



Extension Connection

Extension Notes

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It's a new year and as with all things new, there is an air of anticipation for what the future holds. A famous quote, however, advises that the best way to usher in a good future is to prepare for one. Our articles on rain harvesting as a source for future landscape irrigation water (p. 3) and locating good sources of winter nutrition for small ruminants ahead of spring (p. 5), provide useful information for preparing to reap future rewards. The new year is also a great time to welcome new positive habits or make new commitments to developing better habits, and our articles on the role plants play in health and wellness (p. 2), as well as how positive habits can change your life one small step at a time (p. 8), provide helpful resources to making new habits long-lasting. Speaking of welcoming the new, meet the newest member of our team Shauna Deskins (p. 17), who's assumed the role of 4-H Program Assistant. Also, in this issue's 4-H and Nature Naturally articles, learn more about the five F's of agriculture (p. 10) and Florida's native plants and animals (p. 12). Be sure to check out our calendar of upcoming classes and events including our Earth Day Extension Expo (pp. 14-15) plus our helpful gardening tips (p.18).

And as always, we express heartfelt appreciation for your continued support of the UF/IFAS Extension mission in Citrus County.

For more information contact

UF/IFAS Extension Citrus County
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<https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/citrus/SolutionsForYourLife.com>

We're here to help you find "solutions for your life."
-Your Citrus County Extension Team!



Urban Horticulture

Happy You Year

By most accounts, the construct of happiness is subjective and the definition of what it means to happy is relative. Although the topic has been a source of countless philosophical debates including searching for answers to questions like 'what is happiness', striving to be happier is a worthwhile addition to anyone's new year resolution list.

As a horticulturist, plants are definitely included on my 'happy place' list and not surprisingly, research shows that there is a reason why plants make us happier. Studies have shown that looking at plants and being around plants, either indoors or outdoors, can significantly boost happiness levels by reducing stress, improving mood, fostering a sense of calm and increasing focus.

What's more, the ritual of connecting with nature by caring for plants, activates mood enhancing brain chemicals and improves feelings of fulfillment. Interestingly, experts on the study of happiness have concluded that the 'secret' to humans being happier, is engaging in activities which produce fulfillment. What is most interesting about the experts' deductions on the secret to being happier is that it does not correlate to having more of any one thing but actually doing more of what brings us fulfillment. Here are excerpts of studies which show that doing more with plants can make you happier (no advanced horticulture knowledge required):

- **Reduced stress and anxiety:** Interacting with plants can result in lowered blood pressure, heart rate, and cortisol levels, producing a more relaxed feeling. Children growing up in neighborhoods with more trees and greenspaces, exhibit less symptoms of stress; greenspaces have also been studied for positive impacts on ADHD symptoms in children.
- **Improved mood and emotional regulation:** The presence of plants can trigger the release of dopamine which is responsible for positive feelings, optimism, and decreased negativity. Interacting with soil while gardening, can stimulate serotonin levels, and caring for plants promotes mindfulness.
- **Increased focus and productivity:** Plants and greenspaces improve memory, attention span, and creativity.
- **Connection to nature:** Studies show that humans inherently find connecting to nature fulfilling (biophilia). Interacting with plants and greenspaces play a supporting role in emotional regulation and have been used in Attention Restoration Therapy.



Marguerite Beckford, EdD
Citrus County Extension Director
& Horticulture Agent



Rain Harvesting & Distribution

Simple ways of rainwater collection and run-off distribution in the residential landscape can aid in conserving and efficiently utilizing this valuable resource. Water conservation practices in Florida are considered a true water resource in our state, but millions of gallons are still unwisely used in Florida. Two Florida Friendly Landscaping™ practices to consider are the collection and reuse of rainwater in rain barrels, and the efficient distribution of water runoff from residential roofs, directed toward created rain gardens in the landscape.

Rain barrels are a common sight in Florida residential landscapes. Rain barrels should be placed in locations enabling easy collection of water running off residential roofs, typically near gutter downspouts. Many barrels which have been previously used to ship food products or beverages are safe to use for water collection and water's safe reuse. Do not use barrels which previously contained toxic or chemical materials.

