



Putting Your Garden to Bed for the Winter

If you've been working all season in the garden, you are probably ready for a break – and actually, so are your plants! Deciduous trees, shrubs and perennials are programmed to rest and recuperate through the winter months for a brilliant succeeding spring season. Evergreen plants and winter ornamentals, on the other hand, are about to become the stars of the show. They will look their best if you “clear the stage.” Here is a task list to help you set priorities for a great fall season:

a gradual process: august to september

Gardening is a circular task so it is not surprising that winter preparations begin as summer is winding down.

- ◆ Plants that are strong and healthy have a better chance of getting through winter dormancy. Establish deep root systems during summer by enriching with organic matter to provide good drainage and by always watering deeply.
- ◆ Grow your plants gradually leaner as summer progresses, reducing the amount of nitrogen by $\frac{1}{2}$ at the end of July and doubling the potassium for stronger root growth. Stop fertilizing your gardens around mid-August except for annuals and vegetables which can have the full rate until frost and lawn renewal which has its own schedule.
- ◆ With debilitating heat and vacation schedules, you may have fallen behind in garden maintenance. Set aside a morning to catch up with any weeding, deadheading and trimming of dried foliage.

preparation begins: september

- ◆ Take some time to walk around and look at your garden areas from different angles. Check for empty spots, look for perennials that need dividing and plants that might need moving. Many gardens have strong color and bloom from spring to mid-summer when they just fade to plain green – it may be time to add some late season color!
- ◆ If any of your perennials have outgrown their space or show reduced vigor, it may be time for dividing. Daylilies, iris, peonies and hostas are divided in September. The rule for other perennials: if it blooms between early spring and late June, divide in early fall. Summer and fall bloomers, particularly ornamental grasses are divided in spring.
- ◆ Follow the same timing if you need/ want to move your perennials. Remember to cut back the foliage by at least half to prevent wilting, keeping the proportions above and below ground.
- ◆ Fall is an excellent time for planting: good rains, garden center sales, and cooler weather for the workers! Add fall annuals, pansies, chrysanthemums and ornamental kale. Choose perennials that will add color and interest in the fall and winter. Try to get new perennials planted 4 to 6 weeks before the ground freezes hard – in St. Louis this is ideally by mid-October, but the earlier you get them in, the better root systems they will develop.
- ◆ Spring-blooming bulbs arrive in stores in early September – buy now for best selection but wait to plant!
- ◆ To renew a cool-season lawn, core-aerate to increase nutrient and water absorption and apply slow-release organic fertilizer in mid-September. If you choose to use a synthetic fertilizer you will apply it in October and November as well. Re-seeding and over-seeding is also done in the first weeks of September. See the garden tipsheet “Lawn Care Calendar” for specific information. Commit to regular watering if we go through a dry spell.
- ◆ Peonies and any plants that have been hit with mildew should be cut down to the ground by mid-September.

- ◆ If you have houseplants and tropicals you'd like to move indoors for the winter, start the process in the last two or three weeks of September. See the garden tipsheet "Overwintering Tropical Plants" for step-by-step instructions.
- ◆ Dig and pot up tender herb plants for a windowsill garden – rosemary, tarragon and basil. Sage, oregano, chives and parsley will go dormant around Thanksgiving, so you may want to buy some new little plants. Evergreen thyme will be available through the winter, but you might not want to go outside to fetch it!

heavy-duty clean-up: september into october

- ◆ It is important to remember not to cut perennials to the ground while the foliage is still green. This may cause soft new growth that won't survive colder temperatures while subtracting from the plant's energy reserves. Consider also that trimming back perennials is mostly an aesthetic choice to provide a tidy look, and waiting to cut back perennials until spring means their crowns will be protected by gathered leaves as a natural insulation.
- ◆ Note that fall is not the best time for pruning trees and most shrubs, unless there are broken or dead branches which should be removed promptly year-round. Generally speaking, trees are pruned during winter dormancy; roses cut back in very early spring before growth begins; and conifers as little as possible and if so, only in spring.
- ◆ Give vegetable gardens a good clean-up and clip back so that fall greens and cole crops can have room to thrive. Tomatoes, peppers, beans and squash will keep producing until a killing frost but you may be ready to clean it all up now. Cultivate and amend the soil, allow to be exposed to frost and then cover with leaves until spring.
- ◆ Alternatively, your vegetable garden will benefit from a winter cover crop to till in to the soil at the end of winter.
- ◆ Plant a winter crop of garlic and shallots when you plant spring-blooming bulbs: optimally around mid-October.
- ◆ Get a head-start on spring by preparing any new beds now. Consider building raised beds or simply remove any existing sod or weeds, cover with layers of newspaper, and top with plastic weighted down with bricks. In the spring, simply pull back the plastic, add compost and your new bed will be ready for planting.
- ◆ From the end of October to mid-November is a good time to plant trees and shrubs. Go ahead and mulch these new plantings right away to keep the soil warmer and help their roots establish.
- ◆ Continue to water during dry spells when the ground is not frozen, especially roses, any new plantings, and evergreens which do not go dormant in winter and stay actively growing well into autumn.

now we're almost done: november and december

- ◆ Do you still have bulbs that need to be planted? If the ground has gotten too hard to dig, force them in pots.
- ◆ Ornamental grasses and perennials with interesting seedheads are best left untrimmed all winter to provide food and shelter for birds. Other perennials with little winter interest may be cut back when they go dormant after a hard frost. Clean up the larger leaves that have fallen so they don't turn into a mushy mess.
- ◆ Woody perennials and sub-shrubs that bloom on new wood may be shortened by ¼ in fall and then, in mid-spring, pruned down to approximately 6". Trim off the top growth from rosette-forming plants when it is no longer green, letting the crown alone. Leave evergreen herbs, groundcovers and perennials untouched until spring.
- ◆ Get your tools ready for spring by cleaning, oiling and returning them to their proper place. Clean the lawnmower and other power equipment, detach the hose before a freeze, dump and scrub out pots that held annuals.
- ◆ Do not mulch too early! Wait until there's been a hard frost – defined as 25°-28° for several hours. Apply a 2"-3" mulch layer, but stay several inches away from the trunks of trees/shrubs and the crowns of perennials.
- ◆ To winterize roses apply 6"-10" of mulch or top soil over each plant. Prune only to shorten overly long canes.
- ◆ Lastly, to counteract the effect of drying winter winds apply an anti-transpirant (Wilt-Pruf) on a warm, still day in mid-December to broadleaf evergreens, conifers, rose canes and hydrangea stems. Spray all parts of the plant.