WINTER IS ON ITS WAY

Now is the time to prepare your gardens for winter. Follow the steps below for a beautiful garden through the winter and on into spring.

Plant cool season annual flowers. Try to get these plants in the ground by mid-November for winter color. Options include: snap dragon, swiss chard, ornamental cabbage and kale, calendula, bachelor’s buttons, dianthus, foxglove, sweet alyssum, stock, dusty miller and pansies.

Use fallen leaves for compost. Run over leaves with a lawn mower to break them down into smaller pieces then add them to the compost pile. The addition of some “green” material (kitchen scraps or grass clippings) will add nitrogen and help speed up the process.

You could use the leaves as mulch instead and allow them to compost in place in your flower beds or on your dormant vegetable garden. Mulch reduces weeds while insulating and protecting plant roots. A total of 2-4 inches of mulch is ideal. Too much mulch can cause issues. You can freshen old wood chip mulch by raking it to expose the less weathered mulch underneath.

If you have fallow beds in your vegetable garden, consider planting a cover crop this fall to turn into the soil in the spring. This will add organic matter and help build soil structure and fertility within the bed. Good fall cover crops include crimson clover and Austrian winter pea, both of which fix nitrogen.

When cutting back dead or diseased foliage and removing dead plants, remove the debris from the garden. Diseases and insects can overwinter in the debris and cause problems next spring. Throw out or burn diseased debris to remove it from the property.

You still have time to plant trees, shrubs or perennials during November. Remember to keep an eye on new plantings and don’t let them dry out over the winter.
Remember to save heavy pruning of trees and shrubs until late February or early March to prevent stimulating new growth that will be susceptible to cold damage during the winter.

You can plant spring flowering bulbs such as daffodils, grape hyacinth, snowdrops and snowflakes in November. Established spring-flowering bulbs can be fertilized in November and again in the spring when shoots appear. Wait until spring to fertilize summer-flowering bulbs.

If you haven’t already done so, test your soil for next year. Soil testing can benefit your vegetable garden, flower garden or lawn. Contact the Extension Office for directions and supplies. Call 910.455.5873 for assistance. Remember that this is a free service.

Clean your tools and wipe them with an oily rag to help prevent rust over the winter. Also, service all small engines so they will be ready to go next spring.

As we move in to fall and winter, we have to rely on hardier plants to keep color and interest in the garden. As annuals fade away and the summer perennials die back, ornamental grasses can add drama and texture to the garden. Susan Brown, Horticulture Agent in Brunswick County, shares some of her favorite varieties below.

**Ornamental Grasses**

*Susan Brown*

*Horticulture Agent*

*Brunswick County*

Ornamental grasses are becoming more popular in the landscape. They provide color, texture, interest and diversity throughout the garden. They are extremely adaptable and there is a grass for just about any situation. Most ornamental grasses can stand alone when used as an accent plant or focal point, especially when plumes of several species are present.

Grasses are highly resistant to insect and disease problems, tolerant to heat and drought, and require little to no maintenance. Ornamental grasses have several uses as functional landscape plants. Some varieties can be used as a screen for privacy, while others provide plumes so spectacular they work well in dried flowers arrangements. Two important requirements for most ornamental grasses are full sun and well-drained soil. Species grow in a variety of sizes growing 10 to 15 feet, while others are considered dwarf plants used as ground covers. They also benefit from having year round interest, with rich autumn colors in the fall and winter.

The following is a list of a few of my favorite grasses that provide a graceful accent as well as an interesting architectural effect.

*Panicum virgatum ‘Shenandoah’* is the brightest red Panicum by a long shot. It colors up by June and the flowers are also red. It grows 4’ tall and has a 2’ spread. This will probably be the most popular Switchgrass ever! Introduced by Dr. Hans Simon of Germany, nothing comes close to the fall color displayed by this grass! Can be grown in a variety of soils, but prefers sandy loam soils in full to partial sun. Drought tolerant once established, yet will tolerate wet, soggy soils for short periods. Cut back in early spring to promote new flush of growth. Most effective as a specimen, rock gardens in masses or as an accent in the perennial borders.

*Eragrostis spectabilis,* purple love grass, colors up at the end of summer when reddish bronze flowers develop and cover the entire plant, while the bright green foliage turns shades of red and orange. This plant is tolerant of a wide range of soils, even infertile sand. This short-lived grass grows for approximately three to five years but may grow longer if it is in full sun and has plenty of space to grow. It reaches 2’ in height and 3’ in spread.