Be prepared to utilize the collected water for gardening purposes, cleaning outdoor furniture, bathing pets or any practical use you can imagine. A 55-gallon barrel will quickly fill from roof runoff and several barrels can be utilized to collect an even larger volume of water for reuse. Collected water comes in handy during power outages caused by tropical storms or hurricanes for essential practices like cleaning, cooking, bathing or flushing toilets when other potable water sources are unavailable. Additionally, covering the exposed rain barrel with screen netting prevents the establishment of another unwanted visitor to humid Florida, the mosquito.



Steven Davis, MA
Citrus County Extension
FFL Program Coordinator



Another way to use water runoff is to create a rain garden. Directing runoff to a landscape area for short-term collection and use by plants placed in a low laying rain garden area, creates unique garden spaces. The runoff is going to go somewhere. Creating a destination for its collection and use in the landscape, reduces the potential for erosion or contaminants moving off your property. Excessive runoff from residential roofs disturbs garden spaces or erodes soil, causing injury to lawn and garden areas. Swales can be constructed to distribute the excess water to a planned rain garden collection area, providing water for plants prior to percolating through the soil profile, leaving no permanent surface water behind. Additionally, runoff can quickly move through underground piping to a rain garden destination. Either way, the creation of a rain garden can be a unique feature in the landscape, supplying water naturally to a specific area for the establishment of garden plants tolerant of both wet and dry conditions.

We all know rainfall happens. When and how much is often the question. Quick and efficient movement of water away from a structure to a designated collection point on the property enables gardeners to utilize the resource naturally, reduce damage from erosion, while establishing an attractive garden space minimizing the damaging effects of storm water runoff. Always make sure that landscape improvements and addition of garden amenities like rain barrels, are acceptable in your community, if landscape restrictions apply to your HOA or municipality. As the potential for summer storms and concentrated rainfall increases during the summer season, planning to collect and distribute this resource seems wise. Collection of water in a rain barrel was a wise decision during the last hurricane season when power was unavailable at my residence.





Alyssa Schortinghouse, PhD
Citrus County Extension
Agriculture/Natural Resources
Agent

Winter Nutrition Management for Your Sheep and Goats

Winters, whether they are mild or cool, bring seasonal changes that affect how sheep and goats meet their nutritional needs. Shorter days, slowed pasture growth, and cooler temperatures mean producers should pay closer attention to forage quality, energy intake, and mineral balance to maintain herd health and body condition. Ensuring solid winter nutrition helps animals stay productive and prepares them for spring breeding, kidding, or lambing.

Why Winter Nutrition Matters

Even moderate cold weather increases energy requirements for small ruminants, as animals expend more calories maintaining body temperature. When pasture growth declines and animals rely more on hay, they may not get enough protein or energy unless hay quality and availability is monitored. Poor nutrition through winter can lead to reduced body condition, lower immunity, reproductive delays, and weak offspring. These impacts can be prevented with thoughtful forage and supplement planning.



Photo credit: UF/IFAS Photo Database

Hay Quality Indicators to Monitor

- **Properly dried hay:** Moist or moldy hay reduces feed quality and can cause health issues; properly stored dry hay helps preserve nutrients.
- **Free of excessive dust, mold, weeds, or foreign material:** Clean hay improves safety and intake.
- **Leafy, soft (non-woody) stems:** Younger, leafier, hay generally provides more digestible nutrients than coarse, stemmy hay.
- **Forage Analysis:** While the previous indicators provide visual guidance, aligning Crude Protein (CP) and Total Digestible Nutrients (TDN) assessment from a forage analysis helps with identifying the best quality hay.



Photo credit: UF/IFAS Photo Database

- As a rule of thumb, good quality hay relies on the visual indicators along with the numeric framework of 10-14 % for CP and 55-65% for TDN, which is considered “good” quality hay.

Practical Winter-Feeding Strategies

Use Supplements When Forage Alone Falls Short

When hay quality or quantity isn't enough to maintain body condition, especially in pregnant, lactating, or growing animals, supplemental grain or energy concentrates may be warranted. AgriLife Extension notes that gradual introduction of concentrates is important to prevent digestive issues and ensure animals adapt well to dietary changes (Texas A&M AgriLife Extension).

Supplementation decisions should be based on body condition scoring, forage test results, and the animal's production stage.

Maintain Minerals and Vitamins

Minerals are essential year-round, but they are especially important during winter when hay-driven diets may lack key nutrients. UF/IFAS Extension highlights the importance of providing species-appropriate free-choice mineral mixes to prevent deficiencies, especially in selenium, copper (for goats), and salt (UF/IFAS, *Mineral and Vitamin Supplementation for Sheep and Goats*).

