

## Putting Your Garden to Bed

We often get asked about what is necessary to put your garden to bed. The simple answer is that you don't have to do much at all. However, remember that anything you choose not to do in the fall you will likely be doing in the spring when you might have other things more interesting to do.

Cutting perennials down is one chore that I prefer to do in the fall. I always cut down the peonies and dispose of the foliage in a plastic bag for the curb or put them in the burn pile because most of the time, I end up with powdery mildew on my peonies by this time of year. If you have time for only one task, I recommend taking down your peonies as the foliage will wilt to the ground and set up conditions for fungal growth. I sometimes leave Rudbeckia and Echinacea plants standing during the winter because the seed heads feed birds and they are interesting in the snow scape. This year I will be cutting all of them down because the drought literally fried most of them. In fact, most of them were cut down a month or so ago. Take out weeds or grass in your garden that is likely to go to seed. If you don't have time to dig them out, cut the seed heads off and discard them in the trash, not the compost.

Vegetable gardens need to be cleaned up now. Remove all plants that are no longer producing. Clean up all litter in the garden to prevent diseases from returning next year. Compost healthy tissue and bag or burn diseased tissue. I wait for a killing frost to clean up my herb garden as I find the herbs to be very hearty and I use them until they are completely gone. Of course, sage, thyme and tarragon can be left all winter and used when you can find them through the snow. After the first killing frost, cut back any long rose canes to avoid rocking in the winter when the ground is frozen. Add mulch around perennials if you have not already done so this summer.

If you have compost, spread it on the garden and carefully dig it in or just let it stay on top and the worms will do the job for you over the winter. Gather up excess leaves from the lawn, run over them with the lawnmower and use them as protection around lavender and roses. Don't use black walnut leaves as mulch as they are toxic. If you haven't fertilized the grass yet, do so now. Use a low nitrogen fertilizer.

You will appreciate having clean tools in the spring. Now is the time to get them in shape. Place a bag of play sand in a bucket mixed with some oil. Wash the excess dirt off of your tools and dip them in the oily sand. Wipe them clean and store them in a dry space. It's a good idea to get tools sharpened this time of year so that when you need them in the spring you won't have to take them for sharpening then. If you are handy and have the right sharpening tools you can do it yourself. Otherwise, most hardware stores will have a sharpening service in house or let you know who can perform the task for you.

If you have a lot of perennials to cut back, try using your weed eater. I prevail on my dear husband to crank up his weed eater and while I hold up the plants he cuts them off. It's done in a second and I have all the plant in my arms to dump into the garden tractor wagon and haul away. It turns a big chore into a very small task.

By Kathy MacPherson

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