



Putting your Landscape to Bed for the Winter

Our gardens are celebrating their last hurrah. While we are enjoying the autumn jewel tones blazing in our landscapes, it seems funny to consider our spring gardens. But there are things we can do now to save us time, reduce damage by insects and diseases, and make spring clean up easier.

Vegetable Garden

No matter how beautiful your vegetable garden looked when plants proudly boasted their bountiful harvest, plants are now weather worn. Some believe they should rototill all the plants into the soil as a good way to add organic matter. Instead, I remove all plant material from my garden for a couple reasons. First, vegetable plants are prone to a variety of insects and diseases that may overwinter in plant debris. Also, dead foliage left in the garden may become a comfy home for rodents.

Make a diagram of the garden. It's easy to recall what was planted where while the memories are fresh, but will you remember when you're ready to plant again in the spring? It is important to rotate where you plant different groups of plants. Crop rotation is an old, but effective way to control damage from insects and prevent disease. It also helps maintain the fertility of the soil. In the same area, plant lettuce or other leafy greens the first year; then tomatoes the next, followed by peas or beans.

Flower Garden

Except for perennials with seed heads that provide food for birds and those that offer winter interest, the rest can be cut back to the ground. There are a few perennials whose cutting back should be delayed until spring like coral bells, lavender, Chrysanthemums, Russian sage, and other woody perennials. The foliage of healthy plants should go in the compost bin, but stems and leaves of disease-prone plants like peonies and phlox should go to the curb.

Pull most annuals and toss them into the compost bin, too. Leave those annuals that you want to self-sow for more blooms next year. Examples of these would include larkspur, nicotiana, and poppies.

Weed. As the summer heated up and we headed inside to enjoy air conditioning, the weeds may have taken advantage of our absence. Get a jump on these now, or they will get a jump on you in the spring.

It is not too late to plant bulbs. Ideally they should be planted late September to mid October, but they can be planted until the ground freezes. A little time spent now pays off in dividends when they burst into bloom in spring.

Trees & Shrubs

Strong winter winds cause some shrubs to lose moisture. Apply anti-transpirants like Bonide's Wilt-Stop – its waxy coating provides a moisture barrier that helps reduce moisture loss. Plants like boxwood, rhododendrons and needled evergreens benefit.

Rabbits and voles nibbling on the bark of young trees and shrubs can cause severe damage. Options to prevent damage from these troublemakers include wrapping trunks, putting up fencing of hardware cloth or trying products that repel them.

Prune out damaged or diseased branches before heavy snows can cause extra, more severe damage.

Lawn

Continue to mow your lawn until the grass has stopped growing. Fall is an ideal time to aerate if your soil is compacted - those plugs pulled to the surface will have plenty of time to decompose over winter. Aeration causes better drainage and provides more oxygen to the roots.

Clean up fallen leaves. I like to pick them up with our mulching mower and dump them into my compost bins where they will continue to decompose over winter. You can also mow over them with a mulching mower and leave them on the lawn where they will break down.

Under large trees, you may have to collect the first few mowings before leaving the rest on the lawn. Use these shredded leaves as a winter mulch to protect tender perennials, but don't apply them too deeply or too early. Wait until we have had several hard freezes before applying a three-inch layer.

Still have too many leaves? Make a bin of chicken wire and just dump them in. Throw in a handful of high-nitrogen fertilizer and sprinkle with the garden hose. Leaf mold is an excellent soil additive come next spring.

Garden Shed

Spend some time cleaning your tools. If you're like me, first you have to find them. Then wash off the dirt and wipe them with vegetable oil to fend off rust. Drain and store hoses and other watering equipment. Have pruners sharpened now and you'll be ready to go on those first few warm spring days.

Bring in any pots that can be damaged by freezing temperatures.

Water, Water, Water!

Watering is normally not a job we talk about in fall, but all of our plants are thirsty! Generally, trees, shrubs and perennials need an inch of water per week until the ground freezes. Plants that are especially susceptible to desiccation and winterburn, if they go into winter without sufficient moisture, are needled and broad-leaved evergreens (like pines, yews and rhododendrons).

Take some time to make notes of what you loved about your landscape in the past season and what you'd like to improve next year. Then you can spend snowy winter evenings dreaming and making plans!



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