

FALL AND WINTER PREPARATIONS FOR YOUR LAWN AND GARDEN

by Barbara E. Cohen

For a beautiful lawn and garden next year, start maintenance work and planning before the first frost.

LAWN MAINTENANCE

Rake up dead leaves, which keep light and air from reaching your lawn. De-thatch -- using a dethatching tool or hiring a lawn maintenance service -- to remove dead grass, roots and other debris.

Mow your lawn a final time when it stops growing. Adjust your mowing height, leaving it no longer than two inches high to avoid the development of diseases in the spring. Leave a sparse blanket of grass clippings, which return nitrogen to your soil as they decompose during the winter.

Aerate to give your lawn's roots some breathing room, especially if the soil appears to be compacted from foot traffic during the summer. Aeration will help germination of new seed in the spring.

Bare patches? For germination as soon as it gets warm next spring, seed your lawn in November, making sure there is good seed-to-soil contact. Snow cover this winter will help hold seeds in place.

Apply a sustained-release nitrogen fertilizer when the lawn stops growing but the ground is not yet frozen. The later you apply fertilizer, the less likely it will be beneficial for your lawn, so wait until spring if you are in doubt.

Control perennial broadleaf weeds from September into early October. Herbicide application in the late fall is not usually effective on dandelions, even though they are still green.

If your lawn turns brown, don't panic. Warm-season annual grasses, such as crabgrass, turn brown when they die. Perennial warm-season grasses like zoysiagrass will turn light tan when dormant. Cool-season grasses like Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass usually stay green longer, depending on the weather conditions. If your lawn looks mottled, it is because it contains a mixture of warm- and cool-season grasses.

GARDEN BEDS AND SPECIMEN PLANTS

Fall garden tasks include cleaning up annuals at the end of the growing season, taking in delicate plants and providing protection for hardy plants that will spend the winter outside.

Start by clearing up dead materials, removing litter such as dead stems and branches and replacing mulch around plants. After the first frost, remove blackened stems, all annual flowering and vegetable plants and leaves that may have settled between plants.

Before the first frost, plant new perennials and hardy bulbs, especially varieties that flower in the spring, such as crocus and tulips.

Dig up and store tender bulbs like dahlias, cannas and gladioli. Wrap them loosely in newsprint and store them in a cool, dark place.

Build a cold frame around marginally hardy perennials, especially those that might be able to last through

the winter in your growing zone but that are intended for warmer climates or milder winters.

Transplant trees and shrubs, divide perennials and plant hardy bulbs like tulips and daffodils before the ground freezes. This gives root systems the winter to get established, improving growth in the spring.

Before the first frost, water trees and shrubs heavily, especially evergreens.

Wrap the bark of young trees or apply wire tree-guards to prevent gnawing by squirrels and other animals.

Use burlap screens to shield evergreens from the drying effect of winter winds and sun.

Spread a thick protective layer of new mulch, such as bark, leaf mold or pine needles, to protect the roots of plants, shrubs and trees and to discourage spring-germinating weeds. A good snow cover will also protect your plants, keeping the soil at an even temperature. Wait until the ground freezes to prevent rodents from nesting in the mulch.

