

Putting the Lawn and Garden to Bed for the Winter

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It's hard to think about lawn care and gardening at this time of year, the trees have lost their leaves, lawns are growing slowly or not at all and flower beds have faded from the vibrant colors of growth to the dull browns of dormancy. However, there are a few things you can do to reduce the chances of diseases in the garden next year, enhance the soil and get a jump on a green lawn for next year.

Leaves: The trees have shed their foliage and lay in a thick blanket on the lawn. Despite the temptation to let them stay where they are it is best to remove the leaves. Leaves left in a thick layer on the lawn can smother the grasses. Thick bunches of leaves and extra long grass left from the previous summer can also increase the incidence of Snow Mold, which favors a dark moist environment and will manifest as dead patches in the lawn come spring. If you must leave them on the lawn, you should chop them into small pieces with the mower to decrease the matting capacity of the leaves and reduce the risk of smothering the grass.

Annual Flower/ Vegetable Gardens; All frosted annual plant material should be removed from the annual garden before winter snow sets in. Removal of old plant material reduces the chance of disease development and transmission in the next growing season. Annual flowers and garden vegetable materials can be added to the compost pile as long as there is no diseased plant material. Diseased plant material should not be added to the compost pile, instead remove this plant material from the garden and do not allow it to re-enter the garden system. Spent garden materials can also be tilled into the soil to add organic matter.

Perennial Flowers and grasses; Many perennials have berries, buds and structure that make them a beautiful and interesting part of the winter landscape. Birds and other wild life rely on them for food and shelter during the cold months, and the above ground structures can help to catch and retain snow as root insulation. Chopped leaves can be added to perennial gardens after the hardening off period is complete, usually between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Leaves make excellent mulch and can be used to increase soil organic matter and provide protection from the harsh winter temperatures. Chopping the leaves using a mower promotes more rapid decomposition of leaf material. Chopped leaf mulch at a depth of 5-6 inches should be put over perennials after the ground has frozen to ensure hardening off of the plants before the real cold hits.

Fall is an excellent time to add lime to the lawn and garden, as recommended by a soil test. It takes several months for lime to react with the soil to reduce soil pH. By adding lime in the fall it will have time to react with the soil and improve your plant's ability to extract necessary nutrients from the soil once the growing season begins. Time spent attending to these details this fall will improve the health and beauty of your lawn and garden next spring.