

## Preparing Your Garden for Spring with a Winter Clean Up



Yikes! It is still winter and all the leaves are down with the latest frost; dead limbs and old mummy fruit/nuts are still in some trees - so I must get going and clean up now! Putting the garden to bed for the winter is mostly a matter of cleaning up and covering up. Clear out the blackened stems and foliage of annual flowers and vegetables to prevent the possibility of their harboring disease pathogens and insect eggs over winter.

We need to prepare now for a yard and garden that lives through the heat of summer and produces wonderful fruit, nuts and flowers. Smart garden preparation now will also require less watering during the hot summer months.

While it appears as if all activity in the garden has stopped, there is a lot of going on under the soil. Newly transplanted trees, shrubs, divisions of perennials, and hardy bulbs are all growing roots, drawing on soil nutrients and moisture around them. Earthworms and other microbes in the soil are still processing the organic matter they are finding. Most organic mulch you spread to protect the soil during the winter months has substantially decomposed, so it is important to spread new mulch now, a nice thick layer for winter to protect plants and soil over the winter cold. I am even converting the fallen leaves from my trees to mulch and use it throughout my flowerbeds and ground covers.

With our perennials - flowers that return every year in the garden - it is very important to cut back dry stems to soil level to clean up the dead wood and remove the pest eggs and disease spores that may have lingered on the plants. Also cut off diseased foliage from evergreen plants and shrubs as they may contain pest eggs and spores as well. By applying up to 6 inches of organic matter as winter mulch, it will prevent rodents, like gophers, moles and voles, from nesting in your garden! I want to beat those critters if I can this year with prevention easy like mulch!

Spreading mulch in your garden will also discourage weeds if you remove existing weeds from the garden first. Spread a 3-4 inch thick layer of mulch to block the sun from seeds that remain in the soil so they will not germinate. I also find that mulching makes weeding much easier to pull out those stubborn weeds.

I see spring vegetables and flowers to buy and would love to plant now... but first I need to really clean up the garden, lay some more mulch and let the ground warm up, and have the local frost season end before I jump into my spring planting. Clean up in your yard now for a colorful spring and summer color show, plus use less water!

Submitted by Bettye-Ann Stephens, UCCE Master Gardener of Glenn County