

## **Winter Gardening Myths That Refuse to Die, January 3-9**

**Article written by Cary Sims, County Extension Agent for Angelina County**

Warm spells in the winter months are not uncommon around these parts. Looking ahead, the coming weeks show more warm spells for this winter season, the forecast says it could reach 80 degrees for the first part of January!

Warm winter weather in Southeast Texas has a way of stirring up trouble. A few afternoons in the 70s and suddenly folks are fertilizing lawns, pruning shrubs, and wondering why things look worse by February.

The truth is, most winter gardening mistakes don't happen during hard freezes — they happen during warm spells when we treat winter like spring. Let's clear up a few myths that refuse to go away.

**Myth #1: "It's warm, so I should fertilize."** This one costs homeowners and landowners real money. Texas A&M AgriLife Extension consistently advises against winter fertilization of lawns, trees, and shrubs. Warm days do not mean plants are ready to grow. Roots are still operating in cool soils, and pushing nitrogen now stimulates tender growth that's highly vulnerable to the next cold snap. The result is burned foliage and wasted fertilizer. Soil testing is fine this time of year — applying nutrients is not.

**Myth #2: "Brown grass is dead grass."** Dormant does not mean dead. Bermudagrass and zoysiagrass lawns are simply resting. Their roots are alive and storing energy for spring. Aggressive raking, scalping, or herbicide applications during dormancy weaken that reserve and delay recovery. Mow only when necessary for appearance and resist the urge to "fix" what isn't broken.

**Myth #3: "Cold weather kills insects and diseases."** If only that were true! Southeast Texas winters are mild enough that many insects and plant diseases survive just fine. Warm spells may indeed improve survival for pests like aphids, scale insects, and fire ants. Yet a really freezing cold spell won't get rid of them either. AgriLife recommends scouting and targeted control rather than blanket spraying. Dormant oil sprays can be effective when timed correctly, but random insecticide applications rarely solve problems and often waste money.

**Myth #4: "Winter is a good time to prune everything."** This is half true, which makes it dangerous. Dormant fruit trees can be pruned now if done properly. Spring-flowering shrubs, however, bloom on old wood. Prune them in winter and you're cutting off this year's flowers. Crape myrtles, azaleas, and many ornamentals should be left alone. Prune for structure and to

remove dead or diseased limbs, but not because you are bored and looking for something to do outside.

Myth #5: “There’s nothing to plant in winter.” Winter is actually the best planting season for most trees and shrubs in Southeast Texas. Cool soils encourage root growth without the stress of summer heat. Plants establish better, require less water, and suffer fewer pest issues. AgriLife consistently promotes fall and winter planting for woody plants — just remember to mulch properly and water during dry spells.

The common thread in all these myths is timing. Gardening success isn’t about reacting to warm weather; it’s about understanding plant biology and working with the season. Winter isn’t a pause button, but it’s not a green light either.

Southeast Texas winters reward patience. Leave dormant plants alone, plant what benefits from cool soil, and save the fertilizer and heavy pruning for when spring truly arrives. A little restraint now pays off with healthier plants, better blooms, and fewer problems down the road.

**Matthew R. March, MNRD**

County Extension Agent- Agriculture & Natural Resources

Waller County | Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service

846 6<sup>th</sup> St. Hempstead, TX 77445

Phone: (979) 826-7651

Website: <https://waller.agrilife.org/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/wallercoextension/>

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**Dangerous Spiders, January 10-16**

Texas is home to nearly 900 species of spiders. Out of all those species only two groups of spiders in Texas have venom and fangs large enough to be considered harmful to humans. These two groups are brown recluse spiders (*Loxosceles reculsa*) and black widow spiders (*Latrodectus mactans*). There are 4 different species of black widow spiders found in Texas. While these spiders are harmful to humans, they do not actively seek out humans to bite and to cause harm. They prefer to remain hidden and out of sight and many times they can be found close to homes and around humans and remain unnoticed.

