

# The Garden in February

By Rachel Anderson, Certified Professional Horticulturalist

February can delight and dismay at the drop of a hat. Its fickle weather toys with our emotions - at one moment sunny and warmish, and then comes the dark, ice and rain bearing clouds to make us scurry for cover and a cup of hopefully uplifting tea (or maybe something stronger). I love and hate February because of this, and yet it never entirely diminishes my optimism and excitement for a new season.

## **In the ornamental garden:**

- February means rose pruning time, and the rule of thumb in our region is to get started around President's Day. However, it's okay if you prune a bit earlier than that, assuming the weather is cooperating. Make sure not to prune in freezing weather. If you didn't mulch your roses in the fall, then do it after you prune this February.
- It's also a good time to prune fruit trees and other dormant shrubs. Take care when pruning flowering shrubs, and note which are spring bloomers and which are summer bloomers, and whether they bloom on old wood or new wood, or both. Confused? We've got a great line up of pruning classes this month and into March if you'd like a bit of help. Sign up early, though, because these classes are popular and fill up quickly.
- February is still a good time to apply a dormant spray (lime-sulfur, copper) on most fruit trees and roses. Wait for a calm, dry day that isn't below freezing. If it happens to rain within 24 hours of spraying you may want to reapply. Remember to read and follow the directions on the container and, if you're in doubt, then do a bit of research for information that specifically caters to your types of trees and types of problems. We are here to help if you have questions!
- Plant bare root trees and shrubs, including lilacs, hydrangeas, flowering plums and cherries, and shade trees.
- Valentine's Day is just around the corner and what better way to celebrate than to sow a patch of sweet peas? These seeds are quite tough and can tolerate wet weather and freezing temperatures, and yet still eagerly emerge despite it all. Watch for nibbling critters when the seedlings come up, and maybe put out a bit of slug bait just in case.
- If you've got ornamental grasses in your garden, you may have noticed that they're beginning to fall apart and look messy. Miscanthus is especially guilty of this. Normally I like to wait until I see the beginnings of green new growth to cut back my grasses (which is usually around the start of March). However, if their messiness is driving you nuts, then go ahead and cut them down as low as you can go, ideally leaving 4 inches or so of stubble. If you still love the way they look and appreciate their presence, then leave them be for now. If you have chickens, the tops of grasses make excellent bedding in their coop (but maybe chop it up a bit if the grass was especially tall).
- Cut back evergreen varieties of Epimedium to best show off the flowers which will soon be uncurling from the ground.
- Cut back the tops of herbaceous perennials (if last year's foliage hasn't already disintegrated on it's own) to make room for the newly emerging foliage of a fresh new season.
- If you've overwintered fuchsias, begonias, or geraniums indoors or in a greenhouse, don't forget to peek in on them and make sure they haven't completely dried out. If they've been allowed to go dormant, then there may be a trace of new foliage by now. Move your plant to a brighter location and fertilize with a liquid fertilizer at half strength.
- Cut a few branches for forcing indoors. Some easy favorites are flowering plum, forsythia, flowering currant, and pussy willow.

### **In the vegetable garden:**

- Before you go too crazy with planting, take note of the condition of your soil. We've had a lot of rain these past few months and the soil may be too wet to work with. I like to do what I call the 'ball test' which goes like this: dig down a few inches and scoop out a handful of soil. Roll it into a ball and then toss it gently up into the air and catch it in your palm. If the soil holds its shape, then it's too wet to work. If the soil ball falls apart in your hands, then you're good to go. If the soil is too wet, wait for a few days of dry weather and try the test again. Sometimes just a few days is all you need.
- Plant bare root rhubarb, asparagus, artichokes, horseradish, strawberries, cane berries, blueberries, and grapes.
- Plant bare root fruit trees. We've got our best selection in at the nursery right now.
- In late February, you can directly sow outdoors things like snow peas, snap peas, and fava beans. These tough plants can tolerate cold, wet soil better than some, but if we have a stretch of freezing weather, they may just bide their time until conditions seem favorable. If the weather is especially soggy over a long period, there is a chance they will rot, so keep an eye on the weather and your soil. Replant if necessary. Make sure to protect your freshly sown seeds from birds (they love pea seeds for some reason) by covering the row with a strip of chicken wire or other deterrent. Also protect emerging seedlings from slugs.
- Other hardy veggies that can be directly sown into the garden include arugula, radishes, shallots, and onions (for green onions).
- If you didn't plant garlic in the fall, then February is a good time to get it in the ground for a fall harvest.
- If you have a greenhouse or a well-lit room inside your house (either natural or artificial light), many things can be sown indoors for transplanting out into the garden come April or May, depending on the conditions and the type of plants sown.

As you're dodging the icy rain drops this month and yearning for better times to come, remember there really is beauty in all of this and sometimes all it takes is one bright green seedling emerging victorious from the cold, damp earth to remind us that we too can weather the storm.



### **About the author:**

*Rachel has been gardening since childhood, thanks to her mom, and has been part of the team at Christianson's since 2002. She's a Certified Professional Horticulturist with a passion for roses and vegetable gardening. Rachel and her family enjoy gardening together and now share their urban garden with a menagerie of ducks, chickens, two cats, and a dog.*

---

*This article was first published in the February 2013 issue of **Garden Notes**, our monthly online newsletter. You can sign up for Garden Notes on the Newsletter page of our website ([www.christiansonnursery.com](http://www.christiansonnursery.com)) or sign up in person the next time you're in the Garden Store at the Nursery.*