

## CHORES FOR THE BLEAK MID-WINTER

By Maritta Perry Grau, Master Gardener

In the bleak midwinter  
Frosty wind made moan  
Earth stood hard as iron  
Water like a stone  
Snow had fallen  
Snow on snow on snow  
In the bleak midwinter  
Long, long ago...

Even though “The Bleak Midwinter,” a poem written by Christina Rossetti in 1872, is a Christmas carol, it always seems more appropriate to January or February, the “bleak midwinter” months. But these months aren’t all bleak—I love hearing the squeals and shouts of joy from the children sledding in our neighborhood. I love seeing a few green tips peeping through the snow as early spring flowers begin unfurling from sleepy bulbs.

I even love the gardening tasks to be done in the next few weeks. At least, they give me pleasure as I sit in my warm family room with a cup of tea and a good book, and contemplate what needs to be done. Like housework, some chores are hard and tiring, while others are easier on this old body. The University of Maryland Extension has many suggestions of winter tasks ([extension.umd.edu/hgic](https://extension.umd.edu/hgic)), among them, checking for and removing dead or broken tree and shrub branches; perusing seed catalogs; planning new projects such as worm bins, compost bins, rain barrels, or stormwater management; treading lightly; and preparing to plant spring seeds.

**Checking trees and shrubs for broken branches.** Dead and broken branches can be removed any time. Fruit trees should be pruned in late winter, right before bud break, although UM Extension cautions us not to prune on mild winter days, “as this may stimulate growth and cause a premature loss of dormancy.” You may want to research your particular kind of fruit tree to determine the best time for pruning.

**Ordering from seed catalogs:** Research native plants that grow well in your area; check whether the plant will provide habitat and food for wildlife. Do you keep a garden diary? Check to see what worked/didn’t work last year. Take time now to think of this past year’s gardens—jot down observations to build on your successes for this coming spring.

**Looking for a new gardening challenge?** Now’s a good time to do your research. Try vermiculture—making a compost bin or wormery you can keep in your house (<https://extension.umd.edu/resource/indoor-worm-composting-or-vermicomposting>). Fellow gardeners swear to me that it doesn’t stink. Or determine a good place for a compost bin in your backyard (<https://extension.umd.edu/resource/how-make-compost-home>). Check out how to install and use rain barrels—these can save you money on water bills and provide water for your plants during droughts. Do you have a low, muddy spot in the yard? Review rain gardens and how they can help you direct

stormwater to slowly seep into the ground, rather than being diverted into the nearest storm drain ([https://www.frederickcountymd.gov/DocumentCenter/View/309949/oes\\_ghc\\_rainbarrels2018](https://www.frederickcountymd.gov/DocumentCenter/View/309949/oes_ghc_rainbarrels2018)).

**Treading lightly (on the lawn):** Just as walking on your garden compacts the soil and makes it harder for perennials and annuals to poke through, walking a lot on the frozen lawn may damage grass crowns and slow growth in the coming spring. Did you know Maryland's Lawn Fertilizer Law forbids even residential land owners from fertilizing between December 1 and March 1? In addition, you should not use chemical fertilizers containing nitrogen or urea to melt ice around the home.

**Checking soil for spring planting:** Another encouraging note amid today's bleak midwinter is that all that freezing and thawing is helping make the soil workable. Squeeze it into a ball; if it crumbles easily, you can plant seeds of early spring crops such as lettuce, spinach, radishes, and other fast-growing, early-spring salad greens. By the time they germinate and push through the soil, night-time temperatures should be hovering at least a little above freezing (no promises, though). This may also be a good time to work rotted (NOT fresh!) manure or compost into vegetable and flower beds, if you didn't do so last fall.

Frederick County Master Gardener seminars and other activities—except those held outdoors or at locations other than the Extension Office—are still cancelled until further notice. When COVID restrictions are lifted, we will resume our free seminars on topics ranging from growing herbs and vegetables to storm water management. You can find other gardening information and advice online at:

- University of MD Extension Home & Garden Information Center, <https://extension.umd.edu/programs/environmentnatural-resources/program-areas/home-and-garden-information-center>;
- Frederick County Master Gardeners Publications, <http://extension.umd.edu/locations/frederick-county/home-gardening>;
- Facebook, <http://www.facebook.com/mastergardenersfrederickcountymaryland>;
- YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMsJH9MYdeiNik4OwIHOERg/playlists>;
- or call us at [301-600-1596](tel:301-600-1596).



**HGIC compostworms** Composting can be done both inside and outside. The vermiculture bins for use inside with small red worms are nearly odor-free. Whether indoor or outside, the bin should be kept free of fats. Within a few months, you will have highly nutritious soil for indoor pots and outside gardens.

*For more information about the Frederick County Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, visit: <http://extension.umd.edu/locations/frederick-county/home-gardening> or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596.*

*Find us on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/mastergardenersfrederickcountymaryland>*

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