

Putting the Garden to Bed

Fall to-do's for a Great Spring Garden

By Joe Lamp'1

Don't think of fall as just the end of the current growing season; it is the start of next year's garden as well. Along with the pleasure of enjoying the garden in the cooler fall temperatures there are important duties that should be addressed as we clean up and clear out. It is also the best time of year to get our gardens in shape for next spring and the growing season beyond. In fact, I look at this time of year as the *start* of my next year's gardening season.

Putting the garden to bed each fall is important for a number of reasons. Besides the obvious of cleaning and tidying up for aesthetic appeal, it's important for reasons that are not so obvious as well. A great spring garden next season begins with steps you should take now.

Cutting back and cleaning up

Many pests and diseases will persist in the soil and plant debris over winter, if they're given the opportunity. Removing spent annuals and vegetable plants from the garden, improves our chance of eliminating numerous future pest and diseases that would otherwise survive on that dead plant material. As you clean up your fall garden, include the following in your garden to-do list:

- **Cut back perennials.** These plants will come back next year because the roots survive, even though the growth above ground dies. Cutting off the dead and spent foliage a few inches above the ground in the fall will not harm the plant.
- **Remove spent annuals and seasonal vegetables.** Unlike perennials, annuals do not come back from season to season so there is no reason to leave these in the ground. Pull them up, roots and all, and add them to your compost pile.
- **Remove weeds and leaf debris.** These are common places for diseases and pests to over winter. The less hospitable you can make the garden for winter hardy pests, the fewer problems you'll have come spring.
- **Compost only the healthy material.** As you remove debris from you fall cleanup projects, be sure to add only the pest-free and non-diseased plants to your compost. Destroy any diseased plant material or remove it from you garden. Pathogens and insect pests can winter-over and return next year in a compost pile that doesn't get hot enough. A tip to help keep your compost cooking even through winter is to insert sticks of various sizes into the pile. This creates air pockets, which will help keep microbes actively breaking down the debris. In spring, you can remove the larger sticks.

What not to clean up

- Now with all the cleaning up to do, take comfort in knowing it's good to leave some things that may appear to be dead, alone. Spent flowers from perennials like black-eyed Susan and coneflower can offer an important food source to birds in the winter. Other plants, such as astilbe and hydrangeas, have incredible summer flowers that add lots of

interest to the winter landscape too. Plus it's one less chore you need to tackle in fall, and a great reason to leave them standing all through the winter.

Protect and Prepare

- **Take pictures and make notes.** As the garden winds down for the season, there is still time to document what was growing there. This is especially helpful for perennials you will be cutting back for the season. As you add more plants, having a record of what was planted will allow you to avoid injuring dormant perennials. Notes are also a great way to document what worked and what didn't. While it is fresh in your mind this is a great time to gather your thoughts. It's also a fantastic tool to have as you plan your planting and design strategies for next season.
- **Winterize containers.** Not all plants or containers are able to withstand the winter outdoors. Containers can freeze and crack and non-hardy plants quickly die when roots are not underground. Either bring them indoors or at least to an area protected from winds and extreme temperatures. A garage or basement works well in many cases. For added protection, you might want to wrap the container in blankets or plastic wrap, several layers thick. You don't want to encourage new growth during this time, so don't add fertilizer and keep water to a minimum.

For containers that you just don't want to haul inside, consider lining the inside with padded shipping wrap to reduce the chances of cracking that are so common in winter. The kind with bubbles works great. Simply remove the soil, place a couple layers of the padded wrap so that it's lining the inside. Then you can add back the soil and replant. The plastic cushion will provide critical flex as the moisture from freezing soil creates pressure against the container walls. That's what causes containers to crack. The shipping wrap provides the important flex, which should prevent cracking.

- **Get a soil test.** Fall is a great time to find out important information about your soil. Most reports include details such as pH level and nutrient analysis. Knowing this information in the fall is the perfect time to act on any deficiencies or amendments that may be necessary.
- **Amend the soil with natural materials.** (compost, decomposed wood chips, manure, and organic nitrogen sources such as blood meal, cottonseed meal and Milorganite are good choices). Organic amendments are a great way to improve the long-term health of your soil. By adding them in the fall, they have time to break down into a form that plants can use, just in time for spring. Organic material is not only optimal for adding nutrients in a safe way, it also improves the overall quality of soil as well. Structure, texture and tilth are all terms used to describe soil quality. A mixture of organic material is an easy way to achieve all the desirable qualities of healthy, productive soil.
- **Add mulch.** A fall layer of mulch provides a protective layer over plant's roots and protects evergreen foliage from soil borne diseases splashing back to the plant. In

colder climates, mulch should be added after the ground freezes. This will help prevent frost heave and keep soil temperatures more even, while protecting roots.

