As we head into winter we all have our fingers crossed that it will be a mild one. From the forecasts and the “signs”—excess acorns, spoons in the persimmon, and weather trends, it may not sound great, and we all need to be prepared. The forecast is for a wetter and colder winter. Moisture is a good thing if it isn’t excessive. Moisture serves as a buffer for the plants when we have cold temperatures. Heavy accumulations of snow or ice are not as desirable, so pay attention. Tis the season of our first frost, so pay attention to the weather forecasts, and take whatever precautions are needed. Many folks wait too late to move tender plants into a protected spot. If you plan to have them as houseplants, they should have been inside long ago, but if you simply keep them under the house or in the garage, make sure the move is made prior to a frost.

Plants that are moderately hardy outdoors, often over-winter outdoors if you just add a little extra mulch. Don’t be too quick to apply this extra protection until after they have gone dormant. In past years, folks have piled up leaves, grass clippings, or other mulch covering the plant well, but before cold weather occurred. This prevented those plants from going dormant, and resulted in a dead plant the following spring. Allow the plant to go dormant following a frost, then cut off the plant debris and add the extra mulch. Pay attention to the drainage of your soil. Winter soils often retain more moisture with less evaporation and less water usage of plants while they are dormant. Wet feet can lead to rotting of many perennials. With a little extra care, hopefully we can avoid some of the winter damage we had the past two seasons.

If you have crape myrtles in your landscape, you need to check them for crape myrtle bark scale. Black sooty mold may be covering the trunk, and small white scale insects coating the stems. If you spot the problem, now that the leaves have shed, it is the perfect time to clean up the trunks with a soft brush and soapy water. Once dry, spray with a dormant oil, saturating as much of the trunk and limbs as you can. A light spray on the ground underneath them won’t hurt either, since you may have knocked some crawlers down there when cleaning the trunk. Crape myrtle scale is a relatively
new pest to central and southern Arkansas. We had a rash of new cases late in the season this year. Only treat if you have a problem, but do monitor for the pest and treat as needed. In the spring as they begin to grow, use a systemic insecticide drench.

It was another unusual season with a very late spring and early summer, with wetter than normal conditions, but then in midsummer we got dry and our early fall was dry as well. If the predicted rains don’t come, make sure you water prior to a cold snap. Plants in container are even more susceptible to dry conditions.

Fertilize your winter annuals and winter vegetables every two weeks when the weather is warm enough. Pansies in particular will bloom better with regular feeding. If you haven’t planted, so do soon. Make sure the pansies or violas you plant are well-established and blooming now or you will have green plants all winter with blooming beginning in the spring.

Spring blooming bulbs can still be planted even through mid-January, but if you have the time, get them in the ground now while the soil is easy to work. Plant your bulbs two to three times as deep as they are large. You can layer the larger bulbs deeper in the ground, with the smaller bulbs like crocus on top. Then plant winter annuals on the top and have layers of blooms in the spring. You do not need to fertilize bulbs at planting, since the bulb contains everything the plant needs to bloom. Fertilization should occur when you see the flower buds emerging next spring.

Poinsettias are hitting the market earlier and earlier each season, with new color choices as well. When you get your poinsettia, give it bright sunlight and even moisture. If you keep it too wet or too dry, the leaves will begin to shed. With proper conditions your colorful poinsettias can last for months.

Clean up is an ongoing process in the garden, but never more important than in the transition from growing to dormancy. Rake leaves as they fall and cut back spent perennials. Get rid of the old foliage around your canna plants as the dreaded leaf roller overwinters in the debris. Add a fresh layer of mulch to tender perennials and around your shrubs. Avoid heavy pruning in the fall and early winter, as the extra growth on your plants can serve as a buffer for winter weather. You can prune your bush roses back to a height of 5 feet to make them more stable, but hold off on the severe pruning until winter weather has passed.

If you have a gardener on your holiday gift list, there are so many choices. Some new ideas are the LED light kits to grow vegetables and plants inside year-round, ergonomic tools to make gardening easier as we age, and computerized weather stations. But they would also enjoy seeds, plants, books, gardening tools and raised bed kits.
If you have amaryllis bulbs from previous years they should be putting on new growth now. When you see the bulbs beginning to sprout, increase the amount of water you give them and the sunlight. Turn the plants weekly to keep them growing straight and prevent them from toppling over. Consider using garden stakes as well to help with the tall growth. They often produce their flower stalks before putting on leaves.