

Putting your garden to bed for the season properly

Where has the gardening season gone? September was such a beautiful month; it was easy to imagine summer would never end.

October, however, is filled with signs of change. Falling leaves and frosty mornings remind us that winter is not far off.

This is the month to finish cleaning up the garden and prepare it for winter.

Perennials can be cut back as they finish blooming and their foliage ripens. The exceptions are plants that provide winter interest and/or seeds for the birds.

Black-eyed Susan, Coneflower and Autumn Joy Sedum are a few plants that I don't cut back until spring clean up. I also leave all my ornamental grasses for winter interest. In fact, unless your plants suffered from serious disease problems, you could leave everything in place until spring.

The stems will collect falling leaves and blowing snow and help protect plant roots and crowns over the winter. If you think about it, that is how nature gardens. For most of us however, anything we can do now, helps distribute the workload of the normally busier spring season.

You can start collecting mulch material, but don't be too quick to use it. A common misconception about fall mulch is that it is to keep our plants from freezing. The opposite is true —

we use mulch to keep the soil frozen and prevent any drastic temperature fluctuations.

That way plants won't start sending up tender new growth at the first hint of late winter thaw and sun, only to be zapped by the inevitable return of cold temperatures. So wait until we've had a couple of hard freezes before mulching perennials in for the winter.

In addition, if you mulch too early, it's like putting up a vacancy sign for mice, voles and other critters who may decide to spend the winter in the warm cozy spot you have created for them. Waiting until we have had a couple hard freezes helps assure you that they have found other winter accommodations.

There is still plenty of time to plant bulbs, but don't wait too long, as they need a chance to root in before going dormant. Planting bulbs now is one of the best cures I know of for spring fever. You know how we feel at the end of winter, when the calendar says it's spring but the weather says otherwise? We are desperate for color in the garden — something that defies the odds and gives us the inspiration we need to hold on a little longer. What better than crocus, snowdrops, daffodils and tulips?

I have some great pictures, taken in my garden last spring, of snow covered daf-

fodils blooming their hearts out, oblivious to the weather. Talk about perseverance! It's incredible how that lifted my spirits; spring fever cured instantly. So practice good preventive medicine and plant lots of bulbs now, I promise you won't be disappointed.

Bulbs may fail to bloom in the spring if they don't have adequate moisture, so be sure to water well after planting and until the ground freezes if there is not sufficient rain. If you haven't already done so, dig and store any tender bulbs now.

With the exception of tuberous begonias, which need to be dug up before frost, most other tender bulbs can be dug after frost has killed their foliage back. Carefully lift the clumps with a fork or shovel, so that you don't damage the tubers.

Shake off any excess soil, cut off any remaining foliage, remove any rotten or diseased pieces and let them dry for a day or two in a warm, dry place with good air circulation. They can be stored individually in paper bags, or in containers separated by layers of vermiculite, perlite, cocoa hulls,

or dry sawdust or peat moss, in a cool, dry place such as a basement or cellar. Ideally the temperature should be around 45-50 degrees.

Although trees and shrubs may not need watering as often in fall as in summer, it is important to keep them watered until the ground freezes. This is especially true for conifers and broad-leaved evergreens like rhododendrons.

During the winter, the sun can heat up and thaw out the leaves or needles while the wind draws out the moisture. The plant cannot replace the lost moisture because the ground is frozen, and so the plant can suffer winter damage. This type of damage does not usually show up until early spring and can sometimes be mistaken for other problems. So be sure to give those conifers and broad-leaved evergreens one last, deep drink before the ground freezes.

Spraying with Wilt-Pruf or some other anti-desiccant will also help protect your plants against excessive moisture loss.

This is the last issue of the Home and Garden section for the year and I've had a

great time talking with you about gardening in this column. Thanks for all the questions and comments and remember that we're here to help you succeed at the best hobby in the world...gardening!

If you have questions or comments, e-mail Pine Hill Nursery owner Jeanine Rubert at: jrubert@pinehill-nursery.com



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