

Master Gardener Tips

Putting Your Lawn and Garden Down for a Winter Nap

October and November bring blue skies and cooler weather to Southeast Missouri and make us want to get outside after our usually hot and humid summers. This makes an ideal time to prep gardens and lawns for winter and to help keep them healthy.

Lawn - Cut grass short and continue mowing as long as the grass grows. Stop fertilizing after mid September. Rake and remove the leaves so they don't smother the grass and, of course, the leaves can be used as mulch.

Roses - Remove old mulch and fallen leaves, which can carry diseases, like blackspot, over the winter. Put on new mulch. After the first killing frost, mulch tea roses 6-12 inches deep over the root graft.

Small Shrubs and Annual and Perennial Flowers - Remove all debris such as old blooms, dead leaves and stalks. Remove and burn the foliage from peonies as soon as it starts turning dark to prevent carrying over any disease to the next year. Mulch beds as needed. Leave seed heads from coneflowers, sedums and ornamental grasses for birds to eat. If part of the plant is green, leave it alone.

Vegetable Garden - Clean up and remove the annual plants like tomatoes, peppers, squash and cucumbers. The leaves and stems of these plants can carry diseases or harmful insects so they should not be used as mulch or allowed to stay in the garden. Burn them unless you maintain a hot composting system. Some people plant a cover crop also known as "green manure" to build the soil for next year's garden. See www.organicgardening.com/learn-and-grow/soil-health-cover-cold for suggestions on what type to plant in this area or call the extension office in your county.

Mulch - Adding mulch is one of the most important steps you can take year round to maintain the health and beauty of your landscape. We recommend mulching your gardens, flower beds, shrubs and trees, and fall is the ideal time to do it. First, please use *organic* mulch, because it is made from plant materials that will break down over time to build your soil.

Mulch helps keep weeds down, saves moisture during droughts, and prevents wide swings in soil temperatures during both winter and summer. Several good mulches available in this area include tree leaves, straw, and various kinds and sizes of wood chips. Tree leaves are easily and cheaply available and will return much of the nutrients the trees have extracted from the soil and air. Chop up the leaves using your mulching mower and place them in a 3 to 4-inch layer on your flower beds.

Applying mulch is a lot like putting thick icing on a cake, just don't smother the plants. Around trees and shrubs, keep mulch about 4 inches away from the trunk and 3-4 inches deep. This will prevent mice and voles from tunneling under the mulch to gnaw on the tree trunk. Young trees and those with tender bark like Japanese maples may also benefit from plastic trunk protectors or wire surrounds to discourage voles and rabbits.

Beware! Inorganic materials like rubber pellets chopped up from old tires are being sold for mulch around trees. While these materials may look good, we do not recommend using them. These materials take years to break down and some, like the rubber tire pellets, carry high loads of toxins such as arsenic, lead and other heavy metals that are not good for plants, people, or the soil.

Prepared by Carolyn Johnson, Poplar Bluff Master Gardeners (including Butler, Carter, Ripley, Stoddard and Wayne Counties). We meet monthly and the public is welcome to attend. To find out more, contact the University of Missouri Extension Center at 573-686-8064.