

# Tony's Winter Tips 2010



## **Introduction**

What a difference a year makes! After a milder, wetter summer and a long mild Autumn it's lovely to see Winter. The gardens and plants are in better condition, water restrictions have eased (you can now water every second day), the dams are fuller and our world is green again. Although some deciduous parts of the garden are falling apart, it is during this time of the year that some of the unsung heroes of the garden come to the fore. My camellias are looking fantastic as are my Azaleas (I've got only the sun tolerant varieties now which are much hardier). My winter flowering lavender are budding up now as are my sweet box and Hellebores. We are so fortunate to live in an environment where such a diverse range of plants are available. We can appreciate the wonderful Autumnal tones, but still have plants that perform in Winter. The true start of Winter is Solstice (June 21<sup>st</sup>, shortest day of the year) but I always see that as the lowest ebb or turning point of the season. After that point (in Melbourne), the first blossoms start (weeping apricot), the roses start to progress instead of regress and much of the garden is happening. Much of our gardens don't go fully dormant, but just slow down during the cooler months, then slowly speed up again.

## **Winter Planting**

Most people don't like to garden in the Winter because it feels colder and wetter and a little outside our comfort zone but to many of the plants we use in our gardens our Winter is mild and well within their comfort zone. I never cease to be amazed when we pot up a dormant bare root rose or fruit tree in the first week of June and within a month the rose has a mass of white feeder roots even before we see any leaves and the tree has a mass of white feeder roots within 2-3 months of being potted up. To look at, these plants have no visible outward signs of growth but they aren't dead, they have just slowed down their metabolism in proportion to the shorter day length and cooler temperatures. They are still a living, breathing organism able to react to their surroundings, in the case of a rose which doesn't go fully dormant this reaction is almost immediate. If you plant a plant at this time of the year in well-prepared soil you may not see much growth above the ground but the plant can put on 10 to 20% more root mass by Spring. When Spring comes around and says 'Can you come out to play?' the plant is feeling good about it's expanded root system and away it goes. Winter is a great time to do serious planting whether it be trees, a new hedge or a revamped garden bed. Councils do most of their serious planting at this time of the year because with a minimum of follow up care they have the greatest success. On the subject of new season bare root plants we organize ourselves and our growers to have all our bare root plants potted up into premium potting mix within a couple of days of them being lifted.

A bare root plant is a large rooted cutting that if not potted up or planted out fairly quickly has a limited viability. This is not just in my experience but proven in trials done by the University of California ( world's leading horticultural research body). The best analogy I can give is that buying an improperly stored rose(bare root) is like buying cheese not kept in a fridge. Its viability can be challenged in hours and within days it will have regressed to the point where it is beyond redemption.

One of my pet hates is customers who like to 'tease' the roots of their new plants before planting them. Little do they realise that they have just wiped out two-thirds of the plants feeder/drinking roots and have set the plant back 6 to 12 months, if it survives. It all dates back to Kevin Heinze and the *Sow What?* garden program in the 1960s-70s when many plants were grown in garden soil or were in their pots too long and as a consequence were 'pot-bound'. To encourage lateral root growth instead of inward strangling root growth, people were encouraged to "tease" the roots out to facilitate a spreading root system. However, in our modern nursery industry our plants are grown to a world standard in potting mixes that involve the latest technological advances. Therefore, if you buy from a quality nursery you should never be buying a plant that is 'pot-bound'. Many people knock the plant out of the pot and on seeing the rootball held together with a mass of creamy white roots assume it is 'pot-bound' and then set out to destroy the plants root system. I will never buy a plant unless it has a mass of feeder roots that are holding the rootball together. When I plant a plant the only disturbance to the rootball I will make is usually just to 'score' or scratch the root system from the top to the bottom with my thumbnail with the scored furrows a couple of millimetres deep (1/8 inch) and about 5-8cm (2-3 inches) apart and maybe a criss-cross on the base of the rootball. This will gently encourage lateral root growth without destroying the plants feeder root system. These roots naturally grow to the edge of the pot because it is warmer (black plastic pots are designed to absorb warmth to maximise root growth) and wetter. I never 'tease' roots and will often not disturb the rootball at all, knowing that planted into well prepared soil the roots will want to grow out into the friable compost/manure/organic fertilizer improved soil. Some plants, such as Daphne and many natives, absolutely hate any disturbance to their roots and will be at least set back in their growth and at worst will die! Many pots these days have little ridges on the inside to ensure that the root growth does not encircle the root ball. The idea is to make the transition from the nursery to your garden as seamless as possible and to let the plant establish itself as quickly as possible in its new home.