Selecting Mineral and Vitamins

Choose species-appropriate minerals:

- Goats require higher copper levels; goat minerals typically contain 1,000-1,800 ppm copper (Baptista et al., 2021).
- Sheep are highly susceptible to copper toxicity and must receive low or no copper minerals (Baptista et al., 2021).
- Never feed goat minerals to sheep; offer minerals separately in mixed herds (Baptista et al., 2021).



Photo credit: UF/IFAS Photo Database

Select loose, free-choice minerals rather than blocks:

- Sheep and goats cannot consume enough from hard blocks to meet nutritional needs (Baptista et al., 2021).

Look for essential macro-minerals:

- Salt (NaCl) to regulate intake.
- Calcium and phosphorus in a 2:1 or 3:1 ratio to reduce urinary calculi risk, particularly in wethers (Baptista et al., 2021).
- Adequate magnesium and potassium, especially when animals are on hay-based diets (Baptista et al., 2021).

Ensure adequate trace minerals:

- Copper only for goats, never for sheep (Baptista et al., 2021).
- Selenium (often 20-90 ppm depending on deficiency levels).
- Zinc, magnesium, iodine, and cobalt to support immunity, reproduction, hoof health, and rumen function (Baptista et al., 2021).

Check for vitamins A, D, and E:

- Especially necessary in winter because hay contains lower levels of vitamins than fresh forage (Baptista et al., 2021).

Match the expected intake rate to label directions:

- Typical targets: 0.25-0.5 oz/day for sheep and 0.5-1oz/day for goats (Baptista et al., 2021).

Keep minerals fresh, dry, and accessible:

- Provide covered mineral feeders or weatherproof tubs to maintain intake consistency year-round.

Further Reading: Baptista, R., Shearer, J., & Sargsyan, A. (2021). Mineral and vitamin supplementation for sheep and goats (AN366). UF/IFAS Extension.

<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/AN366>

Practical Management Tips

- Use hay feeders or racks to reduce waste and stretch hay supplies.
- Store hay in dry, covered areas to maintain quality and avoid mold.
- Offer supplemental feed during periods of cold rain, strong wind, or sudden temperature drops.
- Maintain mineral and water programs consistently, regardless of weather.
- Provide windbreaks or simple shelter to reduce heat loss and energy use.

Summary: Winter nutrition is critical for sheep and goats, as colder temperatures and reduced pasture growth increase energy and nutrient requirements. Producers should monitor hay quality, provide supplements when forage is insufficient, and ensure access to species-appropriate minerals, vitamins, and clean water to maintain body condition and prevent deficiencies. Practical strategies such as proper hay storage, use of feeders, and providing shelter help support herd health and productivity through the winter months.

Citations

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Taking Small Steps Toward Healthier Living: Simple Habits That Make a Big Difference

Stephanie McMinds, BA
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As we move through the year, many of us set goals to eat better, manage stress, or improve our overall well-being, but making big lifestyle changes can feel overwhelming. The good news? Research shows that small, consistent habits have the most lasting impact. With a few practical adjustments to your daily routine, you can help create a health, happier, and more secure home environment.

1. Build a Balanced Plate

Healthy eating doesn't have to be complicated. Try aiming for:

- $\frac{1}{2}$ your plate with fruits and vegetables
- $\frac{1}{4}$ with lean protein like beans, fish, or poultry
- $\frac{1}{4}$ with whole grains such as brown rice or whole-wheat pasta

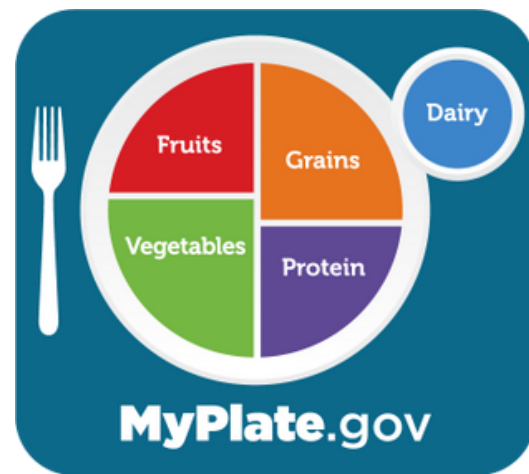
Even adding just one extra fruit or vegetable each day supports long-term health.

