

PREPARING THE GARDEN FOR WINTER

Barbara J. Bromley, Mercer Co. Horticulturist 2007

At the end of the New Jersey gardening season, there are chores that should be performed to prepare the garden for winter. There are also projects that can or should be done in late fall or winter. The following is a checklist of the projects to consider that will make gardening easier in spring.

TREES AND SHRUBS

1. Apply an antidesiccant spray (such as WiltPruf or Folicote) to newly-planted evergreen trees and shrubs to reduce both water loss from leaves and needles and the damage caused by drying winter winds and afternoon sun. **Follow label directions; apply only to plants listed on the label.** Apply when soil is moist and temperatures will be over 40°F for 24 hours or as directed.
2. Check plants damage caused by pests and for over-wintering egg masses of Eastern tent caterpillar or gypsy moth, bagworm bags, and scale insects. Many pests are more easily seen after leaves have fallen. Have the problem identified, then physically remove it or make notes to control it at the appropriate time.
3. Pull away any mulch around trunks of trees and shrubs. Leave 4 inches or more between the mulch and the trunk to maintain a doughnut of mulch. Mulch on the trunk invites fungus and insect problems, promotes development of adventitious roots, and may harbor "varmints," such as voles, which eat tender bark and roots in winter.
4. Wrap soft twine, pantyhose, or broad tape around multi-trunked or stemmed evergreens, such as tall juniper, arborvitae, boxwood, and yews that may split under snow or ice weight.
5. Place board shelters (a-frame structures similar to the sandwich boards worn to advertise a deli) over shrubs susceptible to snow weight damage, especially those plants under the eaves of houses.
6. Put a burlap screen around small marginally hardy plants and broadleaved evergreens that are prone to winter burn. Put stakes in the ground before the ground freezes (November). Tack the burlap to the stakes in late December.
7. If the Christmas tree is balled and burlapped and meant to be planted outdoors, dig the hole before the ground freezes. Place the soil in a box and store it where it won't freeze. Cover the hole with a plywood sheet or fill the hole with leaves or mulch until the tree can be planted after the holiday.

PRUNING

1. Deciduous trees and shrubs may be trimmed after the leaves fall and there is no danger of new growth. Needled evergreens may be lightly pruned of excess growth. Do any necessary heavy shearing of evergreens and severe or renewal pruning of all plants in late winter/early spring.
2. "Bleeders," trees that drip sap when pruned or damaged in early spring (maple, birch, dogwood, elm, sour gum), can be pruned in late fall/early winter after most leaves have fallen, or in May or June. Bleeding does not cause damage to trees, but the dripping sap may stain the trunk or items under the tree and will attract insects.
3. Summer-blooming shrubs are pruned in winter because they set their flower buds on new spring growth. Do not prune spring-blooming plants in fall or winter. This will remove the flower buds that developed the previous August or September. Spring-blooming plants should be pruned immediately after flowering.
4. Remove dead, diseased, damaged, or severely insect-infested stems and branches.

LAWN CARE

1. Continue to mow the lawn until growth stops, usually around Thanksgiving. This final mowing can be 2" to 2 ½" high. Do not remove the clippings unless the mower is also used to pick up fallen leaves.
2. Give the lawn its final fertilization in November or early December to eliminate the need for spring fertilizing until May. This also helps reduce the incidence of lawn diseases that are influenced by heavy early spring nitrogen applications. Many fall turf fertilizers contain a higher level of potassium, which is important for winter hardiness and disease resistance.

3. Apply lime when the ground is not frozen or snow covered if need is indicated by soil test.
4. Using a mulching blade on the mower, grind thin (up to 4") layers of leaves into the lawn. If the layer of leaves is thick, remove most of the leaves from the lawn and compost them. (They will decompose more quickly if put through a shredder or run over with a lawn mower first.) Oak leaves or other non-packing leaves can be used as mulch around roses and other shrubs.
5. "Frost" or "honeycomb" seed bare spots in February or March. As soil alternately freezes and thaws, the ground heaves allowing seed to settle into the ground. The seed will germinate when soil temperatures warm in spring.

