

Gardening Challenges

By Heather Bryant, Extension Educator, Agricultural Resources

Like many people, I inherited a perennial flower bed when I moved a year ago. The great part was that the garden was full of colorful, well established plants, and they got to that stage without any research or labor on my part. The challenging part was that since I hadn't chosen them I didn't know what some of them were. So, in order to care for them, I had to first identify them. I asked a landscaper friend and I visited a website hosted by the University of Vermont (<http://www.uvm.edu/~pass/perry/>) which had a really helpful photo library. Once I identified the unfamiliar ones, it was an easy matter to look them up and find out what kind of care they need. I was very pleased to discover that whoever planted them did a beautiful job of choosing low maintenance, attractive plants. I thought I had all the bases covered.

Then we had unusually warm weather in November and December and I discovered that two of my plants, a daylily and a sedum, were starting to sprout. An early warm spell in the spring will often cause perennials to start to sprout too early, but it is much less common in the late fall/early winter.

It turned out, that too little mulch combined with lack of snow cover and sunny warm days conspired to fool my plants into thinking it was spring. Of course with the cold snap of the first week of 2012 the sprouts are almost certain to die back. Since my plants are already established they should be fine. Established perennials tend to have significant energy reserves stored in their roots, which will see them through. However, repeated cycles of sprouting and dying back can kill young or weakened plants.

Cathy Neal, UNH Cooperative Extension Ornamentals Specialist, suggests adding mulch now to prevent further sprouting and then removing it in the spring so any decomposing plant material from the sprouts will not have an opportunity to cause disease. She also said "Cutting the branches from your Christmas tree and using them to cover your perennial beds is a timely way to recycle your tree right now."

Challenges aside, the flowers were beautiful last year and well worth the time and effort to care for them. For more information on a variety of gardening topics please visit our publications page (http://extension.unh.edu/resources/category/Home_and_Garden) or to get specific questions answered call our toll free information line at 1-877-EXT-GROW.

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