PREPARING YOUR GARDEN FOR WINTER

Preparing your garden for winter not only marks the end of the growing season but also presents an opportunity to get a head start on the next season. Start with a clean up. Cut down and remove dead annual flowers and vegetable plants. If not diseased or insect infested, add them to the compost pile. I make burn piles in the garden, and burn all tomato plants and anything else that was diseased. Then we till the garden under, which we have found makes it much easier to work in the spring.

Cut back faded or dead foliage on perennials after the first hard frost, and compost, unless they add color to your garden in winter. I leave my coneflowers and black-eyed Susan's for winter interest and for the birds. You should leave the dead foliage on chrysanthemums. Research has proven that mums not cut back over-winter better than those that were cut. You should apply a layer of mulch around your perennials. Apply a two to four inch layer of mulch on top of perennial, shrub and bulb beds. It will protect the beds from weeds and the elements and hold in moisture. You can use chopped-up leaves from your lawn or other loose materials like pine needles, wood chips, chunk bark or coarse gravel for the perennials and shrubs. Don’t put down un-shredded leaves or other matter that compact easily because it will mat down and suffocate the plants. Cover bulb beds with evergreen boughs.

Modern, bush-type roses (hybrid teas, floribundas, and grandifloras) require protection during the winter months. Exposure to low temperatures and rapid temperature changes can severely injure and often kill unprotected roses. Hilling or mounding soil around the base of each plant is an excellent way to protect bush-type roses. Mound the soil 10 to 12 inches high around the base of the canes. Place additional material, such as straw or leaves, over the mound of soil. A small amount of soil placed over the straw or leaves should hold these materials in place. Prepare modern roses for winter after plants have been hardened by several nights of temperatures in the low to mid-twenties. I do my rose preparation in late November or early December, but even though I prepare them for winter in this way, my hybrid teas still suffer winter damage. I don't want to discourage anyone from growing hybrid teas in this area, but I have decided from now on to only plant hardy shrub roses. My 'knockout' roses take the winter just fine.

The past couple of years, garden centers in northeast Missouri have sold Crape Myrtles. This is my favorite shrub, and unfortunately I cannot get one to survive our winters here in Northeast Missouri. I have tried the south side of my house and the west side, and because we have had -15 or below the past couple of years, they die. They just can't take our cold winter. My

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grandparents, who live near the Arkansas border, have a very large crape myrtle in their front yard. It thrives there with very little care. I've decided if I am going to grow this beautiful shrub here in northeast Missouri, I will have to grow it in a pot and bring it indoors in late fall.

Who doesn't love to grow strawberries? Strawberries are susceptible to winter injury. Temperatures below 20°F may kill flower buds and damage the roots and crowns of unprotected plants. Repeated freezing and thawing of the soil through the winter months can heave unprotected plants out of the soil and also cause considerable damage. Application of mulch in the fall is the best way to protect strawberries. Excellent mulching materials include clean, weed-free straw and chopped cornstalks. Leaves are not a good mulch for strawberries as they tend to mat together and do not provide adequate protection. Apply 3 to 5 inches of mulch over the plants. Allow the strawberry plants to harden or acclimate to the cool fall temperatures before mulching the bed. I usually get them to overwinter just fine here. Be careful though about late spring freezes. A few years ago, when we had the “Easter Freeze,” I lost 75% of the strawberry plants in the extension garden. It had been warm the week before and I uncovered them, then left for Easter weekend. That weekend the nighttime temperature dropped to 17 degrees and killed them, as well as many crop buds/flowers around the state.

Rake up and compost fallen leaves. Involve your kids or grandkids in this process. My son loves to jump and play in the leaves. Before the ground freezes, water evergreens, especially broad-leaved ones, and spray them with anti-desiccants if they are planted in exposed, windy areas. If necessary, protect them with burlap screens to minimize heaving, desiccation, scalding from intense sun, and other winter damage.

Wrap trees, especially recently planted trees or sensitive varieties like honey locust or Japanese maple. Wrap in burlap from the base of the trunk to the second or third branch, allowing some overlap to allow water to escape, then secure at the crown. If your evergreens brown over the winter, it's because the wind has sucked out their moisture. You have two options to protect your trees: a chemical anti-desiccant spray or windshields. Windshields are easy to erect: simply place wooden stakes in the ground and wrap burlap around them.

