A tall vase of blooming forsythia branches can chase away the winter blues. Bring a bit of spring indoors by gathering branches of flowering deciduous shrubs and trees and forcing them to bloom or leaf out early in your home.

When temperatures rise above freezing in late January and February, select and cut branches that have many plump buds. Cut a few more branches than you expect to use because some may not absorb water satisfactorily. Use a sharp blade and take care not to disfigure the shrub or tree.

With pruning shears or a sharp knife, carefully split the cut end, one to four inches. Place cut branches in a container of warm water and re-cut one inch from the base of the stem. This will help prevent air from entering the stem through the cut end, blocking water uptake. Remove any buds and twigs that will be under water.

Place containers in a warm room (60 - 70 degrees) and change the water every few days. You may add a floral preservative to the container water to help control bacteria.

It may take one to eight weeks for the blossoms to open. The closer to their natural bloom time that you cut the branches, the sooner they will open.

Here is a list of local favorites from the garden. You can also purchase branches from your florist.

- **Cercis canadensis** - Redbud
- **Chaenomeles spp** - Japanese or Flowering Quince
- **Cornus florida** - Flowering Dogwood
- **Hamamelis vernalis** - Vernal Witch Hazel
- **Crataegus spp** - Hawthorn
- **Forsythia spp** - Forsythia
- **Lonicera spp** - Honeysuckle
- **Magnolia soulangiana** - Saucer Magnolia
- **Magnolia stellata** - Star Magnolia
- **Malus spp** - Apple and Crabapple
- **Prunus spp** - Flowering Almond, Cherry & Plum
- **Salix caprea** - European Pussy Willow
- **Spiraea spp** - Spirea
- **Syringa spp** - Lilac
- **Viburnum spp** - Viburnum

**Susan Grupp**, Extension Educator, Horticulture, DuPage County
Alexander County has started its own local chapter of the N.C. State Beekeepers Association. This association started with 17 charter members and elected officers in December. Officers include: President – Tim Stafford, Vice President/Program Chair – David Land, Secretary/Treasurer – Larry Bolick, 3 Year Director – Don McNeil, 2 year Director – Terry Land and 1 Year Director – Danny Price. The next meeting, Monday January 11th will include a DVD “An Introduction to Beekeeping” and additional helpful viewpoints from several veteran beekeepers. All meetings are held at the Alexander County Extension Center located directly beside the Alexander County Health Department. Meetings will be held monthly on the 2nd Monday evening at 7:00 p.m. Dues will be $25 per year and include several benefits; educational programs each month, networking with other local beekeepers, along with informational newsletters and other publications. Contact Lenny Rogers at the Alexander Extension Center at 632-4451 for more information

When is the best time to prune fruit trees and vines?

Pruning may be done at any time to remove dead, damaged, diseased or dying limbs and branches. Major pruning should occur at dormancy, after the leaves have shed but before new growth begins for the spring.

Vine fruit crops like raspberries and blackberries will develop cankers and galls on canes. Remove the dead canes close to the ground after the berries are harvested to encourage the new season’s emerging canes to grow strong. If they develop before or about harvest time, remove them several inches below these areas. Fire blight is common on pear and apple trees; prune shortly after blooming, a foot below the lowest infested foliage. If months have passed and the disease entered the wood, prune out the infested wood when the foliage is dry.

Tree fruits, in addition to vine fruits, require annual dormant season pruning to open their canopy for better light penetration and air movement during spring. This management practice encourages better color and size and reduces some disease development. Older apple tree pruning should start in January followed by young apple trees in late January. Prune all other fruit in February or later. Prune before buds swell to the point of being broken.

Don Breedlove

American Beautyberry

One of autumn’s greatest displays of color comes from a native plant called the American beautyberry (Callicarpa Americana). Its dull green foliage is rather ordinary. However the autumn season brings out brightly colored purple berries that are simply dazzling. Despite its many attributes, beautyberry may not be a good choice for every garden situation. The upright, irregular growth habit along with its coarse textured foliage gives beautyberry a rather unkept appearance. For these reasons, beautyberry is best suited for use in naturalized landscape settings.
Solar-Heated Greenhouses

A solar greenhouse is more cost effective than a traditional greenhouse when growing flower and vegetable seedlings. A solar greenhouse stores excess heat during the day. This keeps the greenhouse warmer at night. Typically, water-filled containers passively store this heat inside the greenhouse. At least one gallon of water is needed for every square foot of glazing. More water is better.

Orient greenhouses east and west for maximum solar gain. Insulate the north wall to reduce the amount of heat loss at night. Controlling air infiltration is critical. Larger containers such as 55-gallon drums provide lots of heat storage, but smaller containers like 2-liter drink bottles provide faster heat exchange. A combination works best. Avoid using milk jugs because they become brittle. For maximum solar gain in late February and March, slant the south-facing roof at a 45-degree angle. (Outside of North Carolina the roof angle should be the latitude plus 10 degrees.)

