



# Concho Valley

December 2023

# HORTICULTURE UPDATE

## Time to Plant Trees and Shrubs

As unpredictable as our weather is, it's always a sure bet that summer will be hot and dry. That's why fall through winter is the best time of year to plant trees and shrubs, because it gives them time to establish good roots and overcome transplant shock before the harshest season hits. An old proverb says that "the best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago, and the next best time is now."

Trees are the most permanent component of the landscape, and shrubs last long as well, so when installing these important foundation plants, do so with careful planning, good design and proper planting technique. Whether creating a brand-new landscape from scratch, or rejuvenating an old yard, now is a great time to plant. Large shrubs should be reserved for the corners of the home, to help it look wider. Don't cover windows with tall shrubs, or stagger them between the windows, as that can break up the visual flow across the front of the home and make it look smaller. Use dwarf shrubs for the front of the home so they don't get too tall and require frequent pruning.

Depending on the specific landscape, a good general rule of thumb is to place trees at 45-degree angles off the front corners of the home – not in front, visually 'dividing' the home into sections, but framing it to highlight the home. The right planting depth is very important – only plant trees as deep as the rootball; don't place in a deeper hole that requires soil to be filled in over the root ball. Sometimes nursery trees even have too much soil over the rootball in the container, so check to see if there is loose soil that can be scraped off the top. Remove excess soil until you see roots matted into soil, and dig the hole as deep as the roots are growing. Very large, heavy trees can even be planted slightly above grade because their weight will cause them to settle in a little deeper over time. Trees planted too deep will have issues later on – the canopies will not be as attractive and they will be more susceptible to stress.

Improve soil with compost before planting shrubs, but not trees. Only the native soil dug from the hole should be used to fill after planting; trees are too large to amend all the soil their roots will occupy, so choose well-adapted species that do well in the local soil and climate. Apply a three to four-inch-deep layer of mulch after planting trees and/or shrubs, but don't pile it around the trunk like a volcano – that can be stressful to the plants. Mulch helps trees and shrubs get established faster because it helps keep weed competition under control, moderates soil temperature, and conserves water.

## December To-Do's

- Plant spring bulbs like daffodils
- Turn off automatic irrigation - but still water occasionally, depending on plant type and weather
- Replenish mulch in beds
- Plant cool season vegetables such as spinach and kale

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## Pecan Update

We will be conducting the annual Concho Valley Pecan show on Friday, December 1st.

Entries will be accepted until noon on Wednesday, November 29th. This is a great way to learn what variety of pecans you may have and to receive information on growing pecans in our area. For details on how to enter, contact the extension office at 325-659-6528

# Christmas Trees and Decor



Using real plants can be a lot of fun for Holiday decorations, whether it's a living Christmas tree that can be planted after the season or greenery cut from the yard. For those that are not allergic, real plants add fragrance and beauty and are hard to beat.

Evergreen shrubs in the landscape such as juniper and holly can be used to create homemade wreaths, or boughs to place on mantles and table centerpieces. It won't hurt the plant to prune it this time of year, just don't overdo it; don't remove more than about 25% when getting cuttings. Rosemary is a great evergreen herb that can be utilized during the holiday season as well. Cuttings smell nice and can be used along with the other evergreen cuttings, or a small potted rosemary plant can be pruned into the shape of a Christmas tree and decorated with small ornaments.

If using a real Christmas tree select a fresh, healthy one. Try a local Christmas tree farm to cut your own down and know it's as fresh as possible. If purchasing pre-cut, give the needles a gentle tug; they should stay put and not come off easily. To keep it fresh, cut an inch off the bottom after transporting to the final location where it will be displayed and place in water immediately. Keep the basin full of water so the tree can readily absorb what it needs. This helps not only with appearance, but with safety – trees that dry out are more prone to fires.

If you'd like a tree to plant after the holiday, living Christmas trees are a fun option. Species selection is important, as we are limited as to what kinds of evergreen trees will thrive or can survive in the Concho Valley. The Arizona cypress and Afghan pine are two examples that should do well. Live trees can only be used inside for a limited amount of time because of the warm, dry air and the lack of light; so they can't be used as long as cut trees. Wait until less than 10 days to Christmas before bringing in a live tree and then plant it immediately afterward.

Winter is a good time of year for tree planting - some tips for success include: dig a hole that's wider than the root ball but no deeper, plant in an area with full sun and plenty of room to grow to mature size, and apply a layer of wood-based mulch over the root ball after planting. Water the tree well after planting, and then water as needed until established.