Never plant a plant deeper than it was in the pot, ie. Surface roots at or above the existing soil level. Always improve soil with "smelly brown stuff" (organic fertilizers, composts or manures) that will not burn roots but encourage roots to grow out into them. To maximise new lateral root growth water with *Seasol*, *Plantstarter* or *Maxicrop* which have mild rooting hormones ideal to encourage new roots. The quicker the roots grow the quicker the top will grow. Getting a plant off to a good start is the secret to gardening!

### **The seven deadly gardening sins**

1. **Don't** tease roots when you plant. You'll destroy half the feeder root system and it will take 6 months to recover.
2. **Don't** use inorganic fertilizers unless they are slow release, organic incorporated or liquid fertilizers correctly mixed. Inorganic fertilizer releases quickly, often burning and damaging the plant and is bad for the environment. Its quick release also effects the feast/famine cycle. It should never be used on potted plants.
3. **Don't** plant a plant too deep or build soil or mulch up around the base of the tree/shrub. This can cause collar rot and limit the flow of water and nutrient through the collar, eventually ring-barking the tree.

4. **Don't** let disease or pest problem get out of control before doing something. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure!
5. **Don't** use a potting mix unless it has the 5 ticks of the premium rating of the Australian Standards Association. You could sweep your kitchen floor, put the sweepings in a bag and call it potting mix and sell it (one nationally known brand was the sweepings from a leading manufacturer's factory floor).
6. **Don't** plant a plant in a hole the same size as the root ball. It's like putting a child in new shoes that just fit. No room to grow in the short term and crippling in the longer term. Plant in a bigger, wider, dish shaped hole.
7. **Don't** be afraid to ask for advice. We employ 7 fully qualified horticulturalists with over 120 years experience between them. Bring a rough sketch map and a couple of photos of your garden on a digital camera to give us better information so we can give you better advice.

### **Winter Edibles**

There are lots of plants that are at their best when planted in Winter allowing you to reap the benefits through Spring and Summer. Potatoes are easy to grow, very productive and worthy of a place in the garden. Certified seed potatoes are grown virus and disease-free and are always going to give a better crop. Most seed potatoes are small but larger tubers can be cut up as long as each section has a couple of "eyes" or buds and that cut sections are left out to dry for a couple of days and harden so they don't rot when planted into the soil. A quicker start can be achieved by exposing the tubers to light and allowing them to shoot and then carefully planting the "pre-germinated" tubers. I'm growing some in pots that I grow tomatoes in, in the summer, in the knowledge that I will probably harvest my spuds at Christmas and pot up my Tomatoes then from a smaller size into the spud pots. I start with 40-50 cm diameter pots, put some compost/potting mix in the bottom 20 cm (8") of the pot, put in 3 tubers and cover with some compost and straw. As they grow up I add another layer of compost/straw/potting mix to cover lower shoots and new tubers until the pot is full and I mulch with straw. In the garden dig the soil over, and create a trench about 15 cm (6") deep, plant the tubers 25cm (10 ") apart and cover with soil/compost and away they go. Keep topping up the layers of soil/compost/straw with bi-monthly dressings of complete fertilizer. Don't allow tubers to be exposed to sun as they will turn green and be poisonous. Always keep covered. Some potatoes are earlier to harvest (Christmas) whilst others are harvested in the Autumn. A good indicator is the foliage dying down. Harvest carefully and store in a cool, dark spot.

### **Rhubarb**

Wonderful, easy to grow, perennial that will be productive for many years as long as a few basic rules are followed. Rhubarb love good drainage and I grow mine in large tubs in an afternoon shade position. Good drainage in the garden means plant in raised mounds in well-prepared soil with lots of compost/manure dug in. They are a heavy feeder and prefer morning sun but some afternoon shade – one of the few shade tolerant vegies. You can grow from seed or seedlings which take up to 3 years to produce or you can buy Rhubarb crowns in the winter which will produce pickable stems later the same year. The stems should be torn/pulled off rather than cut off so that there is no stem base left to rot back into the plant. Red stems are sweeter and more flavoursome but green stems can be eaten. The leaves contain a poison which if eaten in large quantities can poison you. The same poison reacts badly with aluminium so never cook Rhubarb in aluminium pots. Some organic gardeners soak the leaves in water for days allowing it to stew and then spray the liquid as a natural insecticide. To recap: rich soil, regular feeding, part shade and good drainage for best results. Stressed plants can flower to reproduce but the flower stem should be removed and plants given more TLC. Divide every 5 or so years. Asparagus crowns can be planted now in raised compost/manure enriched beds.