Brown recluse spiders have six eyes arranged in pairs which is a unique characteristic that many other spiders species lack. Body length is quarter to half inch in length and is most well-known for the dark violin shaped mark on the cephalothorax (head section). Recluse spiders seek dark places and are most active at night. They prefer to hide in cracks and crevices

where they can hide. Unfortunately, this makes places like attics, crawl spaces, and other dark areas of buildings ideal habitat. Many times, brown recluse spiders may be in your house, and you don't even know it due to their secretive nature and hiding in dark places. Recluse spiders hunt at night and do not rely on a web to hunt prey. Instead, they actively hunt their prey which includes insects and other arthropods. Brown recluse spiders bite when they feel threatened or pressed against skin. Many times, bites occur when cleaning closets or garages, putting on clothes, or rolling over one in a bed. After the bite, skin and muscle will begin to breakdown. Diagnosis of a recluse spider bite is difficult because it is painless at first. With symptoms that may not appear for up to 8 hours. Pain is mild to severe and can also itch, swell, and become tender. A blister forms about 24 hours after the bite and a slow healing lesion forms within 1 week. In severe cases surgery may be required to clean the wound.

Female black widow spiders backs are black while male and juveniles have orange, red and white markings on the back. Female black widow spiders are known for their red spots on the underside of their abdomen. Female body length is around half inch, while males are smaller coming in at less than a quarter inch body length. Widow spiders are usually found under protected areas such as wood piles, shrubbery, and inside electric meters. They can also be found indoors if the structure is open to the outdoors. Widow spiders build strong, sticky, irregular webs. They will hang upside down in the web revealing their red spots on the underside of the abdomen. Bites occur when the spider feels threatened or is pressed against skin. Bites typically occur when the spider is accidentally disturbed such as when moving wood piles or cleaning up brush. The bite will affect the nervous system initially causing pinprick sensation that becomes red and swollen. The bite typically turns pale in the center, and it is surrounded by a tender redness. Intense pain can occur within the hour of the bite and may last up to 3 days. Other symptoms include vomiting, leg cramps, tremors, profuse perspiration, loss of muscle tone, and increased blood pressure. The bite can be serious especially for children and individuals with health problems. However, few cases are lethal. Seek immediate medical care for a black widow bite.

This article is not intended to paint spiders in a bad light. They are just doing what nature intended them to do, even the harmful species. 99% of the time they go unnoticed and live among humans causing no harm at all. However, you do need to recognize the danger and be careful when working in dark places or moving firewood where these spiders like to live.



*Black widow spider sporting bright red spots on the underside of the abdomen.*

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**Poultry Lice and Mites, January 17-23**

Lice and mites are the most common external parasites found in poultry. Infestations can quickly grow out of control and routine inspections of your birds are necessary to monitor for infestations. Lice and mites will have negative effects on production rather than decreased meat production or egg production. Early detection is necessary due to restrictions on treatments available for food producing birds.

Poultry lice are tiny, wingless, 6 legged, flat bodied, insects with broad round heads. A female louse will lay 50 to 300 eggs at a time at the base of the feather. Multiple species affect poultry, but none of the species feed on blood, but rather they feed on skin scales and feathers. When inspecting your birds for lice examine the ventral area as this location is typically the starting site for infestations. Poultry lice cannot be transferred to humans, and their entire life cycle occurs on the host bird. Birds with infestations may have feather damage which can cause a dull or roughened appearance.

Two types of mites can be found on poultry: northern fowl mite and chicken mite. The northern fowl mite is the most common external parasite on poultry and feeds by sucking blood. The northern fowl mite will remain on the host bird for its entire life cycle which lasts 2-3 weeks and is spread through bird to bird contact. While the northern fowl mite is more common during cooler temperatures, the chicken mite is primarily a warm weather pest. These mites also suck blood from poultry, but instead of living on the host like northern fowl mites, chicken mites feed at night and retreat to crevices in the poultry house during the day. Symptoms of mites are very similar to lice, however during inspections mites may not be noticeable since mites can survive off the bird and in the case of chicken mite which is nocturnal. Mites tend to congregate around the ventral region and darkening of white feathers will occur due to feces.

On a flock and production scale, lice and mites will decrease egg production, decrease weight gain, and decrease carcass quality. Additionally, birds can be overcome with these external parasites causing increase susceptibility to other diseases. Prevention is the best method for treatment which requires good sanitation and cleanliness of houses. You should also reduce the chance of vectors transferring lice and mites between houses and flocks. Avoid sharing equipment between flocks and minimize human contact between flocks. When moving between one or more houses or flocks, you should follow proper bio-security procedures between flocks; change clothes, wash shoes, clean equipment, etc. During severe infestations, carbaryl (Sevin) can be used to treat walls, floors, and nest boxes in the house. Special attention needs to be taken to ensure the chemical does not contact feed. In a small-scale operation, a Sevin dust bath or application of a pyrethrin based spray can be applied directly to the birds. Remember to always read and follow the label before applying any pesticide and it is always a good idea to consult your veterinary.

