

Gardening 101: Lesson Five - Clean-up and Preparing for Winter

Rather than continuing to discuss garden design in our series, we're going to go on a small tangent to take a look at what's involved in cleaning up a garden and getting it ready for winter as this seems like an appropriate time for the topic. By the way, we usually call this "putting the garden to bed".

Now, if you've already done your clean-up, you can pat yourself on the back and, if you haven't yet got around to doing anything to get your garden ready for winter, you can also pat yourself on the back as long as you pay attention to the basics described below.

Why? Well, it's because gardeners are divided as to whether it's better to do a thorough garden clean-up in the fall or the spring. Proponents of a fall clean-up say it's a good way of checking out each plant and making sure that each is in the best shape possible to withstand a winter. Cleaning up in the fall gives a neat appearance to the garden; after all, it might be some time before snow covers everything. And, of course, it means that the spring garden time can be devoted more to choosing and planting than in clearing away garden debris. The spring cleaners like to keep plants intact so birds can have a chance to eat remaining seeds through the hard winter months. Keeping plants in place during the winter helps hold the snow so that the spring melt will automatically water the plants. The spring clean-up gardeners also like to enjoy the sculptural effect snow on plants imparts to the garden during the winter. In fact, some even dump out their summer garden pots so that there will be interesting snow-covered mounds to look at.

It's not all quite that black and white, however, because there are some garden clean-up tasks which have to be carried out in the late fall, no matter what. It's a matter of basic garden sanitation and common sense.

If you planted annuals this year, they're now dead and won't revive in the spring. It's your choice as to whether you leave them as is or pull them out now. With one exception – if they or any other kind of plant for that matter is in a container, dump out the whole container now (but not on the lawn). If you leave them where they are, the soil will freeze and expand through the winter and damage the container. Then store the container away so you can use it next year.

If you have any plant which has shown signs of disease, deal with it prior to snowfall so that the disease won't have a chance to live on and spread. So remove wilted leaves and diseased plants and throw them in the garbage – the wilt is usually caused by a fungus and fungal spores can easily live in the soil and reactivate next year.

Raking leaves from lawns is also an essential task. If you leave them on the grass, they'll stop the sunlight from reaching the grass plants next spring and may well kill the grass and cause snow mold to form. If you want to put the leaves to good use, run over them several times with a lawn mower and rake them into the perennial beds where they'll provide some winter protection and then decompose to enrich the soil. But don't rake whole leaves (especially maple) onto garden beds. They just mat and freeze in place which means your plants won't be warmed easily by the spring sun.

If you've had a vegetable garden, check it for any root vegetables you might have missed and put any plant remains from it and the containers in the compost (subject of a future Gardening 101 article).

It's important to water evergreens right until the soil freezes up since these plants don't go into total dormancy in the winter but continue transpire and produce food.

Optionally, you may also want to do some other preparations for winter.

If you're worried about branches breaking on small trees and shrubs, you could use garden twine to girdle the plant and give the branches extra support through the winter. If you think the wind might dry them out, erect a stake and burlap barrier on the windward side of the plant. Small rodents can burrow under the snow and eat the bark off slender tree trunks but there are flexible protectors you can use to encircle the trunks

Roses can be vulnerable to cold but inverting a bucket or other big container over the rose bush and filling it with dirt or peat moss will help protect them.

If you have plants such as peonies, daylilies, or hostas which shoot up from the ground every spring, you can cut them down to 3 to 4 inches from the soil now but this autumn-lazy gardener has to confess that sometimes she does this and sometimes not. The plants don't seem to suffer; the gardener just has to remember to get out there early enough in the spring to get rid of the old stalks and leaves.

Next lesson: Garden design – part two