

Winding Down for Winter

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By the time the frost starts covering the lawn at the end of the season, many gardeners—like their plants—are spent. It is all too easy to ignore outdoor chores, but by accomplishing a few simple chores before those first flakes fly, you can ensure an easier start to next spring.

Perennials

Let the foliage die down on perennials before cutting them back to the ground. This allows more energy to be stored in the roots for next year's growth.

Many perennials become crowded and may benefit from being divided every 4-5 years. As a general rule, perennials that bloom in the spring should be dug and divided in the fall. Perennials that bloom in the fall should be dug and divide in the spring. Divide and replant perennials 3-4 weeks before the ground freezes. This allows time for the plants to “settle” into their new homes.

Some perennials aren't quite adapted to our cold winters. We call these perennials “tender.” Foliage

should still be allowed to die down with tender perennials (after the first killing frost).

Carefully dig tender perennials such as tuberous begonias, dahlias, gladiolas, and canna lilies. Allow the underground plant structures to cure (dry) in a warm area for 1-2 weeks.

Afterwards, store them in a cool, dry area away from danger of frost (usually 45-50 degrees). Use packing material such as vermiculite, sawdust or sphagnum for storing these plants. Dahlias and tuberous begonias tend to get a bit too dry. Placing a cup full of water in with the tubers will add some humidity.

Gardens

Remove all leaves and other litter from the vegetable garden. This eliminates convenient hiding place for insect pests. Roto-til the garden and incorporate composted plant material into the soil.

Compost

Compost comes in all shapes and sizes. The best compost (such as leaves) is free. Incorporating organic matter is the best thing you could do for your soil.

Hint: Running the lawn mower over the leaves helps speed up the composting process.

When adding brown material to the soil, (such as ground up leaves), add nitrogen to aid the soil microbes in breaking it down. A general rule of thumb is for every 1” of brown material in a 100-square-foot area, add 1 pound (2 cups) of ammonium sulfate (21-0-0).

Machines/Tools

Fall is the time to maintain all garden equipment. As gasoline breaks down, varnishes and other deposits make starting the engine in the spring quite the chore. Fuel stabilizers are available to be mixed with gasoline to help prevent varnishing.

Unless the manufacturer states otherwise, remove gasoline from machines. Once the tank is empty, spray WD-40 or similar material in the tank. Also, remove the spark plug and squirt a few drops of oil into the cylinder. Crank the engine over a few times. This will coat the inside of the engine and carburetor to help prevent rust and build up. The engine oil should also be changed before winter storage.

Hand tools such as shovels, hoes, loppers, and pruners also benefit from seasonal maintenance. Start by cleaning off all of the dirt and debris. Sharpen the blades by using a file or bench grinder. Rubbing old engine oil on the blades with a cloth will help prevent them from rusting. A little linseed oil also helps prevent wooden handles from cracking.

Trees/Shrubs

Young trees with thin bark are susceptible to winter sun injury. Protect young tree trunks by wrapping them with white tree wrap available at any local nursery or garden center. The white wrap helps reflect the sun from the tender trunks. Remember to remove the wrap in the spring to allow circulation.

Save your energy for spring when it comes to pruning. In our area, it is best to wait until the coldest part of winter has passed before pruning your trees and shrubs—usually after mid February.

Planting

Fall is one of the best times to plant nursery stock. Cooler weather makes the transition easier for the plants. It also gives the plants a head start for next spring by producing root growth this season. There are also usually great deals at the nurseries and garden centers at this time of year, and the staff will actually have time to spend with you.

Spring flowering bulbs such as tulips, daffodils and crocus should be planted in the fall after the soils have cooled down from the summer heat but before the ground freezes.

Lawns

Late fall (late Oct. – early Nov.) is the best time of year to fertilize your lawn. Apply a quick-release nitrogen fertilizer after the last mowing. Even though the grass doesn't appear to be growing, energy is being shipped down to the root system for storage. This stored energy produces early greening next spring.

Weed Control

Weeds are classified many different ways, but one of the more important classifications is according to their life-cycle. Annual weeds start from seed, grow and produce seed all in one year's time. These weeds, such as crabgrass and spurge, are best controlled in the early spring (before April 15) with pre-emergent herbicides.



Perennial weeds come back every year from the same root system. Perennial weeds, such as dandelion and field bindweed, (aka morning glory), are best controlled in the fall

After the first light frost, energy within the weed moves downward to the root system. Spraying perennial weeds at this time is effective because those chemicals have a better chance in destroying the roots

Irrigation/Sprinklers

Many homeowners utilize secondary water in irrigating their landscape. Now is the time to clean out filters and blow out the sprinkler lines to prevent the valves from freezing.

Even though the secondary water is turned off, it is still important to deep-water landscape plants, (such as evergreens), especially if warm weather persists.

Miscellaneous Items

Use burlap or other soft wrapping material to tie up columnar evergreens or other plants that tend to breaking or bend under snow loads.

And remember, when it does start to snow and freeze, use de-icing materials sparingly. Many of these materials are salt derivatives and can “burn” your plant material if you use too much.

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This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Noelle Cockett, Vice President for Extension and Agriculture, Utah State University.