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## **Get to Know Turnips, January 24-30**

Turnips are a unique vegetable as they are a dual-purpose crop that produces both leaves that are used for greens and the root when cooked properly is similar to potatoes and beets. Turnips belong to the Brassicaceae (mustard family) which includes other vegetable crops like broccoli, cabbage, and kale. Turnip varieties have been developed for root production or leaf production depending on the intended use. A variety developed for root production can be harvested for greens. However, a variety developed for greens may not produce a good root. Most varieties reach maturity in 50 to 70 days.

Turnips should be planted in the fall 8 to 10 weeks before the first frost or early in the spring. Turnips do not grow well in warm weather and are susceptible to frost conditions. Turnips grow best in moderately cool temperatures between 50 to 65 degrees. Rutabagas and turnips look similar and have similar growth requirements. However, rutabagas are usually yellow fleshed and mild/sweet flavor, while turnips are usually white fleshed and sharp/peppery flavor.

Many people dislike turnip roots due to their bitter taste. Though some people swear turnips will always have a bitter taste, there are steps you can follow to take the bitterness out of turnips. Turnip roots should be harvested when they are young with less time in the ground and small to medium sized (2 inches in diameter). Cooking turnip roots slowly can also help to take the bitterness out of turnips.

Turnips have numerous health benefits including the following. Turnip greens are exceptionally high in vitamin K which is an essential vitamin required for blood coagulation and controlling binding of calcium in bones. Turnips can lower your risk of cancer, inflammation, and diabetes. Flavonoids are unique to blue and purple vegetables and can be found in turnips. Flavonoids are antioxidants with proven anti-cancer effects.

United States produces 1.6 million tons of turnips annually, which sounds like a lot but is minimal compared to China which is the leading country in turnip production. China produces 18.1 million tons of turnips annually.

Now that you have gotten to know turnips maybe you can try growing some turnips in your early spring garden so you can enjoy the numerous health benefits of turnip roots and greens.



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**My Tree is Covered in Tiny Holes!, January 31- February 6**

Occasionally I will receive calls from worried homeowners who have discovered a tree in their yard that is covered with tiny holes. These tiny holes can resemble insect damage from wood boring insect pests such as pine beetles to the untrained eye. These holes can range in the hundreds on a tree and can quickly frighten homeowners. However, these holes are not causing any damage to the tree and surprisingly are caused by a small woodpecker called the yellow-bellied sapsucker, *Sphyrapicus varius*, which is a common winter resident in Waller County woodlands and residential neighborhoods. Sapsuckers will tap for sap running inside a

tree trunk creating ring of holes around a tree and multiple rings will create rows of holes. This is very different from wood boring insects which will create holes that will appear random in placement and will be deeper.

Yellow bellied sapsucker is one of the smallest woodpeckers you will see in the forest. During this time of year, it is also one of our most common even though they will only be present until early spring when they migrate back north to their breeding grounds. Breeding grounds or summer range includes the vast forest of Canada and parts of the upper midwest and northeast. The woodpecker prefers young deciduous forest but can be found in all forest types in Waller County. A variety of trees are utilized for tapping sap holes, but birch and maple trees are preferred. In addition to feeding on sap, insects are also utilized as a food source. The oldest recorded individual was approximately 8 years old. Conservation status is considered secure with populations having increased during the second half of the last century. There may even be more yellow-bellied sapsuckers now than 300 years ago due to habitat change caused by humans. The current population is estimated at 10 million.

Historically, sapsuckers were considered pests because of the obvious damage they cause to trees. However, trees do not seem to be affected by numerous holes, since the holes are small and shallow they heal quickly, and it appears to be cosmetic damage more than affecting the health of the tree. Now, if you still want to prevent sapsuckers from tapping holes in your trees you can discourage the activity by wrapping the trunk in burlap or hardware cloth. However, sapsuckers have small beaks and when the sap is really flowing, they may still tap holes through burlap or hardware cloth.



*Multiple Rings of Holes Crated by Sapsucker Feeding*



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