

## Fall Garden Tasks & Putting the Garden to Bed for Winter

### Fall Pruning Woody Shrubs and Trees Do's and Don'ts

Pruning off dead or diseased wood can be done now or at any time. Pruning of spring-blooming trees and shrubs should not be done now as you will cut off the flower buds. Wait until after flowering. Also, wait until dormancy, late winter, or early spring to prune summer-blooming or non-blooming woody shrubs and trees, as pruning spurs growth, which you don't want prior to the cold of winter.

### Cutting Back Perennials Do's and Don'ts Suggestions

There is much debate about whether to leave all of your plants in place over the winter to protect insect pollinators and other beneficial wildlife and to add winter interest.

Some perennials and shrubs provide winter interest in the garden -- by retaining their shapes and lovely dried flowers and providing seeds for the birds -- and some do not. Which should we leave in place until spring and which ones might you consider cutting back now? Here are some suggestions:

- **Leave perennials and deciduous shrubs that remain upright over the winter and have attractive dried flowers, seed heads, and berries for the birds.** Examples are Astilbe, Agastache, Sedum, Hydrangea, Rudbeckia, Ilex, and Echinacea. Wait until early spring to cut back upright woody sub-shrubs like Buddleia, Caryopteris, Lavender, and Perovskia.
- **Suggestions for plants to cut back now include** Hemerocallis (Daylilies), Irises, Eutrochium purpurea (Joe Pye weed), Montauk Daisies, Solidago (Goldenrod), Shasta daisies, etc., as well as most annuals. Some annuals will return if they are in a warm and sunny spot, particularly Snapdragon, others may self-seed, like Cosmos, Verbena bonariensis, Celosia, Cleome. Phlox, Peonies, Monarda (bee balm), and Hosta frequently have fungal and bacterial diseases so dispose in the garbage and do not add them to your compost. Nepeta (Catmint), although a woody subshrub, can be cut back now because it will flop over and not remain upright. But to ensure its winter survival, cut it back to no lower than 6 inches.

### Pull Weeds

While the ground is damp and roots are easily pulled, remove unwanted grass, crabgrass, vines, and weeds.

### Clean up Vegetable Beds

Dispose of plants that are diseased, but the rest can be added to the compost

### Plant Late-Winter and Spring-Blooming Bulbs

#### Dividing and Transplanting

Fall is a good time for this job because the entire plant is still visible, as are the empty spaces where new plants might go, and the cooler, wetter weather will help roots establish so that come spring, the plants are ready to thrive. December may be a bit late, but often December is now still warm enough if your divisions retain a good root mass. Some suggested plants for fall division include

- Daylilies, Joe Pye Weed (a native), Astilbe, Anemone, Hosta, Peony, Iris, Ornamental Grasses, Stokesia, and suckering shrubs like Hydrangea quercifolia (a native) and Lilacs
- Natives that self-seed like Amsonia and Juniperus virginiana (Eastern Red Cedar) can be repositioned

#### Care for Tender Perennials

**"Tender" bulbs, corms, tubers** should be dug up and stored in a basement or garage over the winter: Dahlias, Cannas, Calla Lilies, Gladioli, Caladiums, Colocasia (Elephant's Ears). Except for perhaps Gladioli, these will not survive our winters. Digging up and storing them can save the expense of buying new ones in spring and you can save particular varieties.

- If the plants are in containers or pots, you may try cutting off the tops and storing them as is.
- If they are in the ground, use a pitchfork or shovel to carefully dig up as much of them as possible.
- Clean them off, cut stems to 4-6 inches
- Wait for spring to divide them
- Cure by letting them dry
- Pack them in peat moss, sand, vermiculite, Styrofoam, or wood shavings. Some layer them in boxes. I simply put crumpled newspaper on the bottom of a paper or plastic bag, add tubers/bulbs/corms, top off with more crumpled newspaper, and store them on a basement shelf.
- Label the box or bag with the name, variety, color, and year.
- Store at minimum 40 degrees, except 50-60 degrees for caladiums, either in a heated basement or heated garage.

### **Fallen Leaves**

- Use a mulcher attachment as you mow your lawn and leave the finely shredded leaves to decompose and feed the soil under your lawn.
- As with flattened perennials, leaving a mat of un-shredded leaves in your garden beds or lawn can harbor rodents and diseases. For leaves you rake out from your garden beds, create a pile, and run the lawnmower with a mulcher attachment over the pile. If there are not too many you can let them decompose in the lawn. If there are too many leaves, bag all the mulched leaves with the bag attachment and either add them to your compost pile or return the mulched leaves to the garden beds.
- Use an electric leaf mulcher (Sun Joe, for instance) to shred a large pile
- Another option is allowing the leaves to remain in place in the garden beds during the winter. However, doing so may allow plant diseases and ticks to overwinter. Rodents such as voles may hide under the bulky layer of un-shredded leaves and plant material to avoid natural predators like hawks, osprey, and owls.
- Un-shredded leaves left in your garden beds over the winter may also be more difficult to rake out in spring: they may have formed a dense, soggy mat or, perhaps more problematic, many perennials begin to emerge very early in late winter or early spring – such as Daylilies, Epimediums, and Sedum – and they may be damaged when you do heavy raking at the same time.
- Leaves piled around the trunks of trees and shrubs can shelter rodents that will eat the bark during the winter.

