring before you prune them back.

Fruit Crops:

Fruit trees, blueberry bushes and grape vines also need annual pruning and now is the time to do that. Annual pruning is needed to get the most out of these crops. Thinning out the trees, removing any overcrossing limbs and excess water sprouts encourages the remaining fruits to grow larger. Increasing air circulation and sunlight penetration also helps with insects and diseases. Muscadine grapes simply need a general shearing, while in table grapes we count buds. A well established, older grape vine in full sun can have a total of 60 buds left on the vines after pruning. Young grape vines should only have 10-15 buds left. If you leave too many fruiting buds you end up with more fruit than the vine can support. Instead of a ripe cluster of fruit, you end up with one grape at a time ripening and the size is greatly reduced. Blueberry bushes should have an equal number of 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 year old canes. After five years the canes become overly woody and production goes down.

Bulbs:

Crocus, snowdrops and early daffodils are blooming now. If you planted a variety of bulbs you can have non-stop blooming from February through April. Make sure that you allow the foliage to grow on all bulbs for at least six weeks after they finish blooming. A complete fertilizer could be applied now for all bulbs which will help aid in their flower set for next season. Don't braid or twist the foliage after bloom as this can impeded their growth.

Annuals & Perennials:

Early season perennials are up now or should be beginning; some are even beginning to bloom. Hellebores thrive in the cool months of February and March as do columbine. They are also quite cold hardy, so a cold snap should not bother them. The same is not true for tender perennials that are emerging. Watch for late freezes or huge temperature swings this month and try to have a little extra mulch handy for protection if needed. It is time to cut back your ornamental grasses and other perennials foliage that you let remain for the winter. Check to see if any new growth has begun before pruning so you don't have cut edges on this season's growth. Removing the foliage on even the evergreen liriope and mondo grass gives them a cleaner start. Fertilize and deadhead your winter annuals to help them continue to bloom. From violas and pansies to snapdragons and dianthus, winter blooms are dependent on the winter weather, but they should be bouncing back now and a little extra care can give you blooms that will carry you through until spring planting.

Vegetable Gardens:

Many home gardeners are gardening year round now using season extenders—covering their gardens when cold. Continue to harvest and replant. If you did not plant a winter garden, as long as the ground is workable, start planting. Cool season gardens are much easier to maintain than our summer gardens. Insects and diseases haven't kicked in and the plants can grow undamaged. Plant early peas, greens, onions, potatoes, broccoli, cabbage and carrots. Mulch your plants well to keep weeds at bay and water as needed.

Lawns:

That greening that you are seeing in your lawn is not grass, but winter weeds. If you did not keep on top of them in December and January, do so soon or it will be too late. Winter weeds really kick in and grow with warmer temperatures and longer days. Once they begin blooming, they set seeds which will come back to haunt you next year. Winter annual weeds will then die and lay dormant until next fall. Annual weeds are by far easier to kill than the perennials, such as dandelions and wild garlic. Annuals can be maintained by pulling or mowing to prevent bloom and seed set. For perennials, the more you mow, the stronger their root system gets. Herbicides containing 2, 4-D should take care of them, but don't delay. Don't fertilize until the grass is totally green in late April or May.