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Winter Dormancy: Gardening For the Fourth Season
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The winter holidays are just around the corner and you have your garden in order. Spring bulbs are planted. Garlic and potatoes are in the ground. Your garden has been “put to bed.” Tools sharpened and put away. Tender plants are mulched and waiting for the anticipated winter rains. Most plants are entering their dormant cycle, and you, no doubt, are ready to join them.

Not so quick. Winter in the garden is a time for planting, pruning, and planning.

Now is the time to take advantage of winter dormancy. From December through March your local nursery will have bare-root plants. These are plants that are dug while they are dormant, and they will have their roots exposed. Often they are more affordable than containerized plants, and they are definitely easier to handle.

You’ll find fruit trees, cane berries, asparagus, artichoke crowns, rhubarb, kiwi, strawberries, grapes, roses and vines available as bare-root plants. Check with your local nursery early and place an order. If you are stressed with holiday activities, ask the nursery to hold the plants until after the first of the year. This gives you an opportunity to plan your location, prepare the planting hole when the ground is pliable but not soggy, and get ready to welcome some new plants into your garden.

January is also time for winter pruning, but you’ll want to plan and space your tasks between rain and snowfall. Perennials that were not cut back in fall, should be pruned now. This is also the time to prune cane berries.

Fruit trees require pruning to shape the tree and open up the tree center for the spring growth. If you already have fruit trees, January is the time to apply a horticultural oil to control scale, mites, aphids, and other insects. Once again, check the weather and make certain that there is at least 24 hours of dry weather and around the application.

Now before you relax and reach for those seed catalogues, grab a sheet of paper and make a quick drawing of last season’s vegetable and annual garden. Note where you planted each plant

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family and think about where you can rotate your plantings for the upcoming year. Plant rotation is an important step in sustainable gardening. Plant rotation builds and sustains helpful soil microbes, reduces the spread of soil-borne disease, helps plants take in more nutrients, and makes for a healthier garden.

Planning is important before you shop those seed catalogues, because you don't want to plan for too many tomatoes or melons if you haven't set up a good rotation. The goal with plant rotation is to avoid planting the same plant families in the same location year upon year. Ideally, you will rotate plant families from one bed to another over at least a four-year period.

Learning to identify which plants belong to the same family is your initial task. Tomato, pepper, eggplant, and potato belong together. Cucumber, melon, squash, pumpkins and gourds are related. Cabbage, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, kale cauliflower, radishes are another family. Beets, spinach, Swiss chard comprise another. Beans, lentils, peas and peanuts belong together.

If your garden area is large, then your planning might be easy and you might even be able to leave one bed fallow each year. More than likely, your growing area is not too immense, and you must figure out a rotation plan that works for your space and your food preferences. This task will take a little time, but you'll be rewarded with a healthier garden, a more robust soil structure, and fewer soil-borne pests.

Once you have the families grouped and a rotation schedule established, you can finally kick off your shoes, surround yourself with your seed catalogues, and slip into the gardener's relaxed winter dormancy and dream of spring.

Learn essential information on the selection and proper planting of bare root fruit trees at this Saturday's class with UCCE Master Gardeners Walt Miller and Pam Lane. The free class focuses on planting techniques and tree selection, as well as the best fruit tree varieties for your El Dorado County location. Class is from 9:00 a.m. to noon on December 13, 2014 at the Government Hearing Room in Building C, 2850 Fairlane Court in Placerville.

UCCE Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at the office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.org/Master_Gardeners/ and you can also find us on Facebook.