The Holidays are here with all the wonderful enthusiasm and joy. Thanksgiving is past—and horticulture is possibly about 10 out of 100 on your thoughts! Much of what makes the holidays festive is the beautiful ‘examples of horticulture’ which contribute to the decorations for the season--from pine cones ‘dolled up’ in glitter to the elegant amaryllis and poinsettia, and of course the Christmas tree. We’ll discuss a bit more of this in the body of Plant Info…Enjoy this winter opportunity to experience ‘Peace on Earth and God Will to All’ no matter how you celebrate the winter solstice.

**Garden Tasks to Complete before the Holidays!**

Because I ‘hope’ most of your winterizing is finished, let’s start with the house plants first! The opportunity to move so many ‘house plants’ outside in the spring/summer enables us to allow our inside beauties to enjoy a bit of fresh air. I assume you put the plants in suitable containers and allowed them to adjust to the outside climate in slow, comfortable levels—i.e. don’t put your prize begonia in the sun first day outside! Our interest now is bringing them inside where the ‘weather’ is considerably different than outside!

- Furnace heat is very drying—keep the plants hydrated
- Recognize the amount of light necessary to maintain any indoor plant whether it has been outside or housebound
- It maybe you are just storing your outdoor semi-hardy plants in a protected area, in which case the need for light and water is different.
  - The garage; outdoor space behind an established low growing hedge in front of a building; —but a below normal winter temperature will
kill some of the specimens so use discretion. (Don’t put your prized begonia out there!)
  o basement; these areas can be effective for semi-hardy plants in containers
• Tender bulbs, tubers, rhizomes corms will not survive in freezing temperatures. There are several google sites which give excellent instructions based on your temperature zones. Because these are unique situations checking some of these sites is a good idea!

As this is written the mid-Georgia temperature outside at 6:30 AM is 32° but it is forecast to be 60° later today. If a tender plant is unprotected outside it may or may not be damaged.

It is now the day after Thanksgiving and the outside condition is typical autumn. If I wasn’t sitting here at the computer I’d be out finishing up some last minute garden tasks, but writing this is much more important! As I look out the back windows there are some things still to do if the garden is to be lovely. However experience has convinced me there are some perennials that overwinter more successfully IF they are not cut back to the ground. Chrysanthemums are a good example to NOT CUT BACK UNTIL SPRING. When the weather warms cut them back and continue to cut them back until mid-summer. This will increase the fall display of mums. Snapdragons, pansies, come to mind as being able to survive a normal winter and bloom earlier in the spring. Pansies should be planted in two to four inch mulched garden beds in a sunny location. Raised beds are not a good location for winter pansies or any semi hardy annual. If the ground is subject to freezing in a bad cold spell semi-tender plants will not survive.

If you have not already completed mulching your beds now is a good time to accomplish this task. The soil has cooled and the plants will appreciate a warm winter blanket. (The corollary to this ‘rule’ is don’t mulch in the spring until the soil has warmed up—otherwise the overwinter plants will delay blooming waiting for warm roots. I’ve preached this ‘rule’ for as long as I’ve written this newsletter!
**Let’s Have Some Seasonal Decorating Fun** - think of this as a present because you will need to save the information for next year!

If you have access to any evergreen tree or shrub there are countless ways to use them in both indoor and outdoor decorating. Collect available evergreen tree boughs, shrub cuttings, any green or red berries, condition them to maintain freshness (especially important if you are using them for indoor purposes). What is ‘conditioning?’ Fill the bath tub or any clean large container with tepid water, give each branch, stem, cutting a fresh diagonal cut and immediately submerge the entire piece into the water. Allow the greenery to ‘condition at minimum a few hours, but overnight is even better. After conditioning is complete drain the water from the cuttings and immerse in a container of water to continue hydration as you do your magic to create beauty. Green and red are not the only color possibilities—what about pine cones, dried grasses, branches of deciduous trees? The garden is full of wonderful things—be creative. What can you create? Colors other than red and green are effective.

- Evergreen trees and shrubs
  - Make garlands to drape over windows, doors, banisters… (Concord Garden Club had a great program last week highlighting seasonal decorations. Our presenters recommended using rope as the stable body for the garland and wiring the cut boughs to the rope. I’ve always wired each bough to the next bough. That is hard work and not very stable!)
  - Use berried specimens with caution—Nandina berries are pretty, but they will drop on furniture, carpet, and the floor. The stain is permanent. Holly berries are a bit more ‘house friendly’ but any berry has two cautions—they can be poisonous and they are messy. *Keep them out of the reach of small children and pets.*
  - Favorite containers appropriate for tables, stands, etc. are easy to arrange. Sometimes
sap from the leaves/stems may seep onto the container. Use protective lining in the container to prevent damage—an unobtrusive bowl or clear plastic wrap can be choices

- Leafed shrub cuttings can contribute contrast—leaf plus needle

- this is not going to be NGC judged flower show—you can use fake berries or fruit or flowers and a bit of spray paint, some glitter—So many opportunities. (Though I do have problems with fake flowers! Dried real flowers are so much more appropriate IN MY OPINION. (see ‘craft ideas’ in the next section) These are your designs and there are some better fake flowers available. I was even fooled once)