Asparagus is a long term vegetable so choose a sunny spot where the planting can grow and remain for a number of years. A hedge of asparagus fern at the back of a vegetable garden works well. You can also plant a lot of vegetable seedlings including cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, leeks, onions, lettuce, rocket, kale, parsley, silver and red beets.

### **Fruit Trees**

A terrific range of fruit trees are available in the Winter and this year there are a lot of new releases from *Flemings* that will be very tempting. "Flavour Rouge" is a new plum/apricot cross that is red skinned and has red marbled flesh that is very sweet and is highly regarded at *Flemings*. "Marcia's Favourite" is another plum/apricot cross with red skin, yellow flesh and a very mild sweet flavour. "Cot 'n Candy" is a new hybrid apricot with a touch of plum, orange-yellow skin, lemon-white flesh that is self-fertile. "Spicezee" is a nectarine with a little plum breeding thrown in with maroon red skin, white sweet flesh and is also self-fertile (self pollinating). "Luisa" is a new-released small, sweet and juicy yellow fleshed plum that is the first self-fertile Japanese plum. As there are varying degrees of plum in their breeding these trees are generally quite vigorous and relatively low in pest/disease problems. The first two plums can be cross-pollinated by the "Mariposa" Blood Plum. The dwarf/compact growing white and black cherries are worth looking at as are the column like ballerina apples. Ideal for smaller gardens and tighter spaces.

Some of the easiest to grow and most drought-tolerant fruit trees can produce great value fruit that is expensive to buy. Figs are easy to grow but expensive in the shops because of the transport issue. Quinces and pomegranates are also easy to grow, are fantastic fruiters and love our Mediterranean climate.

Planting fruit trees: it's important to prepare the soil well for best long-term results.

All fruit trees, including citrus, like to be planted in a raised position in rich soils improved with compost/manure. Orchards are always on sloping ground or the soil is raised up in ridges for the best surface/sub-surface draining. At home just dig the position over with a bag/barrow-load of compost/aged manure, make a mound and plant into that mound so the surface roots of the tree are 100-150cm (4-6") above the normal soil level.

### **Rose Pruning**

Books are written about it and "experts" ramble on at length about the many methods and the many things you must know about rose pruning. As a tertiary qualified horticulturist with 30 years of rose experience the main thing you need to know is that roses must be pruned. Roses flower on new growth and by pruning and feeding you encourage the new growth and subsequent flowering. Any prune is better than no prune! I start pruning in the last week of May and have finished pruning by Solstice – June 21. If you are in a frost prone area then prune in late July or August so that the new growth isn't frost affected. I prune normal bush roses back by two-thirds to three-quarters but on more vigorous roses, eg. *David Austin* roses, I will only prune by one-third to half because hard pruning promotes too much growth and less flowers and consequently a messy looking plant. Climbers I prune lightly (by 1/5 to 1/3 off). Hard pruning on climbers forces growth at the expense of flowering. I often do rose pruning demonstrations with hedge clippers to show that any fool can prune a rose and the amount you prune is dependent on the vigour of the plant. Flower carpet/groundcover roses should be hedge clipped – usually back to a neater shape. Overseas, many public gardens have large banks of flower carpet roses which are pruned by running a tractor mounted slasher over the top so don't be shy. I don't prune once flowering roses such as Banksia or Albertine etc. until after their flowering in the Spring. A hard prune now would take them out of a flower forming phase and into a growth forming phase.

I spray roses with Lime Sulphur after pruning to clean up any insect or mite eggs and any dormant fungal spores. That means when new growth emerges there will be no immediate re-infestation of the vulnerable new growth by the remnants of last seasons' problems. Feeding with an organic nitrogen/high potassium fertilizer, such as *Sudden Impact* or *Blooming Roses*, makes your roses less susceptible to disease. Potassium strengthens cell walls and leaf epidermis whilst inorganic highly soluble nitrogen (ie. Ammonia) promotes soft lush growth that is more disease prone and less flower orientated. Feeding should take place a month or so after pruning when the new growth emerges because that is when the plant's metabolism is re-energised and needs the food.