Start seeds in a warmer location and move to the greenhouse about 6 weeks prior to the date you want them in the garden. Ventilation will be required during mid-day. Plan to open the greenhouse later and close it earlier in the day than you would a greenhouse with supplemental heating. During cold snaps, plan to cover the seedlings with newspaper during the night to maintain warmth. A non-woven landscape fabric provides additional protection for colder nights. Remove the cover with temperatures get above freezing. This type of set-up will work down to 18 degrees F. For lower forecasts, when the lives of hundreds of seedlings hang in the balance, spend a few cents on supplemental heating. Seedlings will grow more slowly in this environment, but won’t require hardening off. Seedlings produced in solar greenhouses often perform better during transplanting than seedlings produced in traditional greenhouses.

David Goforth

Protecting Plants from Deicing Injury

While most areas of North Carolina have minimal snowfall throughout the winter months, we occasionally are hit with both snow and ice. Knowing how to properly get rid of snow and ice will help gardeners prevent permanent damage to plants.

Sodium chloride or rock salt is used as a common deicer. Its drawback is that it can burn plants and corrode metal and concrete. If you must use salt, use it judiciously, and erect barriers with plastic fencing, burlap or snow fencing to protect sensitive plants and minimize contact with salt reduce salt damage by mixing salt with sand and by removing snow before salting.

When possible, use deicing agents with calcium chloride, or calcium magnesium acetate (CMA), a salt-free melting agent made from limestone and acetic acid. Cat litter or sawdust help create traction on sidewalks.

Do not pile snow that contains salt around plants. Avoid piling it where runoff will flow over root zones. Plants placed near roadways and sidewalks should be salt tolerant. Many plants can recover from occasional salt spray. If it is a yearly occurrence, however, death of the plant may result.

If salt buildup occurs, water liberally before spring growth by applying 2 inches of water over a 2- or 3-hour period. Repeat a few days later to “flush” the sodium from the soil.

Diane Turner
Many gardeners are familiar with the wonderful ornamental attributes and landscape use of deodar cedar (Cedrus deodara), with its beautiful blue-green leaves and graceful habit. Its unusual-looking cousin, weeping blue atlas cedar, C. atlantica ‘Glauca Pendula’, deserves recognition as well. This is truly a unique plant. Its branches feature a flowing effect, sometimes described as cascading like water over a bed of rocks. This wonderful weeping conifer has the same evergreen, bluish needles as the common deodar cedar. The weeping, twisting, long branches that are crowded with bright blue needles fall down around the trunk.

Weeping blue atlas, with its unusual characteristics, is a perfect candidate as a specimen plant. The plant deserves a special place where it will be sure to catch the eye and hold the interest of any visitor to the garden. It can be trained, trellised, espaliered and even grown as a bonsai to fit the need and size desired in the garden. Its twisted branch habit gives it year-round interest.

As with most cedars, weeping blue atlas cedar does best in loamy soil and full sun but will tolerate other soils except those with poor drainage. It is a moderate- to slow-growing evergreen, growing to 10 feet tall and 15 feet wide. It is somewhat difficult to transplant so it is best to plant container-grown trees. Staking and training young trees is necessary to establish the desired form.

Blue atlas cedar is resistant to serious pest and disease problems. Protect trees from strong winter winds since cold temperatures can injure or kill tops of established trees.

You can find a young weeping blue atlas cedar at the JC Raulston Arboretum on the south side of the visitor center. An older specimen is found in the Klein-Pringle White Garden.

Carl Matyac

**House Plants Are Our Friends!!**

During the cold winter months our thoughts turn from the care of our gardens and lawns to care of house plants. There are three things which are essential for success with house plants: 1. A good soil mixture 2. Good soil drainage and 3. Proper light and proper temperature. A good soil is one that consists of 1 part soil, 1 part peat moss and 1 part coarse sand. As for fertilizing house plants, the best recommendation is to use commercial fertilizer designed for house plants and follow direction on the container. Another important step in having beautiful and healthy house plants is to choose the right plant for the amount of available light. Flowering plants will probably require more sun or at least better lighting than those that do not bloom. Partial shade plants grow best in a few hours of direct sun in winter, but do better in light shade in other seasons. These plants are suited to east and north windows. Examples would include African violets, gloxinia, caladium, and tuberous begonias. The Boston fern, dumbcane, grape ivy, and rubber plants also do well in partial shade.

**HOLD THE ONIONS!!**

This is a good time to control those pesky wild onions in your lawn. You can use a herbicide such as 2,4D amine. Spray on a calm, warm day and follow the recommended rates found on the container label. It will probably be necessary to repeat treatment for 2 or more years.