

Spring Will Be Back Around Before You Know It!

by Maureen Day

Probably you are already shivering thinking about the Wisconsin winter staring us in the face. However, winter preparation for your beds and plants now will make it so much easier for you in the spring and will benefit your plants tremendously. It might even warm you up!

Annuals:

Pull and toss all annuals as soon as they begin looking bad and certainly after the first frost or freeze. Some annuals will reseed themselves if they have been in a protected spot in your garden (Snapdragons, Hirta Rudbeckia, etc.) so, don't pull them before they have had that chance.

Many annuals can be dug up and potted to bring inside as houseplants. Begonias, cuttings of Impatiens to root in water and various foliage plants are good examples. Don't be afraid to trim these plants back. Be certain to do a good job of clean up on your plants. Give them a good wash so they don't bring any pests inside with them. Use clean soil for the potting. Give them all a heavy watering after they are potted. Pull them in and keep them in an area where they will get good light. Remember, unless the plant was a shade plant, they will need light to bloom.

Non-Hardy Bulbs

Some perennial plants will absolutely not withstand our winters. They need to be dug up and store inside and replanted in the spring. Dig them up after the leaves have yellowed, died back or have been killed by frost. Use a spading fork and be gentle so as not to injure the bulbs in the process. Be sure to label as you dig!

Cut leaves off and wipe away soil. Treat the bulbs with a fungicide. You can use an insecticide on the Glads as well. Allow these bulbs to dry for a week or so and then cover them with sand, vermiculite or peat moss. Glads do not need to be covered. Bulbs should be stored at a temperature of about 40 degrees. Place them in a well-ventilated room.

Perennials:

Leafy perennials can be cut back to the ground as soon as they go dormant. There are a few exceptions. Any plants that create winter interest (grasses, etc.) or that the birds will feed on throughout the winter (such as coneflower [Echinacea]) do not need to be cut back. The finches feed on my coneflower most of the winter and it's a great sight on those dismal cold days!

Another exception would be newly planted perennials. Don't cut them back until spring as the foliage will help protect them over their first winter. Mulch these to help alleviate the heaving soil that will occur with the freezing/thawing cycles. This is a good way to recycle your Christmas Tree – use the boughs and put them out after we've had several hard frosts (otherwise, rabbits and rodents will find lovely winter homes).

Woody perennials (Butterfly bush, Russian Sage, etc.) don't need any attention until next spring. If these have shown any sign of disease, remove at least those parts and destroy them.

Roses:

Sometime between Halloween and Thanksgiving is the time to take care of your roses. We do not advocate using "rose cones" because it created a mini-environment underneath and on a sunny winter day, the rose believes spring has sprung and begins to break dormancy. If you absolutely must use them, please weigh it down with a brick or stone and poke holes in it for ventilation. Other methods of protection would be to use upside down pots over the rose; mound dirt up around the bottom of the plant; or, make a circle of chicken wire around the plant and fill with leaves. Hybrid Tea Roses must be protected. It is recommended to protect shrub roses the first year but after that, they shouldn't need any winter covering.

Bed Cleanup and Preparation:

Remove as much debris from your beds as possible because they can harbor pests and disease to say nothing of the cute homes they may create for animals (Can you tell I have a rabbit problem?). If the material is disease free, it can be composted and added back next year to enrich your soil and plants. As you have been doing all summer, please be sure to rake the bark mulch around so that air circulation is good. This will help diminish fungal problems.

Overgrown Perennials:

It's easy to tell when to divide these flowers and this is one of the best times to do it. If they haven't bloomed or they flop over or have had a hole in the center (Asters, Sedums, etc.), it's probably time to divide them. Your Iris needs to be divided by the end of September! You will still be able to transplant some perennials in the spring but fall is also a terrific time to take advantage of sales at the local garden centers.

Bulbs:

Don't forget about planting your spring blooming bulbs now! I rarely use bone meal as it can attract rodents but there is a bulb fertilizer available that you simply sprinkle on at planting time. You will be enormously pleased in the spring when these lovely flowers are blooming.

As you are out in the gardens doing all of this work, take some time to look everything over. Were there bare spots? Are there areas that you could prepare for new beds? Are you ready for something new? Write down these areas and spend some time over the winter planning what to do with them.

Now you can relax and enjoy the holiday season. Get your Christmas shopping done and cards addressed. Sit down with a hot cup of tea and a few gardening books - think about spring!