

## February in the Tallahassee Garden



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*Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: There's still time to plant a few cool-season annuals such as petunias and dianthus.*

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February is a surprise month. It may be freezing cold. Mother Nature likes to remind us who is still in charge. On the other hand, it may be warm and spring-like. This makes things exciting and confusing! The essential thing is, the plants are poised to begin their growing cycle and you, as the gardener, are poised to assist them in their endeavors. Your job is to clear away debris and make room for them to grow when they receive the signal from Mother Nature.

For example, over-crowded perennials, ferns and groundcovers can be divided right now. Replant them and share extras with your garden friends. Keep deadheading those winter annuals like pansies and giving them small, regular doses of liquid fertilizer if you haven't already applied a slow-release fertilizer good for the whole season. Early in the month you can still sneak in some winter annuals like dianthus, petunias and snapdragons. Don't forget to water them frequently until they are established.

Sow seeds of rapid-maturing, cool-season vegetables such as carrots, English peas, lettuce, potatoes, radishes, snow peas, and spinach, but plant them early in the month. It may be too hot by the end of the month. Some seeds of the brassica family can still be sown, including collards, kale and mustard. Broccoli transplants can be set out early in the month. If you didn't plant enough onions or beets in the fall, you can do more now. There is still time to plant winter herbs such as cilantro, dill, fennel and parsley. Strawberries can be planted now, but you are taking a risk by planting tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, and cucumbers before mid-March. Even so, many gardeners are anxious to taste that first juicy tomato and will gladly take this risk with the understanding that these plants will have to be covered in the event of freezing temperatures. Plant nasturtiums around the edges of your beds for spring color. They are also edible.

A great deal of pruning can be done this month. There are many reasons to prune including reducing the size of a plant, changing its shape, and cleaning out dead and diseased branches. Some plants commonly pruned this month are roses, oleander and sasanqua camellias. Crepe myrtles can be lightly pruned to

shape or to remove spent flower heads. It is very important to keep the pruning shears away from spring-flowering shrubs such as azaleas, hydrangeas, spireas, and *Camellia japonica*.

If summer weeds are usually a problem in your lawn, about the end of the month you may wish to use a pre-emergent herbicide to keep the weeds from coming up. When day temperatures reach 65 to 70 degrees for four to five consecutive days, apply a product containing atrazine or isoxaben. For a natural alternative to chemical pre-emergent, try corn gluten meal, a nontoxic by-product of corn processing. Pre-emergent herbicides should only be applied to established lawns. You do not want to fertilize your grass this early. The grass is still dormant and needs to remain so until all danger of frost is over. This is why a weed-and-feed product, containing both fertilizer and pre-emergent, is not recommended. It encourages the grass to grow and new growth will be killed by a frost.

If you wish to revive tired-looking borders of liriopie and mondo grass, cut or mow them back to a height of three inches. Do this before new growth appears. Weed all those tree seedlings out of your beds of groundcover. This makes the groundcover look uniform and also helps it to grow because it is not competing with weeds for nutrients and water.

Don't forget: when Mother Nature gives you a gift of a warm spring day before spring, it is your duty as her loyal and faithful assistant to go outside and enjoy it.

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