



UConn Home & Garden Education Center



Fall Garden Tips

By Pamm Cooper, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

As winter approaches and garden plants enter their winter dormant period, there are still some chores that will help put the garden in order before the first snowflakes fall. Since plants do not have the same requirements for end of season pruning, mulching and winter survival strategies, there are a few tips that may help you ensure your plants will have the best care before the winter months set in.

Lawns should not be fertilized now as growth should be coming to an end. If dormant winter fertilizing is done, wait until grass is no longer growing, and do not use any fast-release fertilizers. It is much better to wait until grass begins growth again in the spring to fertilize the lawn. Many of the nutrients, especially nitrogen, that are applied late in the season, are just leached out of the soil with late fall rain and winter snow. Lawn seeding now is also not recommended because germination will be minimal as soil temperatures are dipping down to the thirties and forties.

Fall is a good time to plant perennials, shrubs and bulbs, as long as the soil has not frozen, of course. Normally it is imperative to water shrubs, trees and perennials after fall planting but our soils are so wet this year that only minimal watering to settle the soil around the roots would be necessary. Some perennials planted late in the year may benefit from mulch applications, to help protect them from heaving out of the soil with alternative winter freezing and thawing cycles. Wait until the soil freezes to apply. Usually bulbs are planted at least twice as deep as their diameter but check planting labels as some may require deeper planting. Bone meal can be added to the soil to promote both rooting and flowering the following year if soils are low in phosphorus.

Some annuals can be saved for next year by digging them up and bringing them indoors. Canna lilies can be removed from the ground and cleaned off before storing in a cool, dry place like a cellar. Place on dry newspapers. Some people choose to bring them in and pot them up. Cut off old flower stems to reduce height, and place away from drafts.

Mandevilla vines can be brought indoors after cutting back. Place them in a pot with a small trellis, and then position them in a location where they will receive bright light. Cuttings can also be taken, if original plants are too large to pot up indoors.

Perennials may be cut back in the fall, or left until spring and then cut back. Some people leave seed heads of rudbeckia, echinacea, sedum and other perennials so birds can feed on the seeds.

Certain plants should not be cut back in the fall, as top growth will help overwintering ability. bush clovers (Lespedeza), blue beard (*Caryopteris*) and butterfly bush (*Buddleia davidii*) are a few of the plants that should be left intact and pruned in the spring as new growth appears. Late spring-blooming shrub hydrangeas may benefit from a

loose wrap of burlap if flowering has been minimal. Some hydrangea cultivars or species form flower buds in late summer and these can be killed during exceptionally cold winters or when winter temperatures drastically fluctuate. Ornamental grasses can be cut down now, or wait until spring just as new growth is seen. Many of these grasses have beautiful seed heads that provide interest to a snowy landscape, so just wait until early spring to cut them back. Some varieties of miscanthus, however, are invasive so seedheads should be cut back before they fully mature.

Once cold temperatures are here to stay, consider spraying the leaves of broad-leaved evergreens like rhododendrons, azaleas and boxwoods with an anti-desiccant. This helps prevent loss of moisture from the leaves during the winter and lessens winter damage. Leaves should be raked out of pachysandra beds, and dead twigs and branches can be cut from trees and shrubs.

Don't forget to clean off tools like pruners, trowels and shovels and put them away. Take some time to sharpen them now so they will be ready to use next season. Winterize lawn mowers by running the gas tank until empty to prevent carburetor gumming. As the autumn season draws to a close, button up the gardens and lawn and enjoy some time off, unless, of course, it snows...

If you have questions about what you should be doing in your garden this November or on other home and gardening topics, call the UConn Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at (877) 486-6271, check out our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.