During winter months, rabbits often gnaw on the bark of woody plants. Heavy browsing can result in the complete girdling of small trees and small branches clipped off at snow level. Apple, pear, crabapple, and serviceberry are frequent targets of rabbits. Small trees with smooth, thin bark are the most vulnerable. The best way to prevent rabbit damage to young trees is to place a cylinder of hardware cloth (1/4 inch mesh wire fencing) around the tree trunk. The hardware cloth cylinder should stand about 1 to 2 inches from the tree trunk and 20 inches above the ground. The bottom 2-3 inches should be buried beneath the soil. Small shrubs, roses, and raspberries can be protected with chicken wire fencing.

Cover containers that will remain outdoors to prevent them from filling with water, freezing, and cracking. Clean terra-cotta pots and concrete containers and store them in the garage or potting shed to protect them from the elements. Drain your water hose and bring it in so it doesn't freeze. Clean and store tools, ceramic pots and birdbaths. Putting them away before harsh weather will prolong the life of these garden essentials.

WINTER SQUASH

Autumn colors are accentuated in the garden by the decorative array of winter squashes. A variety of colors, shapes, sizes and textures are represented in the harvest. Despite the diversity in looks, most winter squash are similar on the edible inside. The flesh of the squash, except for the unique spaghetti squash, tends to be orange in color and mild and sweet in flavor. Most winter squash are interchangeable in recipes.

Unlike summer squash, winter squash was not grown in North or Central America before European colonization. Originating and flourishing first in South America, winter squash finally found its way north, and by the early to mid 1800s was a staple product. It was particularly cultivated in New England as a necessary winter storage food.

Its excellent storability and nutritive value make winter squash an important fall and winter vegetable for the seasonal eater. Winter squash boasts 10 times the vitamin A content of its summer squash relations, and is also an excellent source of potassium. Winter squash is high in fiber and complex carbohydrates, and its versatility means that sweet, warming squash will find its way into your heart...and your tummy.

Storage Tips: Winter squash will store at room temperature for at least a month. Store for several months in a dry and cool (50-55 degrees) but not cold location. Bruised or damaged squash will deteriorate more quickly.

THE SWEET POTATO...A THANKSGIVING FAVORITE

The sweet potato is one of only a few cultivated vegetable crops that originated in the Americas. The wild sweet potato has been traced back to Peru as early as 8000 B.C. Early Native American tribes relied on both wild, and later, cultivated varieties of sweet potatoes. Christopher Columbus introduced this versatile and nutritious storage crop to Europe.

Sweet potatoes are often erroneously referred to as “yams”, a family of starchy tuberous roots originating in West Africa. The sweet potato is neither a potato or a yam, but a rooted tuber and member of the morning glory family.

The sweet potato is a warm-season crop, and in northern climates must not be planted until all chance of frost is passed. It’s produced or, more accurately, regenerated from plants or sprouts called “slips” that come from the previous season’s crop, or from vine cuttings.

In this country we generally see only a few of the sweet potato varieties cultivated worldwide, and these tend to be the familiar, very sweet, thin-skinned yellow and orange fleshed types like the Garnet and Jewel. Most sweet potatoes offer a moist, succulent, and smooth texture, and they are loaded with a host of important nutrients our children need.

Storage Tips: Store sweet potatoes in a cool, dry, well-ventilated place for up to several weeks. Do not store in plastic or refrigerate. Temperatures below 50 degrees will result in off-flavors, and excess moisture will encourage sweet potatoes to rot or sprout prematurely. Do not scrub clean or wash until just before preparation. Excess dirt may be removed without water prior to storing.


MASTER GARDENERS-
ALL VOLUNTEER HOURS ARE DUE NOVEMBER 30

It’s time once again to begin compiling your volunteer hours for 2010. Report forms should be submitted to your club advisor at your November meeting, or you need to submit your hours online in the Master Gardener volunteer reporting system at http://report.missourimastergardener.com/. If you do not belong to a club and are not submitting your hours online, and you are in the following counties (Adair, Macon, Randolph, Schuyler, Scotland, Linn, Sullivan, Lewis, Clark, Putnam, Knox), please mail your volunteer report form to me at the Adair County Extension Center, 503 E. Northtown Rd., Kirksville, MO 63501. If you are in Pike, Ralls, Marion, Shelby and Monroe counties, please mail them to Alix Carpenter at the Marion County Extension Center, 100 S. Main, Room 201, Palmyra, MO 63461. You can download a form off of the state Master Gardener website: http://mg.missouri.edu/. If you have internet access, you are encouraged to enter your hours in the online reporting system. It is an easy way to keep track of your hours.

