

FALL CLEANUP TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Late fall and cold temperatures mean that leaves are falling, gardens are finished, and plants are retreating for winter. For most of us some clean up will be necessary, so here are some tips to help you along in your winter preparations.

Leaves

Many trees drop their leaves at different times during the fall in response to the changing day length, available moisture and the break down of chlorophyll. Depending on the trees and situation, mowing and chopping leaves might be a good alternative for those who are tired of the hand rake. Leaves are nature's own ready-to-use organic material, so regardless we shouldn't let them go to waste.

Research shows that it is possible to work up to 6 inches of leaf litter into the lawn without causing harm. Frequent mowing is the best way to accomplish this. It isn't possible to mow 6 inches of leaves at one time, but mowing 1 or 2 inches of fallen leaves several times during the fall period will accomplish the task. The leaves need to be chopped finely enough to filter down to the soil surface.

It is also a good idea to apply the final fertilizer application of the year to cool season (fescue, bluegrass...) lawns in November with a high nitrogen fertilizer at a rate of 1 lb nitrogen per 1000 square feet. This is especially necessary if you chop leaves up into the turf. The fertilizer helps to breakdown and turn the leaves into compost, so that they'll filter into the lawn and turn into humus, which is beneficial to the lawn.

Gardens

It is important to clean up debris in vegetable gardens to eliminate diseases and insects that might overwinter. Weeds also need to be destroyed to reduce the unwanted competition for next years vegetables.

It is possible to compost old garden debris, but it is important to be vigilant with the compost pile to be assured of complete breakdown of any diseased plant material before adding it back into the garden soil. Many gardeners prefer to till in old garden debris and this is another alternative. It is important to chop the debris into smaller pieces to assure breakdown in the soil. Remember that this method can also lead to a greater possibility of diseases surviving into the following season. Why not also use some of the those wonderful ground up leaves as an organic amendment for the soil while tilling as well?

Landscapes

Many landscapes plants are headed for dormancy including ornamental grasses, shrubs, and other perennial plants. There is no reason to rush to clean up, cut down, or remove old debris from these plants unless they were damaged, diseased, or you like things kept neat and tidy.

Most landscape plants have some sort of winter interest, and besides, isn't it more desirable to see an ornamental grass waving in the winter breeze versus looking at a cut down clump? Leaving foliage on plants in the landscape may actually have it's benefits anyway. Foliage captures snow and snow acts as an insulator for the plant during cold and windy seasons. Old leaves are also able to insulate during the winter as well and it is fine to leave some leaf cover around the plants as an insulating blanket as well. Just make sure the leaves aren't so deep that they suffocate small plants.

And as always, don't forget about wildlife. Ornamental grasses and shrubs provide great cover for birds. The old debris will even be used as part of their nests in the spring. Many perennial plants provide food and cover for the outdoor critters during the time of year when food and shelter is very difficult to find.