

## THE DEAD OF WINTER

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Is February the “dead of winter”? Maybe. According to several web sites, the “dead of” anything doesn’t mean lack of life, as I had always thought, but rather, being in the *middle* of whatever it is—winter, night, etc.

“In the middle of” winter makes much more sense to me than dead, as in lack of life, ever did. After all, if we look closely, we see signs of life all winter long, whether it’s December or February. Last fall’s leaves, slumped-over pampas grass, Russian sage, and flattened hostas all contribute to the life cycle of your garden—they provide shelter and food in the form of insects, larvae, seeds, for winter birds and other creatures, as well as the spring and summer guests on their way.

Look up at your garden’s vertical structures. On those bare, sculpted branches, in the evergreens whose tall, jagged silhouettes pierce the sky is life. Buds are breaking dormancy on branches. Pine cones are fattening in the high branches of pines, junipers, hemlocks.

Now look down. On your garden’s floor, you see dead, shriveled, collapsed stems and leaves. Yet, snow drops, crocuses and other early spring flowers are popping out of the soil. Scratch away a little bit of the surface detritus and you will see more itty-bitty tendrils peeping out of the soil and dead leaves.

But I know what you’re thinking—Looking at all that dead stuff, you’re getting itchy garden fingers. Go ahead—start pruning, spading, cleaning up (a little). However, a word of caution—know which plants will be happy with your grooming efforts and which ones want to hold onto their winter scruffiness just a little longer.

**Prune:** Master Gardeners recommend that you prune both to improve the shape of the plant and to open up the center of the plant for better air circulation. You can find lots of advice in gardening magazines and on websites. For example, the Garden Helper (<http://www.thegardenhelper.com/>) recommends that you first remove all dead, decayed, or broken branches. From there, the method of pruning depends on the type of plant.

Most important with pruning is that you know when the plant blooms. If it’s a springtime bloomer, such as rhododendron, azalea, forsythia, don’t prune until AFTER the blooming season. However, if it’s a summer bloomer, such as many crepe myrtles, it can be pruned now before buds form.

Make sure your pruners or clippers are sharp, and disinfect them between usage. Jessica Damiano of [NewsDay.com](http://www.newsday.com) recommends using “a 10-percent bleach/90 percent water solution, or disinfectant spray.”

Take a look at your hollies, roses, grapevines, and honeysuckle (plant native American honeysuckle, not the invasive Japanese varieties). Do they look a bit ragged and rough around the edges? February is a good time to make them happy with careful pruning, cutting out diseased canes and branches.

Damiano also suggests that you prune deciduous trees (those that drop their leaves in the fall) now, *except* for those she calls “bleeders”: maple, beech, dogwood, elm, and sycamore. She notes that those trees should be in full leaf before you prune. Now would also be a good time to mark with bright paint the branches you want to prune later.

**Replant, water, dig:** As you make your garden rounds, you’ll find that Mother Nature has given the heave-ho to some bulbs, tubers and plant crowns. Gently press them back into the ground. We had so much rain and snow this past fall and in the early part of winter that you probably don’t need to water evergreens, but if the ground isn’t frozen, check to see how dry it is; water as needed. Turn the compost pile, Damiano commands.

**Check trees and shrubs for damaging insects.** You might see small, cottony masses on evergreens that could be wooly adelgid egg sacs. Make sure the wrappings on tree trunks are still secure to keep some larvae from inching their way up to burrow under tender bark. Treat woody plants with dormant oil spray to destroy overwintering aphids, mites, and scale. If you’re unsure what kind of insect or disease is causing a problem, help is available by way of the University of Maryland Extension Frederick website <http://extension.umd.edu/frederick-county/home-gardening/mg-happenings-seminars-plant-sale-wcwfdfy>. On the lower right portion of the page is a link to “Ask an Expert”. This will connect you to professionally trained horticulturists that will help identify the problem to the best of their ability.

**Fertilize:** You can also fertilize shrubs, trees, evergreens, and spring-flowering bulbs now. Use an acidic fertilizer for plants such as rhododendron, azaleas, conifers, evergreens, etc. For deciduous trees and shrubs, and roses, use an all-purpose fertilizer.

Be sure to **check our master gardeners’ web site** for our upcoming FREE seminars which go beyond the dead of winter and into spring. Most are held on Saturdays from 10:00 a.m. until 12:00 p.m. at the University of Maryland Extension Office on 330 Montevue Lane. Information is available on the website listed above. There you will find a link to a complete listing of 2019 seminars.

Upcoming seminars include

- Feb. 9: Pruning Your Garden
- Feb. 16: Basic Vegetable Gardening and Seed-Starting
- Feb. 23: Building Native Bee Houses
- March 2: Creating a Flower-Cutting Garden and Flower Arranging
- March 9: Small-Space Veggie Garden
- March 16: Project Wild
- March 23: Planting the Family Garden
- March 30: Pollinator Friendly Garden Certification
- April 6: Your Yard Can Help the Chesapeake!

*For more information about the Frederick County Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, visit: <http://extension.umd.edu/frederick-county/home-gardening> or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596.*

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