



Four Steps for Fall Cleanup in the Garden

by Dorothy Downing, UC Master Gardener

A few days ago, I was thinking that fall would never arrive. But sure enough, the days have shortened, the temperature has cooled, and fall is finally here. So that means, it's time for a Fall Cleanup!

A little effort now results in less garden work in the winter and early spring. Plus, your garden will look more attractive to you and be less attractive to insects, diseases, and weeds for several months. First, walk around your yard and assess how your garden grew over the year. Take note of what worked well and what didn't, then develop a list of improvements to make. Fix them in fall and by next spring, you will have forgotten these problem spots.

Here are my four steps to Fall Cleanup:

Step 1: Pull Out. Start your fall cleanup by pulling out tired annual flowers and summer vegetables. If the plants or areas were riddled with insects, diseased, or if there are a lot of weeds, then it is best to recycle this plant material in the green yard waste can. If you are an avid composter and monitor your piles to reach at least 140 degrees F (the temperature required to kill most weed seeds and pathogens), then you can compost this stuff yourself. After you've "pulled out" all the excess vegetation, lightly rake the areas under the base of plants prone to diseases or snails and slugs. The goal is to remove any debris that will provide a hiding place for disease pathogens and insects to overwinter.



Deadheading

Step 2: Cut back. With our long summer and late fall this year, many herbaceous perennials are still in their prime like salvias, chrysanthemums, and several herbs. In a few weeks, temperatures will drop and that's the time to cut these perennials down to their basal leaves to direct energy to the roots for next season. You create a stronger, more compact plant when its energy doesn't go to seed making. It may delay spring bloom by a few weeks, but the plant and the bloom will be bigger!

Especially attractive or wildlife-friendly plants can be left standing to provide winter interest and food for birds and butterflies. Let plants like roses set hips and Echinacea form seeds to feed the birds. Encouraging birds to stay in your garden means that they will be there in the spring to help battle aphids, bugs, and worms.

For some plants, like hardy geranium or coreopsis, it might seem like an overwhelming task to remove all the small flowers. In that case, use shears to cut off the blooms. For flowers with a leafless stem, like daylilies, cut the stems down to the base of the plant and remove the entire stem.



Pruned plumbago

Some plants don't need to be cut back now, such as Sedum 'Autumn Joy,' coral bells, hellebores and asters. Also, don't cut back ornamental grasses like pink muhly, purple fountain grass or fescues now. They look beautiful in the winter and will provide some structure and color contrast. Cut them back in the early spring when new growth begins. Remember, don't prune azaleas, camellias, forsythia, lilacs or other spring flowering shrubs and trees because they have already formed their flowers for next year.

Step 3: Weed. Weed, weed, weed and watch for snails and slugs. When it rains, you can bet that weeds will germinate and emerge. If you have areas that are particularly prone to weeds, now is the time to apply a pre-emergence herbicide to control winter weeds. Otherwise, a weekly walk around the yard with a weeding tool and pail will usually do the trick. Applying snail baits in the fall will really reduce the amount of snails and slugs in the spring. Choose baits wisely, as some are very poisonous to children and pets, while others are harmless to them.

Step 4: Mulch. The last step to fall cleanup is to add organic mulch to exposed soil. Over time, the mulch will decompose, add more nutrients to the soil, and help improve the soil texture. It will also protect your perennials from frost upheaval in those areas that are subject to ground freezing.



Weeding

Fall is the perfect time for a Garden Cleanup. Think about it. Do you want to go outside in winter, when it's really cold and foggy?

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