### **New Releases**

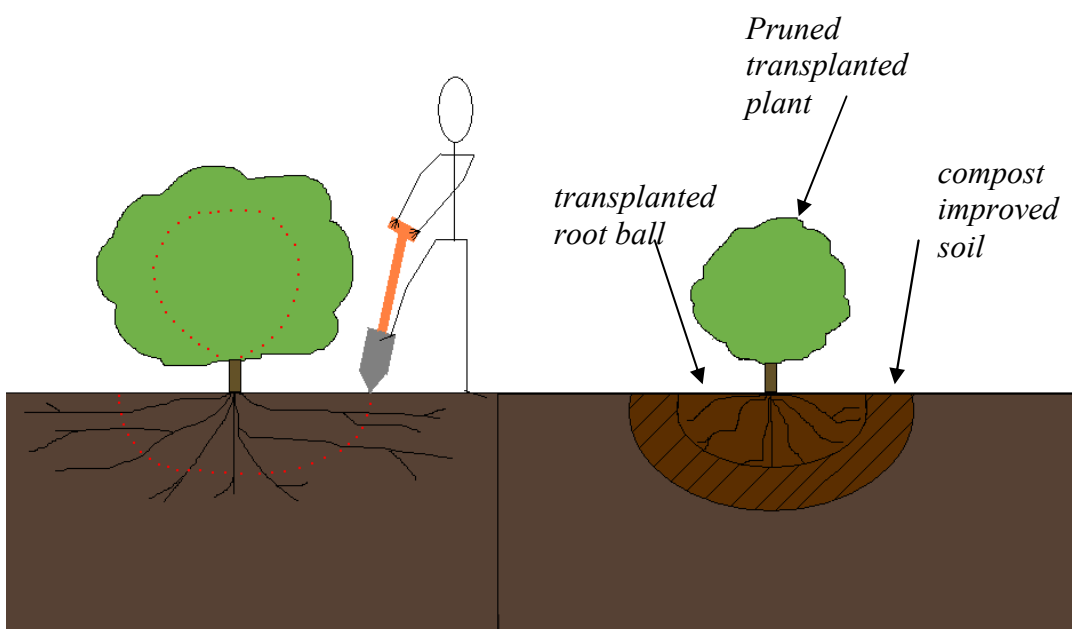
A new release this July, Fairy Magnolia bears masses of small fragrant pink flowers Winter and Spring on a bushy shrub of 2-3 metres tall. A hybrid of *Michelia yunnanense*, *Michelia doltsopa* and *Michelia figo* this plant is an amalgam of the best of each of those plants. Michelias, - are first cousins of Magnolia and will eventually be classified as Magnolias. The shrub has glossy green foliage all year round and clips well to become an excellent screening/hedging plant, loves a soil improved with compost/manure and can take a sunny or partly shaded position. The growers love this plant and reckon it's a good thing so I think it will be too!

Also worth looking at are the new release Lilly Pilly Big Red – dark green foliage, bright red new growth, ideal screening/hedging shrub of approximately three meters or the new Winter Lights – smaller finer leaved but still with the bright red new growth. Also being released in late Winter are a new release Euphorbia called Rudolph- red tipped new growth and a new perennial Dianthus called Passion. Passion has masses of deep red, carnation like, flowers over a long period and is an ideal bordering ground cover for sun to part shade. Euphorbias have proven to be winners in the last few years and the interesting foliage colours and shapes look good all through the year and then a great display of lime green flowers late winter/early spring.

New Release Roses. Chateau Versailles is a new release from Delbard Roses in their “Grand Parfums” (very fragrant) range. Soft apricot/pink buds opening to a large creamy-peach fragrant flower on a bushy plant with dark, shiny green foliage. Lichfield Angel is a new release from David Austin Roses which also has apricot-pink buds opening to a lightly fragrant, full creamy-white flower on a vigorous, bushy shrub. Its bushy habit lends itself to low hedges or borders, covered with flowers with good disease resistance. Both roses are considered to be good varieties and ideal to plant with yellows or pinks or as a stand alone feature.