### **Composting - How to start a compost pile, what should and should not be added**

Start with the perennials and annuals you've just cut back or pulled up. Choose a shady spot, spread down a layer of straw, small brush, thick stalks, or dead leaves to create some air between the pile and the soil, chop up your plant matter (spent perennials and annuals), toss them onto the base, layer some soil on top, and keep adding. Expect to have usable compost in a year. To speed up the process by getting oxygen in the mix, turn the pile over with a pitchfork as often as possible. For even speedier decomposition alternate layers of carbon materials (dead leaves, wood ashes, shredded paper, etc.) and green plant material. The ratio should be 2/3 carbon and 1/3 green material.

### **Collect and Save Seeds**

#### **Protect Evergreens from Damaging Winter Wind & Sun, Deer, and Salt Spray**

- Spray broadleaf evergreens (Boxwood, Rhododendron, Azaleas, Kalmia, and other Laurels, Ilex, Leucothoe, Aucuba, Camellia, Pieris, Euonymus) with an anti-desiccant - also called anti-transpirant - horticultural oil like Wiltpruf. These products coat the leaves and protect against leaf damage from drying winds and sun.

- Wrap shrubs or trees (at least for the first season)
- Tie Arborvitae trees and shrubs that may spread apart under the weight of snow

### **Try these Tips for Winter Care for Roses**

Do not fertilize after August nor deadhead after September. After the first frost, cut back the canes to hip height to prevent wind damage. To protect the bud union, which should be one inch above ground, create a mound to 8 inches of soil, compost, mulch, and an alfalfa mix. This will protect and feed the rose plant throughout the winter. Canes can be sprayed with Wiltpruf.

### **Winterize Garden Equipment and Decorative Accessories**

- Winterize in-ground irrigation system, preferably by calling in a professional to blow out the pipes, turn off the water valve, and disconnect the computer
- Pull, clean, sanitize, and store all reusable plant supports
- Hoses and connections, including seals and rings: disconnect from faucet, drain, clean with water, and store indoors
- Plastic bottles of garden chemicals and liquid fertilizers and various horticultural and deer sprays: to prevent crystallization of the contents and cracked bottles, store in basement or garage, but away from children or heat source.
- Birdbaths and empty planters: turn upside down or, if Terra Cotta, store indoors.

### **Mulching**

Applying a layer of mulch at the beginning of winter helps to aerate your soil, conserve moisture, improve the texture or tilth of your soil, and protect the plant roots from heaving and thawing caused by changes in temperature. It also gives your winter garden beds an attractive appearance. Varieties include:

- Mulched leaves are free and decompose rather quickly, improving your soil by spring
- Wood bark chips if they have been aged. If they are used when "green," they use the soil's nutrients, particularly nitrogen, to decompose. "Green" wood chips also emit methane gas and toxins that can harm your plants.
- Other organic matter like compost, straw, evergreen boughs, and pine needles can also be used. If you don't want your soil to become too acidic from the pine needles, add some lime.
- The conventional wisdom is to apply mulch for winter protection only after the first hard frost; however, I apply it any time in fall, as soon as my mulched leaves are ready, and I've not had any adverse effects.
- **Caveats:** too thick a layer of mulch can shelter rodents during the winter and hide them from natural predators. Also, keep mulch a few inches away from tree trunks and the base of woody shrubs.

### **Plants That Need Protection from Deer and other Animals during Winter**

- Certain evergreens that are left alone by deer during other seasons are eaten by deer during the winter. These include some broadleaf evergreens like Azaleas, Ilex (holly), and Rhododendron.
- The wood of certain native shrubs – such as Fothergilla and Clethra - are prone to squirrel damage during winter
- Protection can include temporary fencing like chicken wire with tall wooden or metal supports, wrapping the plant with burlap or plastic deer netting, and spraying with deer repellent.

### **Fertilizing**

A slow-release fertilizer can be applied under shrubs and on the lawn starting in November. It will decompose and be available to your plants' roots by spring, giving your plants an early boost. No fast-acting fertilizers should be used now. Some think that unless your plants are young or showing signs of distress, there might be no need to fertilize if your soil has the nutrients your plants need.

**Tools to Make Your Work Easier:** whenever possible, use un-powered, clean, sharpened tools, such as pruners, loppers, hedge shears, pruning saws, trimmers, garden forks, and spades. There are many electric, battery-operated tools such as mini-chain saws and leaf shredders that make these jobs faster and require less strength.

**Other Suggestions for Fall Include:**

- Label or mark plants and bulbs now so that by next spring you know their location.

Compiled by Pamela Harwood