*Chasmanthium latifolium,* northern sea oats, grows two to five feet with a rich green color during spring and summer. Seed heads emerge green but turn purplish bronze by late summer. Bright green leaves turn a coppery color after frost and eventually brown by winter. Excellent if used in dried flower arrangements. This grass is a great choice for stabilization of a stream bank or a shady hill. It is happiest in a moist partly shady site, but in such a place it will roam rampantly. In a drier location it is kept in check, but still looks lovely. It also has shown excellent salt tolerance.
When planted in late summer, cool season crops like cabbage, collards, broccoli, kale, and turnips usually thrive with minimal care. One pest that can cause problems for these crops that has shown up in our area this fall is the aphid. Though individually tiny, aphids frequently occur in huge numbers and can cause serious problems for vegetable crops. Aphids are easy to manage both organically and conventionally, if they are detected before numbers get out of hand.

Aphids are tiny (1/8”), oval to pear-shaped, soft-bodied insects, sometimes referred to as plant lice. They occur in a variety of colors, including green, yellow, orange, brown, and black. Like all insects, aphids have six legs. One thing that sets them apart from other insects is a pair of cornicles on their rear end, which look like two exhaust pipes. Another unique feature of aphids is that they rarely lay eggs, and instead give birth to live young, which are clones of their parent. This ability results in rapid, explosive increases in aphid numbers in a very short time.

All aphids are sap feeders, meaning they feed on plant sap with their needle-like mouthparts rather than eating leaf tissue. There are many species of aphids, most of which feed on specific plants. For example, crape myrtle aphids will only feed on crape myrtle and are not a threat to any other plants in the landscape or garden. The two most common aphids that cause problems in vegetable gardens at this time of the year are the cabbage aphid and the turnip aphid. These two aphids are extremely similar in appearance. Both are green in color and feed on plants in the crucifer family, such as cabbage, collards, kale, turnips, mustard, broccoli, cauliflower, brussel sprouts and radish.

Cabbage and turnip aphids are most prevalent in cool dry weather. Because they feed on plant sap from the underside of leaves, they are often not noticed until they become severe. Aphid feeding can cause plants to produce crinkled, cupped or deformed leaves. Feeding by large populations will stunt plants and can kill small plants. Aphids also excrete honeydew, a sticky, sweet, clear substance that can coat plant leaves and attract ants and wasps. Gardeners should inspect the backside of plant leaves, particularly tender new leaves, for aphids each week.

Because aphids can reproduce extremely rapidly, they should be controlled as soon as they are found. Cabbage and turnip aphid are not killed by cold weather in our area and survive through the winter most commonly on collards. If you only find a few aphids, squash them or break off infested leaves and remove them from the garden. Both organic and synthetic insecticide sprays are available to control aphids in the vegetable garden. When using either, make sure to cover plants completely, especially the backside of leaves, since aphids often shelter in pockets and crevices underneath leaves and in buds. Repeated applications are usually necessary to control these pests.

Organic insecticides that are effective for aphid control in vegetable gardens are insecticidal soap, pyrethrin, and neem oil. For these products, vegetables can be harvested from treated crops the same day of application. Aphids also have many natural enemies, including ladybugs, parasitic wasps, and hoverfly larvae. In landscape plants, natural enemies can often be relied upon to clean up aphid infestations. In vegetable gardens though, aphid outbreaks usually cause lasting damage before natural enemies are able to reduce their levels.

Synthetic insecticides for aphid control on vegetables include those containing the active ingredients permethrin or bifenthrin. Both of these products are available under several name brands, so check product labels to find these in local garden centers. Permethrin has a one day post harvest interval, meaning you have to wait at least one day after treating to harvest. For bifenthrin, the post harvest interval is seven days.

Aphids can be washed off of harvested leaves with running water or by submerging harvested crops in soapy water and then rinsing with clean water.
Vegetables that aphids have fed upon are safe to eat and if you don’t get every single aphid off don’t worry -- they will just add a little protein to your meal!

**Winter Squash – A Fall Treat**  
*Katy Shook*  
*Horticulture Agent*  
*Chowan County*

Although winter squashes are planted in spring, it is not until early fall that the fruits are ready for harvest and enjoyment. “Winter squash” is a common name for several members of the gourd family, including acorn, spaghetti and butternut squashes. Unlike their cousins summer squash and zucchini, winter squashes are not ready for harvest until the fruits have fully matured and their skins have hardened into a tough rind.

Winter squash can be used in many recipes, including breads, soups and salads. They are loaded with nutrients, including vitamins A and C, and have only 65 calories per half-cup serving. The smooth, fine-grained flesh makes winter squash ideal for cooking. In fact, many cooks prefer to use winter squashes for pies instead of pumpkins as they taste the same and their flesh is not as fibrous as that of a pumpkin.

