

Putting the Garden to Bed, or it is Not Dead, it's Only Sleeping

by Lindley McPhail

Your veggie garden and the compost

Up to mid-August you can reseed lettuce, arugula, spinach and radish as these can easily be covered if we have a killing frost and are quickly grown.

Harvest frost tender annual herbs like basil well before expected annual first frost date. Cut back hardy perennial herbs and dry; you can pot up small amounts of parsley, chives, oregano/marjoram. These will survive winter on a sunny windowsill. Bring in tender perennials like bay, rosemary and some of the lavenders (Spanish, Goodwin Creek and Kew Red) that are not hardy in our zone. These will overwinter indoors — remember many of the tender perennial herbs are from the Mediterranean areas and are used to mild and dry climates. Do not kill them with kindness (overwatering, let soil become just dry before watering) Basil may also be brought in and should survive until about early December.

Crops such as broccoli, kale, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, Swiss chard, celery and of course root vegetables can withstand quite a bit of frost, a touch of frost tends to sweeten a lot of these crops. Parsnips and leeks can be left in the garden and used the next spring as long as your garden doesn't hold a lot of water and is not too wet in the spring. If you mulch these really well with straw after the first couple of killing frosts you can even push the straw aside and harvest these late in the year.

Pull plants as they come to the end of their season and put into the compost. Annual weeds should be hoed - they may be added to the compost as long as they are not in seed. Perennial weeds should be pulled and garbaged or put into a compost pile that you will not put back into the gardens.

As portions of the garden become vacant, add finished compost or manure — you cannot have too much organic matter. Tilling or digging in the fall

cuts the amount of spring work to be done. When the last of your chopped leaves and pulled annuals have been added to the compost add a layer of soil and some high nitrogen fertilizer. Wet your compost pile thoroughly and it will work well on into the winter.

Annuals, containers, tender bulbs, corms and tubers

Pull and compost annuals and empty any clay containers. If you use garden soil or triple mix in your containers these can be emptied into the compost pile. If you use soilless mix simply put into a large garbage pail and allow it to freeze. In spring you can remove roots etc and reuse in the bottom of your containers. I find by spring the small roots have decomposed and the larger roots etc are easy to remove; I then top up with fresh soilless mix and add some slow release fertilizer. You may get some volunteer plants to surprise you throughout the growing season doing this but it is more economical. If you use a mix with water polymers in it they should definitely not be added to the compost.

Unearth tender bulbs and tubers, like glads and dahlia, cut off all but about 2" of the tops and allow to dry for a couple of days. Shake off all the soil and cut off any excess roots, dust with garden sulphur or bulb dust and store cool (approximately 8 to 14 degrees C or 46 to 57 degrees F) and dry for next year. Check regularly for mildew and breaking dormancy.

Perennials in containers may be left in the container depending on the plant and the container. If the plant is hardy to at least one zone less than yours and the container is frost hardy it should survive just being moved to a dry, protected area of your yard, somewhere snow gathers is ideal. Cover with winter mulch (dry leaves, straw, cedar mulch) and let the snow do the rest. If in doubt sink pot and all into the garden (not clay pots). Alternatively an inexpensive foam cooler filled with foam peanuts and covered with straw or pine boughs also works.

Shrubs

Probably the best thing you can do for your shrubs and perennials in the fall is water, water, water. A good part of the damage to shrubs in winter is due to desiccation from the wind. For this reason some shrubs do best if they are protected with wraps and wind breaks. These range from a plastic netting or twine wrapped around the shrub to prevent snow and ice from breaking the branches to blankets. A windbreak can be made by sandwiching straw between chicken wire in a 4 to 6" layer. Very few shrubs benefit from a fall pruning and branches help to hold snow as an insulating blanket.

Berry Fruits

All benefit from a thorough clean up of fallen leaves, and removal of diseased parts and a final weeding. To deter mice damage you may want to place bait stations in your berry patches; empty soft drink cans with mouse poison inside will keep pets and birds from eating the bait.

Raspberries — in late fall remove weak, diseased and broken canes; leave any further thinning until spring. No mulch or further care required. Fall bearing can be mowed after fruiting.

Strawberries — cover plants with straw after there

have been several light frosts but before -7C, this will prevent injury to roots, crowns and flower buds.

Currants and Gooseberries — general clean up only, delay pruning to late winter-early spring.

Blueberries — no fall pruning; since rabbits are especially fond of blueberry plants you may want to enclose them with chicken wire fence.

Seed Collecting

Before cutting down or dividing perennials and pulling out annuals cut seed pods from plants and empty seeds into appropriate containers. Be sure to label. Seedpods must mature on the plant; seed capsules will open when ripe.

All plants produce seeds and can be reproduced from seed; however, hybrids may not be true to parent plants. Lilies will take 2 – 3 years for the first flowering (sparse) and up to 5 years to do well. Store seeds cool and dark. When sowing remember to replicate natural conditions e.g. seeds that would normally fall in the autumn and overwinter outdoors to germinate in the spring need to have that cold period in order to germinate.

Checklist for bringing plants in your house

- take cuttings to start new plants
- cut back plants by about 1/3 and compost the rest
- use a good strong burst of water and wash each plant thoroughly
- water to the point of “run through” and then use an insecticidal soap soil drench to deter soil borne insects
- re-arrange furniture to accommodate your garden

Best things about gardening in the fall

- time to plant spring bulbs
- time to plant perennials, roses, shrubs, trees and mums
- time to enlarge beds, divide perennials and share with friends
- time to make notes and take pictures of favourite planters and beds, note what worked well and not so well
- time to start planning next year's garden