If you turned in a paper copy to us last year, but want to enter them in the online reporting system this year, you must contact Alix or I to get your username and password, as we have already entered you in the online system and entered your hours in it for you last year. If you enter yourself in it this year, you will be entered twice and we only need you in there one time, so please contact us first.

We will include the volunteer hours in the extension annual reports for each county in the northeast region. I will start pulling reports from the online system and tallying all reports received, on December 1. Please do not be late or your hours will not be included. Every year we receive volunteer hours after the deadline and they do not get included. It is very important that I receive your hours in a timely manner so I can write an accurate report for your county. Please remember to use the correct project codes for your activities. Also, 45 minutes is recorded as .75, 30 minutes is .5, and 15 minutes is .25. Please be sure to record your time in this manner; 45 minutes is not recorded as .45 and 30 minutes is not recorded as .30. It takes a lot of time to go through and make all the corrections on the paper copies if they are not recorded properly, and I cannot make changes for you in the online system, so please record your hours correctly. If you have questions on which project code to use or how to record hours, please contact me or your club advisor for help. We would prefer you ask for help, rather than having to make corrections later. A regional summary on volunteer hours will be published in a later issue of this newsletter.
GARDENING TIPS FOR NOVEMBER

Vegetables
- Any unused, finished compost is best tilled under to improve garden soils.
- Fall tilling the vegetable garden exposes many insect pests to winter cold, reducing their numbers in next year’s garden.

Fruits
- Keep mulches pulled back several inches from the base of fruit trees to prevent bark injury from hungry mice and other rodents.
- Fallen, spoiled or mummified fruits should be cleaned up from the garden and destroyed.
- Mulch strawberries for winter with straw. This should be done after several nights near 20 degrees, but before temperatures drop into the teens. Apply straw loosely, but thick enough to hide plants from view.

Ornamentals
- Continue watering evergreens until the ground freezes. Soils must not be dry when winter arrives.
- Now is the ideal time to plant trees and shrubs. Before digging the hole, prepare the site by loosening the soil well beyond the drip line of each plant. Plant trees and shrubs at the depth they grew in the nursery and no deeper. Remove all wires, ropes and non-biodegradable materials from roots before back filling. Apply a 2 to 3-inch mulch layer, but stay several inches away from the trunk. Keep the soil moist, not wet, to the depth of the roots.
- Remove the spent flowers and foliage of perennials after they are damaged by frost.

Lawns
- To prevent injury to turf grasses, keep leaves raked up off of the lawn.
- Continue mowing lawn grasses as long as they keep growing.
- A final fall application of fertilizer can be applied to bluegrass and fescue lawns now.

Miscellaneous
- Now is a good time to collect soil samples to test for pH and nutritional levels.
- Roll up and store garden hoses on a warm, sunny day. It’s hard to get a cold hose to coil into a tight loop.

(University of Missouri Botanical Garden)

UPCOMING EVENTS

November 1: Fabius Master Gardener club meeting, 7 pm, Presbyterian Church, Memphis.
November 1: Heartland Master Gardener meeting; 7 p.m. Brookfield Area Career Ctr.
November 2: Salt River Master Gardener meeting, 7:00 pm, Palmyra Sesquicentennial Building; program—Sam Walker from Bergman’s Nursery in Quincy, “Putting Your Plants To Bed”
November: Sullivan County Master Gardener meeting.
November 9: Magic City Master Gardener meeting, Randolph County Extension Center.
November 16: Kirksville Area Master Gardeners meeting, 7 pm Kirksville TCRC.
November 22: Macon-Shelby Master Gardener meeting, 7:00 pm, Macon County Extension Center, carry-in dinner.
December 3-4: Missouri Livestock Symposium, Kirksville Middle School. For more info: http://www.missourilivestock.com/mls410.htm.
January 5-8: Great Plains Vegetable Growers Conference, Missouri Western State University, St. Joseph, MO.
September 2011: State Master Gardener Conference, Hannibal.