



The scent of fall is in the air and it is time to think about those chores and planning tasks that really should be done before the snow flies. Yeah – I know, it doesn't seem like it's time yet, but it will save a lot of time and some headaches next season. And if you haven't begun to think about the fall chores as a pleasant part of the regular cycle of gardening – put that at the top of your list! It's a great time to renew enthusiasm, review the growing season, and it presents an opportunity to improve landscape performance before winter arrives. Reviewing the success (or not) of the plant material and your gardening practices, as well as (re)considering the needs of the family in the landscape space - are really fun activities.

First step – if you haven't done this already - get yourself a notebook to keep track of thoughts and observations as you wander about the landscape. It doesn't have to be anything fancy, an inexpensive notebook or even stapled sheets of paper will do just beautifully. The important thing is to jot things down as they come to you - the unnecessary can always be tossed out later. It's important to allow the plants and the landscape to be the focus of attention. Don't clutter your mind with trying to remember what not to forget.

Now, let's get to the to-do items. For deciduous plant materials, inspect the plants before the leaves drop, noting all unusual trunk, stem and foliar insect infestations and/or disease symptoms. If there are no leaves left on the plant material, check the ground for those that have fallen to see if they look clean and healthy. Leaf and stem issues can indicate a need for late fall or early spring treatments. In ornamental plant material, crabapples, hawthorns, ash, birch, and roses are often prime candidates for preventative insecticide and/or fungicide applications, where needed of course. Look for those plants that defoliated or just looked horrible during the growing season and make notations or mark those that may need professional advice or assistance.

Most perennials can be divided in the fall, and with the recent rains, will be happily moved about to spread their joy. Those that are not going to be divided should be considered for trimming back as soon as the tissue browns, especially if they are not particularly attractive during the winter months. Purple coneflowers, ornamental grasses, some of the shrub roses, and blue mist spirea look fantastic throughout the dormant season, and can provide food or cover for our winter birds. Herbaceous peonies (not the tree peonies) should definitely be cut back to ground level, as soon as possible, to prevent stem rots as the damp fall weather arrives. After hard frost, all of the tender

perennials will brown up nicely, signaling the time to cut them back. Once plant material is cut back, clean up the debris and dispose of it away from growing areas to help break any existing disease/infection cycles.

Small fruits (raspberries, strawberries, elderberries and the like) and all fruit trees require year-round care for optimal health and production, with much to be accomplished during the dormant season. On the list should be debris clean up, dormant pruning, and spray treatments. Write up a brief care plan for each fruit cultivar, as the needs can vary quite a bit. That should include a pruning schedule, insecticide, herbicide, and fungicide problem specific applications needed. Take some time now to do a comprehensive survey of the structure and overall health – including soil tests. Planning ahead and putting on items year-round will help you get through the all of the seasons with a minimal amount of panic and plant death.

In vegetable and annual gardens, make notes on the successes, problems, and outright failures. Reviewing these will help you to improve planning and maximize production for next season. Remove and dispose of all of spent plant material as production or flowering stops. Pull up any weeds that escaped your earlier notice. After all of the plant remains are removed, take some time to have a quality soil test done and then use those results to improve the fertility through appropriate soil amendment applications. Vegetable and annual plants are heavy feeders – really, we do expect a lot from them in one season. And when planning for next season, don't forget to include rotations to prevent serious insect and disease outbreaks.

Container plantings will often hold the last plant survivors in the landscape. As the season moves into winter, we forget, are too tired, or it's too cold outside to properly winterize them. This is a big mistake for a number of reasons. From a cheap gardener standpoint, quality containers are too expensive to just throw away, and often the same containers are not offered year in, year out – leaving us with a rather unsatisfying and eclectic collection of usable containers. From a health perspective, diseases are easily brought into container plantings and without proper end-of-season care, can remain to devastate future plantings. With many insects and diseases, disinfecting the containers will take care of health issues. If any issues are left unattended and ignored, the containers will harbor and potentially intensify those problems. So don't be a lazy gardener, clean them up in the fall before the really cold weather sets in. Remove all plant material and soil, wash

and disinfect all plastic or non-heat resistant containers with a 10% bleach solution. If the containers are clay, empty and then wash the pots – follow up with a 20 to 30 minute bake in a 200 degree Fahrenheit oven to sterilize. (Use good judgment as to container and oven size compatibility.) If you want to keep a soil-less container media from year to year, it should be sterilized. Lay out the media in a thin layer (an inch or so deep) on clean cookie sheets or in clean pans and bake for 20 to 30 minutes at 200 degrees Fahrenheit. Yes, it does smell funky, but we gardeners like that sort of thing. Use old pans. I don't bake food products on them after using them for media sterilization – we have to draw the line somewhere, don't we? Store sterilized media in a clean, new plastic bag to limit exposure to pathogens.

Now is the perfect time for many fall lawn care projects. The turf has come out of summer dormancy and looking lush and full right now. Do a good walk-through on your lawn areas – CSI grid style works great for you turf lovers. Look for weeds, bare spots, and pet urine areas. Jot down the weeds observed, or if you don't know what they are – look on line or at a library for pictures or take them to a good garden center for identification. If they are annual weeds, increasing the health of the existing turf (through fertilizer treatments and a taller mowing height – 3" to 3 ½") will help to crowd them out without using any herbicide treatments. Perennial weeds can be a bit more troublesome to eliminate, but once properly identified – it is easy to determine the best time and product for maximum control. If you have bare spots in your lawn, now through the end of the third week in September is the optimum time for seeding. Choose a seed that is compatible to existing grasses, and will do well with all soil, light, moisture, and traffic conditions. Prep the area(s) well and provide adequate moisture to get that seed up and going (takes roughly 6 – 8 weeks) before a killing frost. If there are issues with intense and serious pet urine in your yard, consider putting in a dog/cat/gerbil run to confine damage to a specific area. Running the hose over urine spots on the lawn will only do so much to dilute the problem.

Fall is a time of opportunity to replace materials, to plan for new additions or subtractions, and certainly an opportunity to breathe and enjoy the cooler temperatures while working on those gardening projects.