



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Fall Care for Perennials (October 24, 2020)

by Pam Wallace, UCCE Master Gardener

With the abundance of perennials now available, it's important to know how to care for them during the winter. Some perennials have evergreen foliage that lasts through the winter, but most have a period of complete dormancy, when the leaves and stems die back to a permanent rootstock.

Let's start by defining the difference between a perennial and an annual.

Annuals grow from seed to full maturity in one growing season. Most of the flowers we buy in nurseries in six-pack containers are annuals (or act as annuals in our area), such as pansies, snapdragons, poppies, vinca, stocks, and zinnias. Perennials are flowering plants that will live longer than two seasons.



WATER: As the days get shorter and colder, you'll notice that perennials begin to dry up and their leaves turn brown. This doesn't mean they are dying. They are just entering their dormant period. It's really important to continue to water them when this happens, so they don't enter winter in a dehydrated state. Their roots need the moisture to stay strong and healthy.

MULCH: A layer of mulch will help protect perennials during the winter, especially if you live in an area where frost-heaving of the soil occurs. Frost heave is a result of temperature fluctuations between freezing nights and warmer days. It causes perennials or bulbs to be thrust out of the soil.

PRUNING: Most gardeners don't recommend cutting back perennial plants in the fall but prefer to wait until late winter or early spring. As leaves die back in autumn, they provide some cover and protection to the plant's tender crown from the winter frost. Not only are leaves an insulating mulch, but they also are food for plants and improve soil as they decay.

At winter's end, you can finally cut any perennial stems left standing upright back to near ground level. Don't cut off the leaves of evergreen perennials unless they have been damaged by a harsh frost. If so, just prune them back to healthy foliage.

DIVIDE CLUMPS: Fall is a perfect time to divide clumps of perennials to keep them flowering well. Simply dig up the root system, shake off as much soil as possible, and remove dead leaves and stems. Perennials with fibrous roots, such as chrysanthemum and agapanthus, are easy to divide. You can pull them apart with your hands or cut them with a spade. Others, like daylilies and astilbe, grow woody with age and may require a shovel or ax to cut them apart. Slice the plant into halves, thirds, or quarters and discard the woody parts, since they won't reroot well. Work compost and other soil amendments back into the soil before replanting at the same ground level as the original plant. For perennials with multiple crowns, such as *Heuchera* (Coral Bells), separate the crowns, clean off any dead or dying leaves, cut the stem off 3-4 inches below the lowest leaves, and replant. Be sure to water often enough to keep the soil moist (not wet) until new roots develop.

COMMON PERENNIALS: Here's a short list of some common perennials and what to expect during their dormant period. If you're unsure if your plant is a perennial or an annual, consult a garden book.

Hostas, penstemon, yarrows and campanula leaves will turn brown and fall off. You might want to mark the spot where your plant is so you don't forget and accidentally disturb the roots.

Salvia leaves will fall off and the stems will turn brown and dead-looking. If you can stand it, leave it all until spring when the danger of frost is gone. Then cut the stems back to ground level or to where the new growth is starting to bud out. The common purple salvia often sold at nurseries in six-pack containers is a perennial and should return next spring.



Coreopsis, scabiosa, begonias, agapanthus, coral bells, candytuft, heliotrope, and society garlic should last through the winter without dieback, unless we have several nights of below freezing weather.

Peonies can be cut back to the ground, as can plumbago vines and echinacea. Buddleia can be cut back as much as two thirds. Clematis vines are a little trickier. Spring-blooming clematis bloom only on the previous year's wood and need to be cut back after flowering. Summer-blooming clematis bloom on new wood. Cut back in late fall or early spring as the buds start to swell.

If we have a mild winter, you may find that your perennials don't die back at all. In that case, in early spring, simply prune back to keep their growth under control. With the proper winter care, you will have a garden full of perennials that return year after year.

In accordance to the Shelter-at-Home guidelines, the Master Gardeners have cancelled all public events at this time, but if you send us an email or leave a message on our phone lines, someone will call you back!

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