Preparing Your Plants for the Winter Season
By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Weather-wise, these past two weekends have offered some stretches of sunny and clear weather to finish attending to those end of season chores. By now, vegetable and annual flowerbeds should have been cleaned up and any necessary soil amendments added. Hoses should have been drained and stored in the garage or shed. Birdbaths and other garden ornaments last longer if brought under cover during the winter so that water does not freeze in their cracks and crevices and break them apart.

Ornamental plantings will require less work next spring if given one last weeding this fall and excess leaves around the plants are collected. Cut back the dead stems of most perennials and allow some leaves to collect in their crowns. It is recommended to leave the seedheads of some perennials, like coneflowers and rudbeckias, for the birds to feed on. I do leave a few but not all as they often produce copious amounts of seedlings next season.

Some plants need a little help to survive the winter. In a perfect world (at least as far as plants are concerned), fall rains would be plentiful, the ground would gradually freeze by mid-December and the week before Christmas, a foot of snow would blanket the ground throughout the cold winter months. Since the amount of snow cover is unpredictable and temperatures can fluctuate drastically, susceptible plants depend on us.

Which plants are likely to benefit from a protective winter mulch? Those which are shallow rooted, marginally hardy or newly planted. Mums planted this fall have shallow roots and would benefit from some protection. I have lost butterfly weeds (Asclepius) planted in June to frost heaving because their tuber-like roots were thrust out of the ground during a relatively snowless winter with considerable temperature fluctuations.

To protect these plants, use a winter mulch. I prefer evergreen boughs because spring cleanup is quick. Over the years, both natural occurring pines as well as selected evergreens have been encouraged or planted on our property so a few branches can easily be clipped and set over tender, shallow-rooted or newly planted perennials. For those not as fortunate, Christmas trees, yours or your neighbors’, could be used.

If no evergreen boughs are available, you can use pine needles or non-packing leaves, like oak. Occasionally, bales of straw are available at local garden centers. Wait until the ground freezes before applying a 2 to 4 inch layer of mulch. Remove the mulch in the spring as the ground thaws and new growth begins.

Broadleaved evergreens are especially prone to winter desiccation. Leaves and stems transpire, or lose water, on sunny winter days. If the ground is frozen, the roots cannot replace the water lost and the drying of the tissue, or desiccation, occurs.
Make sure broadleaved evergreens go into the winter well-watered, which should not be a problem this fall. Purchase and use an anti-desiccant, such as Wilt-Pruf or Moisture-Loc at the end of December and again in February. Multi-stemmed shrubs, as well as upright evergreens, may be split open by heavy snow or ice. Loosely encircle the plants with soft twine to keep branches upright. A chicken wire cage could also be used.

Image by Dawn Pettinelli.

Thin barked trees such as maples, beeches and fruit trees may be prone to splitting on their trunk. On warmer sunny days, the bark on the south and west side of the tree heats up. Since temperatures markedly drop at sundown, the outer bark will cool down and contract faster than the inner bark sometimes causing cracks to occur. Some protection is offered by wrapping young tree trunks with commercial tree wrap.

Fruit trees especially are a food source for wildlife. If rabbits are abundant in your neck of the woods, you might want to place circles of hardware cloth around tree trunks to prevent gnawing. Another solution is to leave fruit tree prunings on the ground around trees you want to protect. The rabbits prefer the tender twigs to the main stem.

A few steps taken before winter’s arrival will do much to insure your plants’ survival. For questions about winter protection for your plants or on any home & garden questions, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271, visit our website, or your local Cooperative Extension Center.