2. Make Your Kitchen a Safe Food Zone

Food safety is one of the easiest ways to prevent illness. Remember the basics:

- Clean: Wash hands and surfaces often
- Separate: Keep raw meat away from ready-to-eat foods
- Cook: Use a food thermometer to ensure proper temperatures
- Chill: Refrigerate leftovers promptly

These simple steps can greatly reduce the risk of foodborne illness.



3. Strengthen Your Financial Well-Being

Money management plays an important role in reducing stress and improving your overall quality of life. Try:

- Tracking your spending for one week
- Setting a small savings goal
- Reviewing bills and subscriptions for potential cuts

Small financial habits grow into long-term success.

4. Prioritize Self-Care and Family Connection

Healthy routines support strong relationships and emotional well-being. Even 10–15 minutes a day of intentional time, sharing a meal, taking a walk, or conversing without distractions, can make a significant difference. Simple stress-relief activities like deep breathing or journaling can also help both adults and teens manage busy schedules.

5. Stay Engaged and Keep Learning

Workshops, community classes, and online learning opportunities can help you build new skills, increase confidence, and stay connected with others who share similar goals.

By focusing on simple, everyday habits, you can create meaningful and lasting improvements in your overall well-being. Small choices, like preparing balanced meals, practicing safe food handling, setting financial goals, or making time for loved ones, build on each other over time. These gradual changes help reduce stress, strengthen family routines, and support a healthier, more positive home environment. Remember, real progress doesn't come from doing everything at once, but from choosing small actions that you can sustain and feel good about. Each step you take brings you closer to the lifestyle you want to build.



4-H Volunteers and Youth

The Five F's of Agriculture: Food, Fiber, Flowers, Forestry, and Fuel

Agriculture is big business. The American Farm Bureau Federation reports 1.9 million farms across the United States and 95 % of them are operated by families. They are responsible for growing plants, raising livestock, managing trees, and harvesting crops. The commodities produced by farmers are diverse and serve a variety of uses. A few examples of these commodities are listed below.

Food:

- Grains - wheat, rice, corn, and oats
- Vegetables - potatoes, tomatoes, corn, and onions
- Dairy - cheese, milk, and yogurt
- Meat - pork, poultry, and beef

Fiber:

- Plant-based - cotton, flax, and hemp
- Animal-based - wool, hides, and fur

Flowers:

- Tropical foliage - palms, hibiscus, and "Bird of Paradise"
- Ornamentals - grasses and ferns
- Cut flowers - sunflowers, daisies, and herbs

Forestry:

- Logging - long-leaf pine and cypress
- Forest products - resins, barks, pine straw, and mosses

Fuel:

- Biofuel - derived from sugarcane waste, soybeans, and other commodities
- Solar farms - capturing the energy of the sun



Marnie Ward, PhD
Citrus County Extension
4-H Agent



Size Doesn't Matter:

Agriculture is not limited by size, with farms and operations as unique as the commodities they produce.

In Florida, 1 acre of land may produce:
50,000 lbs of strawberries or
27,000 lbs of potatoes or
3,500 lbs of peanuts



Sugarcane

How to learn More:

Parents and youth can take a deeper dive into agriculture and learn more about farm life at <http://www.myamericanfarm.org>

For hands-on experiences in agriculture, contact your local Extension Office to learn about programs, camps, and workshops with horticulturists, agronomists, and farmers.

For 2026, follow Citrus County's 4-H Facebook, Blog, Newsletter, Webpage media sites and other outreach sources as we continue to learn and grow Florida's agriculture and natural resources.



Forestry



Soil Roots



Sunflower



FFF Breakfast

Spend Time with Florida's Plants and Animals

Florida is home to a rich diversity of plants and animals. A key factor in this diversity? Florida's climate. Average temperatures and rainfall vary from the panhandle to the keys, allowing for differing plant adaptations. Many non-native species also find these same conditions appealing, but in this issue, native Florida plants and animals are the focus.

Florida's Native Animals

Reptiles and Amphibians

If you are into herpetology (the study of reptiles and amphibians), check out the Florida Museum of Natural History website at this link: [Native Reptiles and Amphibians](#). The page has a link to "Frog Calls", so you can practice identifying the calls in your backyard.

