

## **PREPARING THE GARDEN FOR WINTER**

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By the end of August our gardens tend to look weary and bedraggled. Most of the flowers are spent and have suffered the ravages of Japanese beetles, mites, black spot, rust, mildew... - hopefully not all! Then there are those weeds lending a tropical jungle appearance to gardens abandoned due to the heat of summer and vacation time. September, therefore, is a welcome month for the gardener. Lower temperatures allow us to get outside into the garden to survey the damage wreaked and plan ahead for reparations

The lawn is the bane of most homeowners in the area, but what some may not have realized is that fall is the recommended time to fertilize your grass. Spring fertilization stresses grass and encourages weeds and is best for warm-season grasses such as zoysia (that lawn which is straw-colored in winter and greens up late in the spring after temperatures rise). Cool-season grasses such as fescues, bluegrass, and ryegrass make the most effective use of fertilizer in late fall for root growth and development. The advantages will manifest themselves in increased drought tolerance and decreased summer disease activity next year. Most of the soils in the area are acidic and lime is generally a recommended addition to the lawn to raise the pH of the soil for better growing conditions. Just how much lime and fertilizer is required can be calculated for you if you have your soil tested. Soil testing kits are available at your local library, the local Extension Office or from the Fairfax County Master Gardeners Association which holds clinics at a variety of locations throughout the county. You may have to fertilize more than once over the fall months, depending on the test recommendations. Also if you need to dethatch or overseed your lawn, now is the best time. Grass sown in the early spring is susceptible to summer drought and can become choked with unwelcome weeds, such as crabgrass.

As the fall progresses, there is much to be done outside before winter blankets us with its chill. Now is a great time to add new plants, move plants that you may feel are in the wrong place, or divide perennials that have become too large. It is best not to transplant after mid-October. This gives the plants time to settle down their roots before the ground freezes and some years that can be early November in this area.

When the trees become bare, it will be time to clean up your garden. This is a crucial step in reducing both insect and disease problems in your landscape. If you can compost fallen leaves so much the better – your soil will benefit from the dark rich by-product. In your flower beds remove dead leaves, stems, and spent flowers. These materials often harbor insects and diseases-causing organisms. If applying winter mulch, do so when the soil temperature has dropped after several killing frosts. If the mulch is applied too early, the warmth from the protected soil will cause new growth to start. The plant can be severely damaged as a result of this new growth being frozen back. Mulch modifies soil

temperatures and protects perennials from the heaving that results from repeated freezing and thawing of the soil. However, be careful not to pile it heavily over the plant crowns, as this can encourage rotting.

Mulch should be no more than 2-3 inches thick and although you may think it looks professional, do avoid piling mulch “volcano style” around the trunks of your trees. Mulch should never be placed around the trunk beyond the root flare (that area where the roots begin to spread out from the trunk). There are several reasons to discourage this practice, the most important being that the bark under the mulch can rot, leaving the tree vulnerable to insect damage or disease organisms – and eventual demise.

For free advice on your gardening problems contact Fairfax County Master Gardeners at:

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