When selecting winter squashes for cooking, choose fruits with hard, tough rinds that are heavy for their size and free of cuts and blemishes. Some of the thinner skinned varieties can be peeled with a vegetable peeler, but others must be cut and baked before peeling. Cutting a winter squash in half is not always easy. A mallet may be needed to assist the knife. Once cut in half, the squash can be baked, cut sides down, in a shallow baking dish for 30 minutes at 350°F. Peeled pieces can be cut into cubes and added to soup or boiled until tender and mashed.

All winter squash varieties can be stored for months in a dry 50°F room. Ideally the fruits should not touch one another during storage. If necessary, they can be stacked in layers no more than two deep.

*Winter Squash Recipe from University of Illinois Extension*

**Spaghetti Squash with Parmesan Cheese**

One 4lb. Spaghetti squash  
1 / 4 cup olive oil  
2 cups minced garlic  
3 / 4 cup grated Parmesan cheese

1. Pierce squash in several places. Place on baking pan and bake 1.5 to 2 hours. Using potholders, squeeze squash to test for doneness. It is ready when it gives slightly under pressure. Remove and cool.

2. Heat a saucepan over heat, add olive oil and garlic and cook about 5 minutes.

3. Cut squash in half lengthwise and scoop out seeds and string portions. Using a fork, pull pulp from the shell in long strands and add them to the warm garlic oil.

4. Toss squash strands gently with pepper, salt and cheese. Pour into serving bowl and garnish with parsley or basil. Serve immediately.

**Decorations from the Garden**  
*Barbara Walters*  
*Master Gardener, Onslow County*

As the holidays fast approach, we find ourselves with less and less time to do the things we want to do - especially those little things that make our houses our homes. Are you the one in the family who has the “whole gang” at your home for Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner? And do you do most of the cooking? Not to mention the time you will spend on the meal and the financial cost, the mental and physical stress can be enormous. You just don’t have the time or money to worry about a holiday centerpiece for your table or entry hall. If so, I have an answer; open your eyes and go outside for a walk!

Yes, take a walk in your yard. You will be amazed at the shrubs, bushes, trees and yes, even weeds just
waiting to be cut and put in a vase of water. Gather up what you see - perhaps it is a bare branch on a tree that has an interesting shape, add some greenery from a pittosporum, podocarpus, or acuba and tuck in some tall grasses. If you still have flowers blooming add them to the vase but if not, greenery alone will be very pretty.

After that little walk outside, you will feel calmer and less stressed. You have just pruned some overgrown bushes, done some weeding, and saved money all at once. You will also wind up with a useful, decorative centerpiece that is sure to spark a conversation around the holiday table.

Other Ideas for Simple Centerpieces
• Fill a footed trifle bowl with nuts or sturdy fresh fruit. Small apples or pears work well as would quince or persimmons.
• Arrange a variety of ornamental gourds, squashes or small pumpkins down the center of the table. Consider placing some larger evergreen leaves underneath to show off the gourds. Southern magnolia or sweetbay leaves work well.
• Cut small branches from trees or shrubs with colorful leaves or berries. Nandinas often have nice fall color and the bright berries on hollies add interest to an arrangement.

Master Gardeners are gardeners who want to learn more about growing plants while giving back to the community. Master Gardeners complete an initial training course and then continue to learn while volunteering. The initial training course offers a minimum of 40 hours of instruction and covers topics including: lawns, ornamental trees and shrubs; insect, disease and weed management; soils and plant nutrition; vegetable gardening; home fruit production; garden flowers and water conservation. Members also receive a comprehensive Master Gardener manual.

At the successful completion of the training program, members begin a volunteer internship. Master Gardeners volunteer 40 hours the first year and 20 hours each subsequent year to maintain their membership. This ongoing volunteering and training is where the Master Gardeners really learn more about plants and the people that grow them.

If you think you might want to be a Master Gardener volunteer, ask yourself these questions:

• Do I want to learn more about growing and caring for many types of plants?
• Am I eager to participate in a practical and intense training program?
• Do I look forward to sharing my knowledge with people in my community?
• Do I have enough time to attend training and to serve as a volunteer?

If you answered yes to these questions, the Master Gardener program could be for you.

Master Gardeners are a resource for horticultural questions that come in to the Extension center. They make it possible to reach out to a larger portion of the gardening community in our area.

Our Master Gardeners can choose from a wide range if volunteer opportunities. Master Gardener volunteers:

• Help diagnose plant, insect and disease problems.
• Staff the Plant Clinic and Hotline at the Extension Office.
• Answer gardening questions at the Onslow County Farmers Market.
• Design and install demonstration gardens in cooperation with Extension.
• Grow and sell plants suitable for Onslow County.
• Provide educational opportunities to other gardeners and the public.

