



Preparing Your Garden for Winter By Jessica Holmes

Warm weather and summer are slowly coming to an end and fall is right around the corner with winter approaching. I bet everyone is excited for below freezing temperatures and snow, right? Probably not, but gardeners need to remember they have a lot to do in the fall to prepare their plant beds for the cold months ahead. Most of us hunker down and stay inside our homes. Our plants in the garden do this in their own way by saving up energy to come back again in the spring. Preparation in the gardens for fall includes checking pH of the soil, watering, fertilizing, cutting perennials down, planting bulbs and more!

It is a good idea to recheck your pH, as pH can take many months or years to adjust depending on how far out of line it has become. During the cooler months is when we can apply sulfur. This does need warm soils to react; the ground temperatures need to be over 45 degrees and under 80 degrees for sulfur to work properly. Lime can be applied anytime as long as the soil is not frozen. It is wise to consciously think about this to amend to the correct pH and get ready for the next growing season. Vegetable gardens' ideal range is from a pH of 5.8-6.3 while perennial beds range from 6.2-6.8.

Late summer, early fall is a great time to plant trees, shrubs, and perennials. Fall is the best time to plant rather than spring because there likely won't be stress from hot temperatures. Plant between late August until mid-October; remember even though the temperatures will start getting cooler, you need to continue watering until the ground has frozen. Check the grounds moisture level six to eight inches down into the soil with a spade or a stick to determine if you need to water. This is most important for newly planted plants, but it is still smart to check your established plants. During the fall, the plants are taking up water and storing them in the roots to get through the winter months and ready for spring.

Cleaning up your garden beds by taking out debris and diseased leaves will be beneficial to your plants health. This removes any chances of disease and pests overwintering in them. The same goes for weeds; keep you beds weeded until the first few frosts.

Although many people are very eager to get out in the garden and cut everything down in September and October, don't do it! Wait to cut perennials down until two to three frosts have passed, when they become dormant. Only cut two to three inches above the crown, you don't want to cut too low because this can cause injury to the plant. Most perennials don't actually need to be cut down until early spring. It all depends on how you want your garden to look aesthetically. Many perennials have beautiful winter appearances, such as ornamental grasses, sedum, hellebores, ferns, coral bells and an array of others. Leaving perennials as is helps provide shelter and food for birds and beneficial insects. As for shrubs, the majority should be cut back in the spring or summer depending on the flower time and shrub. Avoid pruning shrubs in the fall as it allows them to set buds, continue growth and save energy to get ready for the winter months. Shrubs like hydrangeas can keep their flowers for added texture to your winter garden. You can also add organic material such as leaves, lawn clippings, compost or mulch to your garden beds to give an extra layer of insulation. Make sure that it is no more than three inches thick or this can suffocate the plants' root system. This is ideal for borderline hardy perennials, such as plants that are Zone 5, which cannot take winter temperatures under negative twenty degrees.

During the month of October is a great time to save seeds from your perennials. You can also do this with your annuals before they are done for the season. Make sure to dry out the seeds completely and store in a cool dry place or a refrigerator. Just remember if you are taking seeds from a hybrid plant that it may not be the same as its parent.

Enjoy the last of the summer and fall days to come, because with a blink of an eye winter will be here. The snow will be falling and we will be patiently waiting to see the colors of spring again in our gardens.