

February Garden Tips

Authored by: Steve Campbell
Navajo County Cooperative Extension Agent

Depending on the property elevation there are several things that can be done in February which will provide limited production and help make the gardening season more productive. The biggest issue will be whether the soil is still frozen or not.

1. Composting: It is a good time to work compost into unfrozen ground during February. This allows the compost to integrate into the soil making it a more susceptible planting medium in April and May.
2. Turning the cover crop into the soil during February is as important as incorporating compost. Cover crops are not nitrogen stabilized and will require longer to become suitably incorporated into the soil making it suitable for productive planting.
3. For our lower elevation gardeners, cool season crops should be planted in areas where there is at least half day exposure to sunlight. Locally, the suggested crops are Kale, spinach, red romaine, radishes, and turnips. Onions, garlic, Jerusalem artichokes, and leeks can be set out. All of these crops, especially asparagus and artichokes should be well mulched to protect the crown area from late frost.
4. If the goal is to have well developed seedlings to set once temperatures reach the level where they can thrive; cold frames, mini greenhouses, sunny rooms, and window ledges can be used as planting areas.
 - a. Anything that will allow the plant and its developed root ball to be removed intact will serve as a good planting container: Just be certain that holes are cut into the bottom of the container to facilitate drainage.
 - b. Plastic containers with clear lids can be used as mini green houses for tender plants, remembering that nighttime temperatures may necessitate bringing them indoors at night.
 - c. Walls of water can be used outside and will provide protection from all but the hardest frost. They can be somewhat labor intensive in that they need to be closed at night when hard frost is experienced and opened when daytime temperatures exceed fifty degrees.
5. Bare root fruit and landscape planting is suitable when the soil has thawed from the winter. These plantings should include a mulch bed at least two inches thick covering the roots and extending up the stem.
6. Starting Sweet potatoes early is essential for a productive crop locally. They are time consuming and require considerable attention if you are to be rewarded with success.
 - a. Obtain an organic sweet potato and fit it halfway into a jar or glass filled with water.
 - b. Wait for the root slips to form, it takes about two months for them to reach significant size.

- c. When slips are about six inches long, twist them off the sweet potato and place in a separate jar filled with water.
 - d. Allow the slips to form a good a root mass before planting in loose, sandy, soil.
 - e. Do not plant until the ground is warm and all danger of frost is over. In the White Mountains it is generally best to plant sweet potatoes outside after the first week of June.
7. Pruning! Arguably, the most important maintenance activity the gardener will ever conduct is proper pruning of the fruit and landscape plants they are growing. Depending on the plant and the desired outcomes, pruning is a very specific process.
- a. Fruit trees produce on differently aged wood depending on variety. Obtain an accurate pruning guide and prune according to the needs of the plant and the desired outcomes of the gardener.
 - b. One key to pruning success is to prune regularly and never remove too much material at any one time.
 - c. Due to the high wind season each spring, pruning must be adjusted to accommodate the impacts of wind. The key is to keep the canopy of the tree or shrub open enough to let the wind pass through without causing damage to the plant. Also, branches will tend to grow longer on the downwind side, therefore, adjustments need to be made when pruning to balance the canopy each time it is pruned.

Cleanup! Winter results in leaves, broken branches, damaged plants, and lots of debris on the ground. February is a great time to do a thorough cleanup of the garden area. Mulch the smaller material and remove the large. Finally, all February cleaning does is make March, April, and May cleanup easier. The longer you let it lie around the harder it is to get it moving again