

DIG THIS by Peg Tillery (for 1-24-07) Winter gardening tips © 2007

Is it spring yet? I'm not so fond of this very cold weather anymore. I'm ready to get out in the garden and start planting, pruning and cleaning up. You'll want to get started thinking about early spring gardening too. So here are a few ideas to get you going.

If you have fruit trees or small fruits you'll want to attract Orchard Mason Bees to your garden. These teensy blue-black bees are the first pollinators to awaken in February when temperatures hit 55 degrees during the day. You'll find mason bees and their houses at many of our local nurseries and the WSU Master Gardeners can help you build your own mason bee houses along with supplying you with free mason bees to get started.

Call the Extension Office at 360-337-7157 to receive information in the mail about constructing Mason Bee homes. Even if you don't build or buy a Mason Bee house, the bees live in cracks and crevices on the outside of our homes and in the bark of trees and other woody plants, so you'll see them now and then. Their whole goal in life is to mate (if they're the males) and to pollinate and lay eggs for the next season if they're females. In the process they profusely pollinate our fruit trees when they're blooming early in the spring.

Early spring is the perfect time to tidy up our gardens. Many of the woody plants and shrubs are still bare or just leafing out so you can see where you need to prune. The three D rule is a good one to follow for pruning. Prune out the Dead, Dumb and Dying. If you think you're not done pruning put away those bypass pruners and walk away. This is the point where we usually want to make just one more cut and we're always sorry. So if you don't think you're done, you really are. Move on to raking up all the leaves that provided our plants with a blanket and compost them.

While you're at it get those pesky weeds before they really become a nuisance. With the spring rain the weeds are ever so much easier to pull up and dispose of. Most weeds, without seeds or flowers will compost easily. Be sure to bag up and send to the trash any noxious weeds. It's also a good time to mulch your plants with one inch of finished compost or bark chips. When applying mulch avoid the crown of plants and the stems and bark – leave a margin around the plants so they can breathe. The idea of mulch is to keep the root zones cooler in hot weather, maintain moisture when needed and also to keep weeds down or make weeds easier to pull up.

If you grow fruits, then February and March, before temperatures warm up, is the time to spray delayed dormant oil to keep down scale insects, certain aphids, and also prevent diseases of fruit trees. Always read the label directions and apply accordingly. The WSU website <http://pep.wsu.edu/hortsense/> gives directions for each type of fruit and for the timing of the applications. If you misapply the oils and chemicals for fruit tree problems you can create a worse situation. The sprays also need a "sticker" to help the chemicals stay on the trees so make sure you follow the directions for success. Also, make sure your plant has a problem before applying any chemicals or taking any remedial actions.