**Winter Gardening Do’s & Don’ts**

**General**

* Continue to water your overwintering outdoor plants unless the rains keep the soil moist. Irrigation should be reduced, not stopped, as plant photosynthesis slows down and cold weather dries plants out. Plants that are stressed lack of irrigation are more susceptible to frost damage.
* Clean up all garden debris, and dispose of it or compost it (not diseased items, however--toss these, don't compost them). Leaving debris in the garden provides harboring areas for overwintering pests. Periodically rough up soil surfaces to bring these pests and their egg cases to die of exposure on the surface.
* Cover the compost pile loosely with a tarp or black plastic to hold in heat and keep rain from leaching out the valuable nutrients.
* Thoroughly clean, sharpen, and oil tools, and apply linseed oil to wood handles. Store tools in a protected area, as severe weather and moisture contribute to their premature aging.
* Provide feeding stations for winter's hungry birds, and keep them well- supplied with seeds, suet, and water; they'll reward you in the spring and summer by eating the garden's undesirable insects.
* Make notes on last year's garden while your memory is still fresh. Your initial choices, impressions, and the results of this year's garden will provide a starting point for next year's choices.

**Your December garden chore list: Water wisely, plant liberally and beware of frosts**

* Clean out the rain gutters. As leaves and debris accumulate in the gutters all year, by winter there’s no room for rainwater. Instead, the water flows over the edge of the roof and beats up the plants below. If the “gunk” that comes out of the gutter is primarily dirt, decaying leaves and plant parts, simply add it to your compost pile.
* Don’t let water accumulate in dishes under potted plants since constant moisture can drown plant roots. Turn over dishes and buckets so they don’t become mosquito nurseries. Keep water moving in birdbaths or change the water frequently to keep mosquitoes from breeding in them.

**Clean up the garden**

* Many plants accumulate dead, brown branches underneath healthy green growth. This is a good time to figure out what is still healthy and living, and what is dead. Cut out the dead so the plant resprouts healthy and green next spring.
* When transplanting, be careful to not compact the soil, now that it's thoroughly cold and moist. After gently gathering the soil back around the transplant's roots, barely water it in--just enough to settle the plant. Tamping the soil more than lightly will damage the soil tilth by compression.
* Sow California poppies right before rain is forecasted: buy a packet of seeds and sprinkle them, don’t bury them; the rain comes and sticks them to the soil and triggers them to germinate; by the spring they’ll be glowing orange.
* Transplant strawberry runners if you’d like to expand or renew your strawberry patch.
* Make a shadow map: near the winter solstice of December 20, note how far shadows reach across your yard, in the morning, at noon, and in the late afternoon; trees and buildings make the biggest and longest shadows; the function of this is to guide your future plantings, as some plants enjoy being in chilly winter shade (like deciduous fruit trees) while others can suffer (like a banana that remains in shade through a frosty winter morning).

**Deciduous Fruit Trees**

* Watering can be reduced now.  Continue monitoring the soil moisture, but the trees are using less water this time of the year.  Mature trees very likely will not need any irrigations.
* Most varieties will begin showing a lot of yellow or drying leaves by now.  Leaf drop will be most noticeable after a rain shower or a windy period.  By the end of the month, depending upon the weather, trees may have no leaves left or still a moderate amount.
* On about Thanksgiving Day should be your first of three applications of a dormant disease control.  This is a liquid spray product containing either Copper Sulfate or Lime-sulfur (do not use Lime-sulfur on Apricots).  Both of these are organic products.  Applying these products should be an annual chore, repeated every year to avoid infestations of such diseases as Peach Leaf Curl, Shothole Fungus, Apple Scab, Brown Rot, and many others.

**Citrus and Avocados**

* Many tangerines (also called mandarins) will be ready for harvest this month.  Check the flavor of one or two first.  If the sugar level is high, pick some more.  If not, wait a bit longer.
* Citrus may already have a few yellow leaves, especially in inland gardens.  Don’t worry, they are warm weather plants and suffer a bit during the next few months of cool temperatures.
* Be sure to keep a very thick blanket of mulch, compost or fallen leaves under mature avocadoes and citrus .
* Don’t be alarmed by a lot of leaf drop on mature plants.  Avocados produce a lot of leaf litter nearly year round.  This is a normal condition.
* Be careful with irrigations now.  Warm, dry weather may require an irrigation; otherwise the cooler temperatures at this time of year suggest careful irrigations.
* It’s too late to plant an avocado successfully this year

**Annuals**

* This is another great month for putting in cool-season annuals.  The soil is still rather warm, but the temperatures are cooling off, making this another perfect planting month.
* Just a few cool-season annuals to install now include pansy, viola, stock, Iceland poppy, linaria, English daisy, alyssum, calendula, snapdragon, ornamental cabbage and kale, bedding cyclamen, cineraria and primrose.
* There is still a chance of some warm days and drying Santa Ana winds, so keep newly planted annuals well-watered until they are thoroughly rooted.