

Guide to Fall Cleanup in the Garden

It's not too late to clean up the garden for this year. The purpose of "fall cleanup" is to prepare the garden for the winter months and prevent/minimize problems for the next year.

Tools for fall cleanup include bypass pruners, loppers, hand pruners and most importantly a trowel for weeding. Clean and sharpen tools at the end of fall cleanup so they are ready for spring.

As a general rule, if a perennial blooms in the spring, cut it down in the fall. If it blooms in the fall, wait to cut it down until spring. The arbitrary date of July 4th differentiates spring and fall bloomers.

Remove diseased foliage to control the spread of the infection for the year to come. Roses, peonies, phlox and German iris are examples of plants whose foliage harbors the disease spores or insect eggs that will come back the following year. Remove diseased foliage as soon as you notice it, throughout the year. But if you have not done so, do it in the fall. Do not compost this infected foliage, send it to the curb.

Healthy foliage can be left up for winter interest, cut and placed in your compost area/bin, or cut down and left in the garden as a "natural" mulch. Not only is the healthy decomposing foliage a source of nutrients for next year, course clippings left in the garden can provide a natural habitat for beneficial microbes and insects, especially our overwintering native bees. Traditional mulch can be applied over the top of garden clippings if desired.

Weed, weed, and weed! Don't let weeds get well established or go to seed. Removing them now will make garden cleanup easier in the spring.

Early fall is also a great time to re-arrange the garden, but by the middle to end of October, it's probably too late. Roots will not have time to acclimate to the new spot before the ground freezes. Put any plant moves on next year's 'to do' list. If you weren't happy with a plants' performance, get rid of it. If you don't like the location of a plant or group of plants, move them in September or early October. Fall is also the best time to divide spring blooming perennials.

Plant Bulbs. In the fall, the spread of the perennial foliage can easily be seen. Plant bulbs beneath this spread so that in late spring, the new perennial foliage covers the declining bulb foliage. "Smarter not harder" is the theme. Smaller bulbs can easily be "naturalized" in your lawn. Plug these smaller bulbs, like scilla or crocus, into core aeration holes. Bulbs can be planted up until the ground freezes, even as late as December! Check for clearance prices and get some great deals!

Mulch. Cut a fresh edge on the beds. Mulch should be applied before the first frost and left on year-round to maintain more consistent soil temperatures and retain moisture in the root zones. An effective mulch layer is 3-4 inches thick. Keep mulch 6 inches from shrubs and tree trunks and 3-4 inches from the bases of perennials. This mulch free zone allows the plant bases/crowns to have air flow and sunlight necessary for disease prevention and keeps insects and rodents from nesting and consequently nibbling plant bases/crowns. Mulching in the fall is also easier (smarter not harder) because you don't have to mulch around bulb foliage.

Chopped up tree leaves make an excellent addition to the garden bed. Apply as you would mulch. As the leaves decompose, the organic matter feeds the soil.

Think Spring! Take stock of the garden and start a spring "to do" list.

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