- Dried plant materials
  - A well-shaped deciduous tree branch makes a great Christmas tree for light weight ornaments.
  - Dried grasses are very effective in tall containers especially when combined with other dried or fresh materials—wheat, dried okra can be effective.
  - Then there are the pine cones. Glitter, fake snow (some things have to be fake!), a variety or types of cones, a few ornaments—the possibilities are uncounted
Pressing Plants to Preserve Them for Future Use

Floral pressing is a very old technique to preserve flowers and leaves to be used in decorative projects as well as to preserve the botanical properties for research. Pansies/violas are one of the simplest flowers to press. There many uses include note cards, framed pictures; the internet has several detailed instructions for perfect results. Here are some suggestions your Happy Gardener uses:

- Pick the blooms on a low humidity day and after the dew is gone.
- Choose fresh blossoms
- If the pistil or stamen is protruding (it raises a big bump above the petals) you may need to trim it down with a sharp pair of embroidery scissors. Don’t be afraid to experiment.
- The picture to the far right shows several easily press examples
- The single species plant to the left is Echinacea, and its structure is too pronounced to press successfully
- Trim the stem as close as possible—too close and the petals will fall off!
- Pressing a flower can be achieved by several easy methods, and a few more complicated methods.
  - Flower press is necessary. The press can be two heavy boards with screws to clamp the boards together plus sheets of ‘fresh newsprint’ between the boards. Using several sheets of paper (3 or 4 sheets) place the specimens on the paper and cover with several sheets of paper. Using thin corrugated cardboard to divide
each ‘flower sandwich’ continue adding 2 or 3 more sandwiches topped with second heavy board—twist the nuts onto the screws and clamp as tightly as possible. Set aside for several days and check the tightness of the screws again. I like to give the flower press at least two weeks. There are many ‘fancy’ ways to achieve a flower press—from purchasing to homemade. The Happy Gardener prefers as little expanse as possible—my press is two squares of left over cabinet from the kitchen cabinet!

- Paper backed books with newsprint type paper—both book cover and the interior sheets—cheap romance novels have the perfect paper! I use a rubber band around the book and then pile on all the heavy encyclopedias possible! Pressing is required.

- There are many ways to successfully press flowers—while writing my ideas I found a great web site: preservedgardens.com/how-to-press.htm

- Herbs, autumn leaves, ferns are pressed just like flowers and make great contrast for a picture.

- Microwave pressing is another more advanced method. Its advantage is faster results. My success has been about 30%, and it was more trouble than it was worth. I even purchased a real microwave press! One microwave technique I’ve used that was more successful included the paperback books with the specimens in place. A small container of water should always be included in the Microwave when you are using this technique. Microwave them for short time (time is dependent on the microwave and the specimen—start with 30 seconds and keep checking for condition. Completed the drying process under heavy books. Just make sure there is NO
METAL in the specimen book—paper clips, staples, or metallic designs on the cover. I used two heavy rubber bands to keep the book flat.

Drying Flowers to Preserve for Future Use

Flowers can also be dried. This especially effective for species which are more ‘full’ such as zinnia, dahlia, roses, etc.

- Cut the stems about two inches below the bloom. Flowers are best cut after the morning dew
- Using a shallow paper box, dust the bottom of the box with a layer of silica gel. Silica gel is used to absorb moisture, and is readily available in large quantities at craft stores. (Borax, also known as sodium borate, is also a popular curing agent, although it is less readily available, and slightly more toxic--handle with care and gloves.) I’ve even used fresh kitty litter—anything that absorbs moisture
- Place the blooms, bloom-side down, in a shallow cardboard box. Coat the blooms with another layer of silica gel, until the blooms are completely covered. The stems should still be visible. In time, the silica gel will slowly remove the moisture from the flowers, and preserve them for use as you choose—bouquet, picture, whatever you want
- Place the box into a dark closet for two weeks
- Remove the flowers, and gently dust off the blooms with a soft brush. Some gel may have become lodged in the flower’s crevices—you may need a needle to gently remove the final traces of the silica.
- Prepare the dried flowers for storage or use. Dried flowers are used for bouquets, display, boutonniere...deep picture frames make handsome works of art
There is another form of flower drying which works. It doesn’t involve anything more complicated than some twine and a *dry* dark closet. In fact the important factor is dry—it’s ok if some light falls on the species!

- Flowers which are successfully dried this way include Gomphrena, and Celosia—the gomphrena at the left and the celosia are to the right. One of the celosia is *Celosia argentea* crested form and the last picture is *Celosia argentea* plumose form

- Store the dried specimens in a dark, dry cardboard box, drawer, until you are ready to use them in a design

Consider the dissertation on horticulture preservation techniques as a seasonal present from your Happy Gardener. Start making your plans to try some of the ideas as we enter the New Year! Follow these and other suggestions found in gardening books, the internet, or contact me for more ‘home grown’ information.

Most importantly treasure and enjoy this happiest of seasons.

*Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night!*

*Happy Gardening and Happy Decorating for the season*

*Gail, The Happy Gardener*