### **Winter Jobs**

- Spray Azaleas and Rhododendrons with Confidor if they have that silvery grey sheen caused by an infestation of Azalea Lace Bug. Follow up with a complete fertilizer to rejuvenate the plant. It is often misdiagnosed as Red Spider Mite which is wrong.
- Add some blood and bone to your compost heap to facilitate the breakdown of the Autumn leaves and aerate to stimulate composting bacteria.
- Feed cymbidium orchids with a high potash flowering fertilizer, stake flower stems with Bamboo Stakes and put out snail pellets to prevent flowers being decimated.
- Spray Helleborus with Confidor to control aphids sucking the life out from underneath.
- Spray Citrus with Pest Oil to control scale and leaf minor. Non-toxic spray which works by suffocating the pests.
- Treat Box Hedges with dolomite lime to balance soil acidity (especially important if your box go an orange/rusty colour.)
- Feed citrus with an organic based fertilizer (inorganic or white fertilizers are inefficient in a cold soil.)



- Treat lawn with lime if you regularly feed your lawn. Lawn fertilizers often acidify lawn. If

not sure, bring in a soil sample for us to pH test for you.

### Transplanting

Winter is the time when many plants are dormant or are growing at their slowest rate and as you can see more clearly it is a good time to look at whether some plants are in the wrong place and may need to be moved to a more appropriate place. If the plant is not too large and your back is good then you can often do the job in one go. Prior to transplanting, prune the plant back reasonably hard being aware that when you dig the plant up you will chop off the largest part of its feeder root system and you need to reduce the foliage accordingly. Depending on the **size** of the shrub/tree (and the strength of your back) push the spade in at a 30 degree angle, 30 to 40 cm out from the trunk to cut the root system and having root pruned all the way around then slide/lever the spade underneath the root ball to cut any roots going straight down. The bigger the root ball the quicker the plant's ability to recover and grow away. The new position should have the soil improved with compost/manure in a layer 15 cm or more, around the root ball to facilitate drainage and encourage new root growth. The plant should be up on a slight mound to improve surface drainage and preclude root rot. Water in with Plant Starter, Seasol or Maxicrop to allay transplant shock and stimulate new root growth. By the time summer comes around you want it to have a vigorous new feeder root system. I often play musical chairs in my garden as plants grow beyond my expectations or their position has too much or not enough sun. If it is quite a large plant and the move likely to be traumatic I will often prepare the plant by root pruning with a spade in April and giving a light prune to the foliage so that the plant is more receptive to the Winter move.

### Potting Mix – Rip off or Responsible Gardening?

I am always amazed at how often people will pot up a lovely plant in peak condition into either garden soil or cheap and nasty potting mix. These soils are unable to properly sustain the plant, and will cause the plant to go backwards from day one. People think that good potting mix is a rip off, but can't understand why their plants never prosper. I go to nurseryman's meetings, and over dinner they discuss the aeration, porosity, drainage, water retention and wettability, nutrient release and retention rates and all round performance of their potting mixes. When your livelihood depends on it, you make sure you're growing your plants in the good stuff because it is a false economy to grow it in the cheap stuff. Bagged potting mix can be made to a price or it can be made to a certain standard, and if you saw what was required for a manufacturer to gain the 5 ticks of the Australian Standards Association you would be amazed.

It must be free of plant pathogens, weeds and harmful substances, There is a requirement to be met for air filled porosity, water holding capacity, wettability, pH, minimum and maximum quantities of the various fertilizer elements, maximum salt allowances and so on. There are different requirements for specialist mixes such as orchid, African Violet, seed raising, bonsai and others. The standards also apply to bulk mixes as well. We pot all our roses and fruit trees into a bulk premium potting mix because we only buy from the best rose and tree growers, and we want the plants to progress rather than regress. We only recommend the premium grade potting mixes so look out for the 5 ticks on your potting mix bag. It doesn't have to be our brands, but in a study done by Burnley College a couple of years ago the leading mixes were found to be from three manufacturers; Growbetter, Debco and Amgrow (a W.A. brand). If not rated premium then you need to add fertilizer and wetting agents almost immediately and humus/water storage crystals as well if it is unrated.

### **Planet Ark Schools Tree Planting Day**

Each year for the past 3 years, Acorn Nursery has been officially involved in Planet Ark schools tree planting day on the last Friday in July. In the last 3 years at Chatham, Wattle Park and Canterbury Primary Schools we have planted over 400 native trees, shrubs, grasses and groundcovers. The kids get involved in the plantings and take ownership of the plants in that planting, encouraging them to stop the other kids from damaging the plants. Even the Preps understand from early on that plants are good for the environment, that they make the oxygen we breathe and that they provide homes for native birds and animals. This year we will be planting an area of Surrey Hills Primary on July 30<sup>th</sup>. The following Sunday is National Tree Planting Day, and for anyone who would like to get involved, there are a number of projects in the local area.