

# Gardening tips for February

## Flowers and houseplants

☞ I hope you get some flowers for Valentine's Day! Use the flower preservative that comes with your flowers to maximize their life. This preservative provides nutrients, kills bacteria, and balances the acidity of the water for good floral color. Adding sugar, pennies or aspirin will not do the job. If you don't have any preservative, mix 2 cups lemon-lime soda with 2 cups water

and 1/2 teaspoon of bleach. Then keep your flowers in a cool location, away from direct sunlight and away from warm drafts. Recutting stems and changing the water in the vase daily will help prolong the life of the flowers.

☞ Do you want to give your love a bouquet of flowers but are too cheap to pay for them? Send a free bouquet over the internet! Go to [www.iflowers.com](http://www.iflowers.com) or [www.virtualflowers.com](http://www.virtualflowers.com). Your friend will receive a beautiful picture of flowers with your card attached.

☞ One of the most fascinating annuals you can grow from seed is castor bean. It grows into a tropical bush with giant umbrella-shaped leaves, soaring over 10 feet tall. Its seeds are poisonous, so use your common sense around it.

☞ Begin fertilizing houseplants once new growth begins to appear. Now is also a good time to repot houseplants. The fresh soil will stimulate vigorous growth.

☞ To clean crusty clay pots, mix a solution of one part bleach to nine parts water. Badly crusted pots will need to be scrubbed with steel wool after soaking.



☞ Hold cacti with kitchen tongs as you repot them and you won't get spines in your fingers.

☞ Potting soil may be sterilized using a microwave oven. The soil should be slightly moistened and crumbly. Place two pounds of soil mix into a plastic turkey-roasting bag. Do not seal the bag shut (or it will explode). Microwave on high for three minutes. Let the soil cool to room temperature before using.

☞ The vines of sweet potatoes make for an interesting houseplant. Start your plant by suspending a sweet potato in a container of water (toothpicks are often used for this) leaving the top 1/3 exposed to air. Transplant the potato when a strong root system develops. The vines can be staked or trellised.

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## Trees and shrubs

☞ Wait to prune your trees and shrubs until late February or March. Earlier pruning can cause dieback at the pruned tips.

☞ Trees and shrubs have an economic value. If killed or damaged by ice or accident, they may be covered by some homeowner's insurance policies.


☞ Shredded wood from evergreens is fine for use as mulching. It can also be used in a compost pile, but grind it first. Otherwise the shavings will take a long time to decompose.

- ☞ Sap can bleed profusely out of the pruning wounds of maples and birches this time of year. Don't worry—this bleeding is completely harmless. We do not recommend putting wound dressings on these trees. They heal better without the dressing, as dressings can sometimes trap moisture in the wound, creating rot.
- ☞ Backyard maple trees should not be “tapped” for maple syrup. Improperly bored holes can lead to infections. Besides, it takes 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of maple syrup. Maple syrup production is only recommended for woodlands.
- ☞ The wound of a well-pruned limb will look like a donut as it heals itself.
- ☞ Among the best azaleas for the north are members of the ‘Northern Lights’ collection from the University of Minnesota. These hardy plants do well in sunny areas and moist soils. Flowers come in a wide array of colors, including yellow, orange, pink and orchid. You may need to add sulfur to the soil to give these plants the acidic conditions they desire.

## Vegetables

- ☞ Avoid choosing varieties that take longer than 100 days to mature. They probably won't mature before frost.
- ☞ I love using pelleted seed for small-seeded crops like carrots and lettuce. The clay-covered seeds are easy to handle, allowing for perfect spacing down the row. The seeds absorb water and germinate well. Thinning is much easier, too. Give it a try!
- ☞ Low tunnels are easy to construct. They are much cheaper than traditional hoop houses. The 3-foot-high tunnels can generate the extra heat you need for a decent crop of cucumbers or tomatoes.
- ☞ Here's an interesting saying from China: If you want to be happy for a week, take a spouse. If you want to be happy for a month, kill and eat your pig. But if you want to be happy all your life, plant a garden. Happy Chinese New Year!

## Fruits

- ☞ Tart cherries are easy to grow. I love their pristine white blossoms that turn into tasty fruits in July. A nice bonus is their bark, which glistens during the winter. Three dwarf varieties are noteworthy: ‘Evans Bali’, ‘North Star’, and ‘Meteor’.
- ☞ Grapes can be pruned in February.
- ☞ Wait to prune your fruit trees until late February or March. Earlier pruning can cause dieback at the pruned tips. No wound dressings are recommended. 

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