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## Plant Spotlight

### Possumhaw Holly

*Ilex decidua*

Deciduous holly that provides great winter interest - bright orange or red berries persist into winter. Only female plants will produce berries, but can be pollinated by any type of holly. Is adaptable to many soil and climate conditions.





# Foods to Plant in Winter

There is a special kind of enjoyment that comes when serving a meal with homegrown ingredients or giving gifts of fruits and vegetables to friends. Now is a great time of year to think about incorporating more edible plants into the landscape, as winter is ideal for planting things like fruit trees, asparagus, onions and evergreen herbs.

First – fruit trees. Container grown trees can be planted year-round, though summer is the most difficult time of year to establish them. Bare-root fruit trees should only be purchased and planted in the dormant winter season (January), so don't wait too long – when it warms up in late winter and early spring it's too late to have good success planting bare-root. Some of the recommended fruit tree options for the Concho Valley include peaches (varieties such as Ranger, Redglobe, Loring, Harvester); plums (Morris, Methley, Santa Rosa); pears (Orient, Moonglow, Le Conte); apples (Fuji, Holland, Gala); and pomegranates (Salavatski, Sumbar, Al-Sirin-Nar, Surh Anor). The options don't end there, also consider figs, persimmons, apricots, and jujubes. Winter is also a great time of year to plant pecan trees, and some of the improved varieties that are recommended for the area include Pawnee, Nacono, Hopi, Western, Waco and Sioux.

Blackberries will do well in the local soil and climate – though they are large sprawling plants and many varieties are very thorny. So keep that in mind when choosing a spot to plant. Some thornless varieties to choose from include Ouachita and Natchez, while thorny varieties that would be good include Kiowa, Womack, and Rosborough. Blackberries are biennial plants and make fruit on two-year old stems (called canes). At the end of the growing season, prune off canes that made fruit but leaves the rest of the canes to make fruit the following year (don't just cut the whole plant to the ground).

Grapes are a nice addition to a landscape with a large fence, arbor, pergola or other structure that could support a large heavy vine. Champlein is a wonderful variety for landscape arbors. Other grapes that would work include table grapes like Mars, Reliance, and Flame Seedless; wine grapes can also do well, such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Tempranillo. For more detailed info on growing any of these fruit crops, visit <https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/>.

# Winter To-Do List



Leaves have started dropping and should not be bagged up to take up space in the landfill, but used as valuable organic matter in the landscape. Most leaves can just be mowed over on the lawn to shred and break down into the soil, or they can be gathered up for a compost bin or used as mulch in the garden.

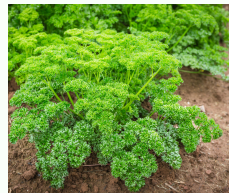
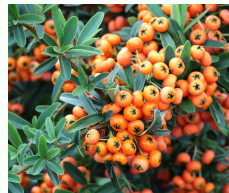
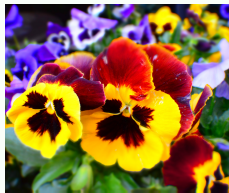
Water needs are greatly reduced and irrigation should be reduced to match. Water lawns, shrubs etc thoroughly once every three to four weeks when there's no rain. Water winter vegetables and annual color in beds and containers as needed, up to a couple times per week depending on weather.

Clean up frost-damaged perennial tops, and even those that have not been killed by frost can be cut back so mulch can be replenished to protect roots when it gets colder. Ornamental grasses can still provide aesthetic value after they turn brown, so they can be left for the structure and interest they provide but be sure to cut down to the ground in late winter before new green growth appears.

Winter is a great time of year to work on soil improvement. It can be physically demanding but very simple. Just remember the phrase 'compost once, mulch forever.' Any spots in the yard that need rejuvenation, or any new beds or gardens that will be added in the spring, should be tilled up to loosen and aerate the heavy soil. Incorporate organic matter (well-finished compost) to maximize the tilling step and allow the soil to stay loosened and porous instead of settling back into compaction. Roots need to 'breathe' and allowing oxygen to penetrate into the soil more readily can make a huge difference in plant health and growth. And organic matter provides important nutrients and provides many crucial functions for healthy plant growth.

December through January is also a good opportunity to prune shade trees. Wait until it cools down more to prune oaks, to ensure that the nitidulid beetle that can spread oak wilt disease is dormant. Don't remove more than a third of the canopy in one year, not counting dead wood.

# Winter Curb Appeal



I love fall and winter in Texas, but it is sad to see the pretty warm-season annuals and perennials fade away when it gets cold. There are several ways to keep the landscape looking bright, colorful and attractive through the winter though, and now is a good time to transition over to cool season color and interest.