Birds

Are you interested in practicing your Florida bird ID? Maybe you've been wondering what kind of brown bird has been flying through your backyard? Check out the bird watcher blog, at this link: [Native Birds](#)

Mammals

Florida's mammals come in all shapes and sizes; some live in terrestrial (land-based) and some in aquatic (water) environments. The smallest mammals include mice and voles, and the largest include bears and panthers. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has summarized information on many of these species. Check out their webpage for a deep dive into Florida mammals.



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Citrus County Extension
4-H Agent



Northern mockingbird

Trees

Can you identify the state tree of Florida? It's the Sabal Palm. You might also recognize it by the name "cabbage palm". This stately tree is found throughout Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina. Its name comes from the fact that the heart of the tree can be eaten and some say it tastes just like cabbage. Learn more about the Sabal palm and other native Florida trees, at this link:

[Native Trees](#)



Sabal Palm

Shrubs

Native plants in Florida also include the Beauty Berry, varieties of Azaleas, honeysuckle, milkweeds, and tick seeds. Many of these plants have uses beyond food for animals or nectar for insects. Have you ever eaten Beauty Berry jelly?

Adding native plants to your backyard attracts wildlife, but it also helps to protect Florida's unique native environments. Each of us can add more native plants to backyards and common areas. To learn more, visit the Florida Native Plant Society website at this link:

[Florida Native Plants](#)



Zebra longwing

Native plants and animals are important to Florida ecosystems. The plants and trees provide food, nectar, and habitats for other native plant and animal species. Florida recognizes the importance of native plants and animals

- American Alligator (State Freshwater Reptile)
- Loggerhead Turtle (State Saltwater Reptile)
- Northern Mockingbird (State Bird)
- Florida Panther (State Animal)
- Zebra longwing (State Butterfly)
- Largemouth Bass (State Freshwater fish)
- Atlantic sailfish (State Saltwater fish)
- Orange Blossom (State Flower)
- Tickseed (State Wildflower)
- Sabal Palm (State Tree)



American Alligator

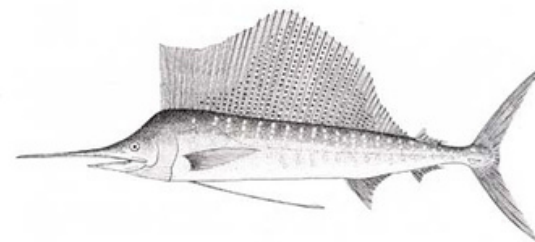
Take a deeper dive and learn more about natives with activity sheets at these links:

Florida Wildflowers:

[Wildflowers](#)

Florida Animals:

[Animals](#)



Atlantic Sailfish

Gardening Seminar Schedule



Hosted Online and/or In-Person

Register here for these free seminars: <https://ccufflprogram.eventbrite.com>



“Right plant, Right place”

Tuesday January 6
2:00 - 4:00 pm

“9 Principles FFL”

Tuesday January 20
2:00 - 4:00 pm

“Weed Management”

Tuesday February 10
2:00 - 4:00 pm

“Optimizing Irrigation Systems”

Tuesday February 24
2:00 - 4:00 pm

“Managing Gardens Pets wisely”

Tuesday March 10
2:00 - 4:00 pm

“Florida Friendly Fertilizing”

Tuesday March 24
2:00 - 4:00 pm

Irrigation & Turf Management 101 on Thursday, February 12, 2026, 12:00 - 3:00 p.m.

Water Resources - Rain Barrel Workshop

Thursday, April 23, 2026, from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.

UF/IFAS Extension Citrus County

3650 W Sovereign Path, Ste 1, Lecanto, FL 34461

Get tickets at the webpage:

<http://ccufflprogram.eventbrite.com>



<https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/citrus/>



(352) 527-5700

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citrus@ifas.ufl.edu

Classes/Events/Seminars

JANUARY, FEBRUARY, MARCH



Monthly Extension Master Gardener Seminars

Seminars offer an opportunity to explore timely garden topics and are offered at each Citrus County Library. No registration required for in person seminars.

All programs start at **1:00 p.m.**, are approximately 1 hour, and are free.

ZOOM seminar: pre-registration info available on our Facebook page.

- January: Spring fruit and vegetable gardening
- February: All About Mulch
- March: Butterfly gardening

- | | | |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| • 1st Monday | Lakes Regional Library | Inverness |
| • 2nd Wednesday | Central Ridge Library | Beverly Hills |
| • 3rd Monday ZOOM | —Pre-registration info available on our Facebook page! | |
| • 3rd Wednesday | Floral City Library | Floral City |
| • 4th Monday | Coastal Regional | Crystal River |
| • 4th Thursday | Homosassa Library | Homosassa |

Bring plant problems and questions for expert advice to the Plant Clinic at the Extension office.

