



Ok – it's formally fall, now what to do? With the first hard frost comes the realization that there are tasks to prioritize and get going on before the ground completely freezes. The list can be so endless and somewhat daunting if not broken down into simple choices. To make it really simple, fall chores can be divided into two categories – put it down or pick it up - as easy as flipping a coin. What requires “putting down”? Planting of spring flowering bulbs, fall care of perennials, fall planting of trees and shrubs, end of the season lawn care, and mulching. “Picking up” includes acclimating house- and tropical plants to an indoor or dormant situation, end of season care for annuals, removal of summer flowering bulbs, cleaning up containers, inspecting plants for diseases, and removal of plant materials that have seen better days.

Putting down the spring flowering bulbs is one of those more pressing, yet enjoyable, planting duties – but remember that it is a good idea to wait until a hard frost before planting. Well prepared beds, cooler soil temperatures, a bit of moisture, and enough time to set some roots will get the bulbs into a somewhat active state that will encourage the development of elasticity. This elasticity is needed to see the bulbs through the winter temperature and condition changes. Don't forget to give the planted bulbs the recommended dose of bulb fertilizer - sometime around Halloween. If winter color with bulbs is desired, make sure to choose and pot up the biggest you can afford for a good indoor show. When planting the bulbs in a container, be sure to allow enough room for the roots to develop and don't worry quite so much about the planting depth. If necessary, extra support in the container can always be provided as the bulbs develop and grow. Double check the amount of time needed for cold treatment, count back from the desired bloom date and get them started in a cool area. Keep the container away from anything that produces ethylene – car exhaust and vegetables.

Perennials are screaming for a bit of care right about now. Those that need it, should be cut back before it gets much colder. Peonies are one perennial that should not

be ignored in the fall. If left uncut, stem rot can invade and destroy those beautiful plants. The dry weather certainly reduced the vigor of some perennials that would normally provide some terrific winter interest. Rather than leaving them up and looking pathetic – put them out of their misery and cut them back. For those perennials that need to be divided, inspect them carefully to make sure that they are not diseased or providing homes for insect infestations. Some problems are quite treatable, while some are best treated by removal and disposal. If you are unsure how to proceed with problem diagnosis, ask for help from a professional. Roses are often asked about and often mistreated. Each rose type has different care requirements and the first step in understanding how to provide fall and winter care is to accurately identify those roses. One very important rule that can be followed across rose types is to NOT use rose cones. If the roses need to be covered, begin after hard freeze and slowly mound the soil up and around the plant crown. Over the span of a couple of weeks, the soil should cover the base area of the plant's structure, including the lower branch area.

If planting trees and shrubs this fall, that task should be finished up relatively soon. The small feeder roots need a few weeks for regeneration and to get moisture and nutrients through the plant system before hard freeze. If container grown materials were purchased, be sure to check the roots, removing anything unhealthy in appearance, untangling any circling roots. If balled and burlap, remove all of the twine and at least the top half of the burlap. Also, make sure that the flare of any tree is at ground level, never below. Shrubs should be planted with the crown appropriately placed, most often at or above ground level, if unsure of placement check with the grower. Remember to water when necessary right up to hard freeze. After the ground is frozen solid, mulch with about 4” of a good quality product – always leaving a few inches between the trunk and the mulch to help prevent health issues.

It is past the prime time to put grass seed in, so do so at the risk of less than grand germination and growth

success. Don't forget to do the most important lawn fertilizer application of the season – around Halloween. Make sure that in the fertilizer composition at least half of the nitrogen is slow release to give your turf the needed energy for spring growth.

Now, flip the coin and look at what needs picking up. Tropical and houseplants should have been acclimated to lower light and lower humidity indoor situations already. If not, expect leaf loss as that slow process of bringing them indoors is very important to maintaining continuous health and density of the leaf canopy during and after transition. Inspect for insects and diseases and treat as needed to lessen the impact on any existing houseplants. Re-pot as necessary, using the appropriate blend of sterilized potting mix. The only plants that require frequent fertilizing, from October to March, are those that flower year-round.

Now is the time to collect seed from some of those heirloom annuals that gave heartily all season. After that task is complete, clean up the annual beds. Leaving plant material in the beds can increase the potential for disease issues next year, especially if there were disease pressures this year. There are some annuals (coleus, scented geranium) that make beautiful houseplants when cut back and acclimated to the indoor environment. Give it a try.

Summer flowering bulbs should be removed and stored in the proper environment for the winter season. Depending on the bulb (corms and tubers as well) storage conditions may be anything from kind of damp and cool to dry and somewhat warm. If proper storage conditions are unknown, do a bit of research or ask a professional for assistance. When removing from the ground, thoroughly inspect for insect and disease problems. Either treat the problems or dispose of those bulbs that are not in excellent condition. Any problems will become greater during winter storage, and may infect some of the healthy bulbs.

Containers need to be put on vacation – empty, disinfect, repair, and store safely. If any diseases were present in the containers, disinfecting (with a 10% bleach solution or other product) may not be enough to control the problem. Plastic pots are notorious for holding some disease pathogens. Clay pots are a bit easier to completely disinfect, either with

a bleach solution or through heat treatment in a 200 degree oven for 30 minutes. Identifying the disease culprit will help you to control spread in the future years of container use through appropriate treatment or improved management practices.

When plant material has seen better days, ask for professional help. Disease or damage can become more of a problem when treated by the untrained. Chainsaws and plant health care products are great tools when used responsibly. Know knowledge and ability limitations, call for help or guidance.