

Avoiding the Winter Doldrums

By Susan Camp

The holiday season will end on January 1st, and we can anticipate 10 weeks or more of dreary, cold, possibly sleety or snowy weather. We are only into the first official week of winter, but, if we aren't careful, we could easily slip into the winter doldrums, sipping tea in our pajamas and binge-watching sit-coms, true crime, and "reality" shows. I would rather be outside.

The results of numerous studies on the benefits of spending time in nature indicate that we can improve aspects of physical and mental health, as well as social health through increased contacts with other people, just by spending a few hours each week off the couch and out in the fresh air. Our mothers were right.

After the stress and fuss of holiday parties and company, cooking and gift-buying, an hour or two outside can be refreshing and relaxing. On the Middle Peninsula, we will have many pleasant days with temperatures warm enough to complete chores we didn't finish before Thanksgiving, even if it is still too cold to dig in the dirt.

On a day when the temperature is between 55 to 60 °F, pull out the paintbrush and give a fresh coat of paint to mailbox posts and decorative gateposts. We had new directional signs made for our house and our neighbor's house, and they look bright and friendly on their shared, newly painted post. On a warm day, repair or replace broken fence posts and rails and grape or rose arbors. A chilly winter day is a good time to reset stones bordering the driveway, parking area, or flower beds.

If you have woods, as we have, it is easier to see which dead or diseased trees need to be removed when the trees are bare of leaves. Hauling the debris out of the woods is less of a chore, too. Unwanted English ivy, vinca, and other invasive species are less difficult to remove during the winter, when the plants are dormant. In winter, there are fewer ticks, chiggers, and mosquitoes to pester you.

Take stock of garden ornaments and furniture. Which pieces can be sanded and repainted, and which ones are beyond repair? It may be time to buy new Adirondack chairs. Does the potting shed need a new door? Have the children or grandchildren outgrown the playhouse? Are you going to leave it in that condition, or fix it up as craft, hobby, or writing space for a new phase in your creative life?

Winter is a good time to de-clutter the potting shed. Clean and repair tools; sand and paint handles; sharpen blades. Throw away broken tools and pots and check expiration dates on garden pesticides and fertilizers. Set aside old or unused chemicals for disposal on the next hazardous material disposal day. If you are like us, that day usually sneaks up before we are ready. If you

separate the chemicals in advance, dropping them off at the collection center will be a simple task.

Install a rain barrel to collect water for your garden. Kits and directions are available from garden centers and online. Build a new raised bed for vegetables or herbs. With the leftover wood, you can build a pretty garden bench, where you can sit this summer and watch your tomatoes grow.

Install bird feeders and provide seeds, nuts, suet, and water for our winged friends. On cold days, you can watch them while you sit by the fire. Install bluebird boxes for spring visitors.

Sometimes gardening is hard, dirty work that seems never ending. We don't always reap the hoped-for rewards, and we dread the chores that seem like drudgery. If we complete some of the clean-up and repair jobs on pleasant winter days, we can focus on our plans for spring planting during the frigid, snowy ones, with plenty of time to drink tea and watch reruns. Happy New Year!

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