

## Garden Line - January The Quietest Month

by Brent Moon - HPARD Urban Garden Manager

### January the Quietest Month

January may be one of the quietest months in the gardening calendar but it's a good time to get your garden beds ready for the spring growing season.

In Houston, one thing to remember is our high clay content soil. This type of soil can make ordinary gardening tasks like watering and feeding plants a major problem. Clay soil holds water, does not drain well and, the clay particles hold tightly to nutrient particles meant for your plants.

One option to bypass Houston's clay soil is to plant your garden in raised beds.



### Raised Beds

Raised beds improve the drainage for your garden, make it easier to work in and are also a great option for people with disabilities who would like to garden. If you're building a bed for the first time, research and planning are important in every step. Once you've chosen your garden site it's time to decide what material to build your raised bed with. There's a variety of material on the market to choose from, including cedar boards, landscape timbers, plastic lumber (made from recycled plastic), or stone or concrete. Consider the choices and base your decision on your taste and budget. A good rule to follow when deciding the size of your garden beds is to keep them no wider than 4-5' (they can be any length). The 4-5' rule will make it easier for you to reach the center of your garden from either side of the bed.

### The Good Earth

The soil is the foundation of your garden. So don't skimp! A high quality soil might cost more but it will pay off immediately in higher producing vegetables that need less fertilizer and water than a cheaper soil. Look for a light, fluffy soil mix, one that doesn't clump together too much when you get and handful and squeeze it. Ask your local nursery for a "vegetable mix" soil. This type of soil has the right ingredients that your produce will need.





### Compost Now

January is a good time to add a top dressing of compost to your soil. Compost is simply decomposed plant matter and is great for your soil. Add a 4"-6" layer of compost to your beds and lightly till it or work it into the soil with a garden fork. The addition of compost once or twice per year will quickly improve your soil structure. Compost helps keep the soils loose, making oxygen more available in the soil, which promotes more vigorous root development and increases the water and nutrient-holding capacity of the soil.

### Winter Crops

For those of you whose garden is already going, you may still be harvesting some of the many great cool season crops we can grow here in our area, such as lettuce, cabbage, collard and mustard greens, carrots, Swiss chards and sugar snap peas, to name a few. Don't forget you've still got time to sow seeds for some quick harvest crops such as radish and lettuce before our Houston weather gets too warm.



### To Trim or Not To Trim – Crepe Myrtles

On a different topic, the winter dormant season is the right time to prune your crepe myrtles, if you must. Crepe myrtles do not have to be pruned; however, if you really feel you need to, there is one important rule to follow: **Do not commit CREPE MURDER!** This is what we call it when people cut their crepe myrtles back too far and leave unsightly stumps. Cutting crepe myrtles back severely is unnecessary and unhealthy for the plant. It looks unnatural and the resulting growth will be weak and poorly attached. One only needs to tip the branches and remove the old seed heads, trim away dead wood or crossing branches. Try not to remove anything that is larger in diameter than your finger. Your crepe myrtles will bloom just fine next year.



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#### **Cut Back – Ornamental Grasses**

This is also the time of year to cut back ornamental grasses. Cut them back with a set of sharp hand pruners or garden shears to a height of about 6". Cutting them back now ensures that the new growth will be able to emerge unhindered by old foliage. You will get a nice flush of growth in the spring. You may also cut back liriope (monkey grass) if it has started to get brown leaf tips. If you have a large area, consider mowing it with your lawn mower. This technique works well and is a great time saver. February is almost here, so get out into your garden and get it ready for spring planting. Remember to warm up and stretch your back a little before beginning any garden activity. If you have heavy lifting to do, remember: gardening is fun for the entire family!