Cool season annuals provide a big impact and beautiful color punch to the winter landscape. To get the best effect from annuals, start by preparing the soil with compost if planting in the ground or use potting mix if planting in containers. Ensure that the containers have good drainage holes for excess water to flow out. While proper plant spacing is important for permanent plants, annuals are just there for the season and can be squeezed together to make the most of them. Planting in small 'pockets' or groupings, strategically placed in beds or containers will be more impactful than spreading a flat of them throughout the whole bed. Some of the best winter annual flowers include pansy, stock and snapdragon.

Winter vegetables can also be attractive in the landscape, providing a double benefit – food and beauty. Swiss chard and kale are some of the most striking, but all the winter vegetables provide bright, vibrant greenery like spinach, lettuce and broccoli. Keep annual flowers and vegetables watered and fertilized to have the best production and flowering. Keep flowers pinched as they fade to keep pansies, snapdragons etc blooming strong. Include some cool-season or evergreen herbs like parsley, rosemary and thyme to have fresh scents and greenery, and to have fresh herbs handy for cooking.

Shrubs that produce bright red berries in the winter like possumhaw holly, nandina and pyracantha make the yard look festive and appealing in the winter. Other ways to create a beautiful, inviting atmosphere in the yard in the winter include holiday décor like wreaths and lights.

Clean up the fallen leaves once they finish coming down, but don't bag them up and send off to the landfill. Often the leaves can simply be mowed and shredded into the lawn, or rake them up and add to the compost bin or use as mulch in beds. A fresh layer of mulch makes a big difference in curb appeal and is very helpful for keeping plant roots protected from cold weather. Keep weeds under control and continue to mow if needed for attractive yard all season long.

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## Poinsettias and Christmas Cactus

Poinsettias are a beautiful Christmas icon, but can be a bit finicky. While they are a winter holiday decoration here, they are actually native to the tropical regions of Mexico and Central America so they prefer a warm, humid environment. Questions are often raised on how to keep a poinsettia plant looking good throughout the holidays, and the three main factors to control are light, temperature and moisture.

One of the most common mistakes in poinsettia care is leaving the plastic decorative wrapper on the pot when watering. Poinsettias must be kept moist, but do not like to have 'wet feet,' or have soggy soil. Remove the wrapper, place in the sink and soak the potting soil thoroughly; then let the pot drain well before placing the wrapper back on. How often to water will depend on the temperature of the room and how much light the plant gets - just check the potting soil and water as soon as it starts to dry out on top.

Poinsettias require plenty of light to stay healthy so place in a location with bright but indirect light. As for temperature, they prefer warm days and cool nights, with no extremes in either direction. Keep away from doorways that can expose them to cold drafts, and also away from fireplaces and heaters.

Another pretty holiday house plant is the Christmas cactus. It makes an especially nice hanging basket because of pendulous stems that trail down. It has colorful flowers, most commonly pink or red, but orange and purple are also available.

If cared for properly and provided the right temperature and amount of light, it will bloom around Christmas time - just like the name implies. There are also other species that bloom around Thanksgiving or Easter. Like the poinsettia, a Christmas cactus can be picky to maintain. Although it is not a true cactus, it is somewhat drought tolerant and does not like constantly wet soil, but does need high humidity. Mist occasionally with water or use a humidifier to help keep the plant healthy during dry weather.



# UPCOMING EVENTS

## *December 2023*

Thursday, December 7, 1pm-2pm

### **PPC Seminar - Winter Vegetable Gardening**

*Location: Angelo West Branch Library, 3013 Vista del Arroyo, San Angelo*

*Cost: \$10*

*Speaker: Allison Schwarz, County Extension Agent - Horticulture*

Hosted by the People/Plant Connection; Learn about what crops love cold weather and grow food all winter long! To reserve a spot [Click Here](#) or call Susan Stanfield at 325-656-3104

Friday, November 17, 12pm-1pm

### **Lunch N Learn Class - Tree and Shrub Pruning**

*Location: Texas A&M Agrilife Extension Office, 113 W. Beauregard, San Angelo*

*Cost: \$5*

*Speaker: Allison Schwarz, County Extension Agent - Horticulture*

Hosted by the People/Plant Connection; Join us for a discussion about pruning mature shade trees as well as shrubs around the home. To reserve a spot [Click Here](#) or call Susan Stanfield at 325-656-3104

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For more information on any of the topics, or to ask questions please contact:



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