Trained Master Gardeners are available most weekdays, between 8:30 a.m. & 4:30 p.m.

Schedules can vary, so please call ahead (352-527-5700).

Additionally, Plant Clinic questions and pictures can be emailed to:

IF-SVC-citrusmg@ad.ufl.edu



Upcoming Event

SAVE THE DATE

SATURDAY
APRIL 18TH, 2026
10:00 AM - 1:00 PM

**EARTH
DAY
EXPO**

UF/IFAS EXTENSION OFFICE
CITRUS COUNTY
3650 W SOVEREIGN PATH

UF | IFAS Extension
UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA
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Trained service animals only, please.

Welcome

Hello.

My name is Shauna Deskins, and I am excited to be the new 4-H Program Assistant for Citrus County!

My 4-H journey began when I was 5 years old, and I quickly discovered a love for showing animals, preserving food, photography, and livestock judging through my projects. The program taught me so much about responsibility, communication and leadership, and I am thrilled to give back to the program that helped shape me.

My husband and I own a small farm where we live with our family, dogs, cattle, & chickens. I am also a beekeeper in my spare time. I'm a graduate of Saint Leo University and have 15 years of experience in the field of education along with multiple teaching certifications with the Florida Department of Education.

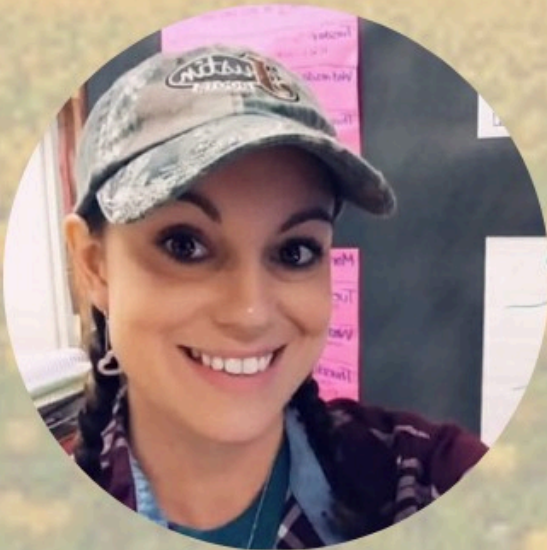
I am eager to meet all the wonderful 4-H members, families, and volunteers in our community. I'll be assisting with everything from organizing club activities to helping out at the fair, so please feel free to say hello if you see me around!

352.527.5722

shauna.deskins@ufl.edu



Shauna



Fall Gardening Calendar



Winter Gardening Calendar

What to Plant

Annuals/Bedding plants: Cool-season annuals that tolerate cooler conditions include pansy, viola, petunia, and snapdragon. Other plants that can take a chill include dianthus and dusty miller. Wait until spring begins to plant warm-season annuals e.g. Angelonia, wax begonia, and zinnia to avoid them getting damaged if there's a cold-snap

Bulbs:

Crinum, agapanthus, and gloriosa lily can be planted in the year's first quarter. As spring arrives, canna bulbs can be added as well, for spring and summer flowering. Replenishing mulch in flower beds will protect plants from cold-snaps.

Tree & Shrubs:

Many early bloomers include the Fringe-tree, and star magnolia. Shrubby azaleas in a wide variety of colors can also be planted at this time. A visit to local nurseries will help with your selection.

Vegetables:

Cool-season crops include broccoli, kale, carrots, and leafy greens. As temperatures begin to warm in March, crops such as beans, tomatoes, squash, and corn, can be planted for late spring harvest, but cold protection will be needed if there is a cold-snap.

Herbs:

Cool season cilantro, dill, and shrubby rosemary are great winter-time herbs. Herbs perform best in drier soils so avoid over-watering.

What to Do

Cold protection - cover tender plants to minimize damage.

Pruning - avoid pruning most plants until spring. Cold temperatures may still injure plants. For palms, don't remove fronds above the horizontal plane, to avoid depleting palm nutrient storage.

Pests - to control persistent scale insects on citrus, shrubs, camellias, and deciduous fruit trees, apply horticultural oil while plants are dormant.



Dianthus



Star Magnolia