Our next Master Gardener Volunteer Class has been scheduled for February 7 – April 3, 2012. Classes meet Tuesday and Thursday mornings from 9 am until noon. Cost for the class is $100 (this includes the cost of the manual). For more information or to request an application, please call 910.455.5873.

BUY A WREATH FOR CHRISTMAS...The Onslow County Master Gardeners, Onslow 4-H and Extension and Community Associates are selling fresh Fraser fir Christmas wreaths just in time for the holidays. All proceeds will go to help support these groups. An order form with additional information is attached. Please support your community organizations through the purchase of a wreath. Call our office with any questions, 910.455.5873.

RECIPE CORNER
Try this savory sweet potato recipe for a zesty change of pace. This is my favorite way to eat sweet potatoes (sweet potato fries aside of course).

Lime and Cilantro Sweet Potatoes

2 pounds sweet potatoes, peeled and cut into bite size pieces (about ¾ inch) or steak fries
3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
¼ teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons fresh lime juice
chopped fresh cilantro to taste (several tablespoons to ¼ cup)
¼ teaspoon cayenne (may adjust to taste)

Place oven rack in lower third of the oven and preheat oven to 425. Toss sweet potatoes with 2 tablespoons oil and ¼ teaspoon salt in a shallow pan. Arrange potatoes in a single layer in the pan (make sure the potatoes have plenty of room so they brown nicely). Roast potatoes until tender stirring halfway through. This will take 25 to 30 minutes depending on the size of the pieces. Whisk together the lime juice and remaining tablespoon of oil and toss with the hot sweet potatoes. Sprinkle the remaining ½ teaspoon of salt, cilantro and cayenne evenly over the potatoes and stir gently to distribute evenly.

You can adjust the amount of cayenne pepper and lime juice to taste. You may also choose to add a ½ teaspoon of finely grated lime zest and reduce the fresh lime juice to 1 tablespoon.

CONTACT US
If you have questions about lawn, landscape or garden problems, contact your local Cooperative Extension office. In Onslow County call 455.5873, Mon – Fri, 8 am and 5 pm, or visit us online anytime at http://onslow.ces.ncsu.edu. While you are there, you can post your questions to be answered by email using the ‘Ask an Expert’ widget (in the upper left hand corner).

SPOTLIGHT

Kelly Abma- 4-H Program Assistant

Hello everyone! My name is Kelly Abma and I am the new Onslow County 4-H Program Assistant. I am new to Onslow County and I am excited about this opportunity to work with 4-H! Originally from Florida, I am a warm-weather gal! I grew up along the beaches of south Florida, and this is my first time living out of state. I have a passion for the ocean and the awesome critters that call it home. From snorkeling to camping, fishing and research, I don’t mind getting my hands dirty or wet.

I have worked with numerous youth organizations and camps throughout Florida with environmental and marine conservation efforts. I graduated with a Bachelor’s degree in Marine Biology in 2009 and worked with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, dependent fisheries
division until earlier this year. I recently moved to North Carolina with my husband after he was transferred here as a pilot with the Marines.

If you need to get in touch with me or have any suggestions for future 4-H activities, please call me at 910.455.5873 or send me an email at kamorga3@ncsu.edu. I am excited for the new adventures that will come and the great opportunity I have here to get involved with Onslow County youth!

**CHRISTMAS CHEER TIME IS HERE AGAIN**

Onslow County 4-H County Council is again participating in the Elder Cheer Program. Since 1996 the Onslow County Adult and Family Services unit at the Department of Social Services has coordinated the Elder cheer program. This program places an emphasis on elderly and disabled population who are in resident care facilities, while giving our community the opportunity to share their holiday spirit.

On December 12th, join us at 6:00 pm for refreshments and at 6:30 pm the social gathering and assembling of items. Please plan on attending and completing a wonderful community service project.

In the meantime, please tell everyone you know that we are collecting the following items. All of these can be dropped off at the Cooperative Extension, 4024 Richlands Hwy. Please remind our staff that they are for the Elder Cheer Holiday Program. Items requested by Onslow County Elder Cheer are: lotion, candy (diabetic), aftershave, fruit baskets, socks, cassette tapes, key chains, watches, blankets, deodorant, electric blankets, combs, perfume, slippers, hair brushes, night gowns, batteries, gospel tapes, holiday novelties, toothbrushes, writing paper, stationery, support hose, powder, pajamas, disposable razors, personal care items (soap, shampoo, etc.), small flashlights, fashion jewelry, live plants, pens, window mounted bird feeders.

County Council is also in need of baskets, tins and gift bags to help wrap these items. All of these items are due in the 4-H office by December 10th. For more information, contact Wanda Mills, 455-5873.