- **Protect trees and shrubs from pests.** Fall is an excellent time to protect your trees and shrubs from certain potential pests next spring. Many damaging insects become active again in early spring, often times before we've had a chance to take action. Systemic insecticides applied to the soil as a drench are taken up by the roots and can be effective for many months. By applying a systemic agent in the fall, the active ingredient will be present in the plant or tree in spring when pest begin to feed again. It's an easy and more environmentally friendly way to control certain pests all year, but especially in early spring.

Plant for next season

- Fall is also the very best time to plant trees, shrubs, perennials, winter annuals, bulbs and cool season vegetables. The soil is warm and the air is cool, so less energy is required of the plant overall. Some annuals such as pansies and snapdragons are ideal for fall planting. Color in the colder months is still possible with the right selections. However, making sure you add them to your garden before the soil gets too cold is important. The warmer soil will allow roots to become established and give the plants a better chance of looking their best.

Shrubs can also add to color and structure to your garden in fall, just when much of the garden is going dormant. Shrubs with late season flowers such as Blue Mist Shrub (*Caryopteris*), Scotch Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) and shrubs with colorful fruit like Nandina, Pyracantha and American Cranberry (*Viburnum trilobum*) extend interest throughout the season. A personal favorite is Winterberry holly (*Ilex verticillata*) with its bright red berries drawing your eye and calling attention to any landscape.

Evergreen azalea, rhododendron and camellia are popular choices. By planting now, next fall's display is even better as the plants have more time to become established in the ground. Although not winter hardy in all parts of the country, some gardeners treat them as annuals or over winter them indoors in zones 5 and above.

Ornamental grasses and perennials such as Chrysanthemum, Joe Pye Weed, Sedum, and Asters extend the colorful display. By planting them in the fall they have the best chance to grow bigger and better every year. So, while you are putting your garden to bed for the winter, envision the pleasure next spring will bring.

Shop Your Yard

- Fall is the best time to divide perennials and make many more plants for free. Shop from your own yard and swap with friends and neighbors. It's one of the fastest and cheapest ways to expand you garden and variety quickly. For a comprehensive list along with specific instructions based on the type of plant, here is a great resource from Clemson University (<http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic/plants/landscape/flowers/hgic1150.html>)

Stabilizing Tree limbs and shrubs for winter

- With winter on the way, high winds, snow loads, and potential ice storms, can wreak havoc on your trees. The conditions are brutal, not only for your trees, but anything beneath them, should a limb or branch break and fall. Best to attack the problem head on, and remove what you can of dead or diseased limbs that might pose a risk to your home or objects below. The work you do now, will not only save you potential time and money this winter, but it will likely do wonders to improve the health of your trees, by taking out the damaged limbs anyway. There's never a wrong time for that but now, it's better than ever.

Late season lawn care

- Now is the ideal time to sow or overseed cool season grass seed. For areas where simply overseeding is needed, use a "core aerator". It's a valuable tool to help improve compacted ground by removing soil cores, which allows air and moisture to reach deeper into the ground, and gives new grass roots more room to grow.

In areas where starting over is necessary, use a tiller to remove all existing vegetation and create a clean seedbed. Rake up and remove all debris before spreading seed. Be sure to allow sufficient time for this before it's time to add the grass seed.

Fall is the best time to add "cool season" grass seed, such as fescue or bluegrass. For the proper application rate, check the instructions on the package for the suggested setting of your equipment.

Once all the seed was spread, lightly rake it in to ensure good seed to soil contact, and then a light top dressing of straw to help keep the seed and soil moist, combined with light irrigation in the absence of rain until germination, which varies from about one to three weeks after sowing based mainly on moisture and temperature. The key to establishing a great fall lawn or renovating an existing one is taking time to prepare the seed bed, use high quality, fresh seed, apply it at the proper rate, and keep it moist. In about two weeks give or take, you should start to see the fruits of your labor.