VEGETABLE GARDENS

1. Clean debris from vegetable gardens to eliminate hiding places for over-wintering pests. Destroy or dispose of diseased or insect-infested plants, all tomato plant residues, and the seed heads on weeds. Chop up other residues and compost them.
2. Plant a cover crop, such as winter wheat or annual ryegrass, in the garden. Cover crops reduce soil erosion and add organic matter to the soil when plowed under in the spring.
3. Harvest cold-sensitive vegetables before frost. Store individual mature green tomatoes in the dark. They will redden. Can or freeze remaining vegetables.
4. Continue to harvest frost-tolerant crops until a hard freeze. Harvests can be extended into winter by covering crops with a thick mulch of hay or straw.
5. Collect and store seeds of non-hybrid and heirloom open-pollinated vegetables. Do not bother saving the seed of hybrid vegetables. Plants grown from those seed will probably not have the characteristics of the hybrid, but will instead revert to the characteristics of the parent plant.

FLOWER GARDENS

1. Plant spring flowering bulbs, such as tulips, daffodils, crocus, snowdrops, winter aconite, and grape hyacinths until the ground freezes. "Forgotten" bulbs can also be stored under refrigeration, and then planted during a mid-winter thaw, although this is not as desirable as mid-fall planting.
2. After the ground freezes, mulch bulbs, marginally hardy perennials, and strawberries with evergreen branches (especially from cut Christmas trees after Jan. 1), straw, hay or salt hay to prevent frost heaving and untimely new growth during a winter thaw.
3. Store tender bulbs (dahlia, canna, gladiolus, tigridia) in a ventilated plastic bag in a cool, above freezing place for winter. Harvest and store tender annual flower seeds for next year's planting.
4. Clean excessive debris and dead stalks from perennial beds. Leave some stems to serve as hiding places for insect-eating toads and over-wintering beneficial insects, support for over-wintering butterfly eggs and chrysalises, and to trap blowing snow and leaves as additional winter mulch.
5. Place tender plants in a cold frame or greenhouse for the winter. Pot up geraniums, wax begonias, lantana, rosemary, and other plants to grow indoors.
6. After the first hard freezes, mound soil or mulch around the bottom foot of rose bushes to prevent winter injury. Trim canes back to about 4 feet to reduce breakage by winter winds. The remaining pruning should be done in spring just as the leaf buds swell.
7. Collect and store seeds of non-hybrid and heirloom open-pollinated flowers. Do not bother saving the seed of hybrid varieties of annuals or perennials. Plants grown from those seed will probably not have the characteristics of the hybrid, but will instead revert to the characteristics of the parent plants.

GENERAL

1. Construct a compost bin or pile. Composting is an excellent way to recycle organic materials such as garden residues, kitchen scraps, grass clippings and leaves into compost, an excellent soil conditioner. Gardeners with limited outdoor space can start a worm bin to compost kitchen scraps indoors.
2. If a new garden bed is planned for spring, have a soil test run to determine pH and nutrient needs. Add organic matter (compost, peat moss, leaf mold) and rototill or spade the area in the fall. Add sand to clay soils. This makes spring planting easier. Slicing off grass and weeds and turning them upside down on the new bed or in the bottom of the hole followed by the remaining soil will allow the weeds or grass to decompose over winter.
3. Continue watering until the ground freezes if there is a dry spell. Broadleaved and coniferous (needled) evergreens continue to transpire in winter and need sufficient soil moisture to survive. Water evergreens in January or February if there is a thaw and here hasn't been any winter rain or snow.
4. Clean, oil, and repaint tools. Store indoors. Drain the gas tank of the lawn mower and other gas-powered equipment after the last use or run the mower until it runs out of gas. Drain and store garden hoses and watering equipment. Turn on older outdoor faucets, then turn off the water from the inside line to prevent pipes from freezing. (Many new hose bibs turn off inside the house, so water drains out and pipes are not in danger of freezing.
5. During mid-winter thaws weed out winter annuals such as chickweed and henbit. These plants had germinated in fall and are still small and easier to remove than they will be after their flush of growth in early spring.
6. Keep ice-melting salt products away from trees, shrubs, lawns, and flower beds. Use fertilizer to melt ice. Consider using sawdust, fresh kitty litter or coarse sand as a non-burning alternative to increase traction.
7. Provide food and water for birds. Keep a birdbath or other water source filled and thawed. Keep fresh seed in feeders. Clean out and rehang bird houses.
8. Attend adult school gardening classes, workshops, and seminars. Join a Master Gardener program. Read gardening books. Join a garden club.
9. Order catalogs. Plan for next year's garden.