

Winter Check List: Part I

There are many gardening tasks that must be done or are better done in the fall of the year. Things like cleaning up old plant material; fertilizing trees, shrubs and lawns; and protecting tender plants like hybrid tea roses and French hydrangeas. These chores are all a part of garden maintenance and taking care of them now will improve the quality of your garden later. Here's a checklist to remind you of what needs to be done to get the garden ready for winter.

Clean-Up
Fall clean-up in the yard and garden is under-emphasized. Leaves can smother a lawn; plant debris can re-infect next year's crop; and dead wood can invite insect and disease infestation. The diseased tomatoes in the vegetable garden, for instance, can easily re-infect next year's plants if not disposed of properly (a hot compost pile will turn the debris into compost and kill disease pathogens, too). Fallen leaf debris from diseased roses is the #1 culprit for easy re-infection the following year. Insects and fungal diseases both can winter over on plant debris. Even healthy plants during the growing season can act as cozy

winter protection for pests so go ahead and cut back herbaceous perennials once they have died back naturally. With that said, I do use healthy small fallen leaves from trees as mulch under the tree's canopy as nature would do. This helps to build healthy soil. Use your common sense, if disease is present on plant material like tomatoes, remove it; if it is just good leaf matter keep it! After clean-up is finished you can add some things...

Planting and Fertilizing
Don't hesitate to plant trees, shrubs or perennials...it's not too late. Research shows that a plant's root system grows

most actively when the soil is cool (but above freezing). There's no guarantee that the ground will freeze each winter in Kentuckiana so just use your best judgment from one year to the next. The benefit of planting in the fall is that plants have a chance to develop a good root system before they must expend energy for top growth. Provide water throughout the winter if Mother Nature does not. We have had a dry late summer this year so irrigation will help new plants get established more quickly. Do not fertilize newly planted trees, save that for year-old plantings and older.

If you are inclined to fertilize trees, shrubs and lawns then fall is the ideal time. Shoot for between

Thanksgiving and Christmas to apply a nitrogen source to woody ornamentals and trees in the drip-line (the area just below the tip if the canopy). Since the roots are actively growing in the cool soil, the root system will benefit the most from fertilization this time of the year. Same goes for our lawns, there's still time if you haven't already done so. A natural source of nitrogen is best; I shy away from petroleum-based fertilizers and in fact never fertilize trees (I let the leaf matter do so this for me) or lawns (I mow high), so it is clearly not a critical practice. I prefer using organic matter as mulch during the growing season, which

proves to be an adequate slow release of nutrients. I love my fallen tree leaves for this natural recycling of nutrients!

Protecting
There are several popular garden plants that need some winter protection in order to survive. Floribundas, grandifloras and hybrids tea roses spring to mind. We must protect the fist-like bud union of these hybrids from freezing winter temperatures. After several hard freezes you can trim the roses up and pile

mulch around the base, about 8 to 10 inches high. Hard winters can knock back a French hydrangea, too, which means it won't bloom for you next summer. Although there are many newer varieties that are not so susceptible. Just don't be surprised! If the hydrangea is in an exposed location, consider constructing a chicken wire cage around the plant and fill the space with straw to protect the stems from exposure. And sometimes it is just bad winter luck.



JENEEN WICHE

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