

Prepare Your Garden and Flower Beds for Winter: Essential Fall Tips for a Thriving Spring



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With winter just around the corner, now is the time to get your garden and flower beds ready for the cold months ahead. Fall is crucial for making adjustments that will ease your workload in the spring and improve overall soil and plant health. This fall checklist provides six important considerations to ensure the garden and flower beds stay healthy and come back strong in the spring. Although the task may seem daunting, a well-organized approach can make it manageable



1. Clean Up Debris

As the growing season winds down, debris and seasonal dieback accumulate in your garden and flower beds. Cleaning up this debris is crucial for maintaining garden health. Removing diseased plants, weeds, branches, and other spent plant material helps prevent pests and diseases from overwintering in your garden and flower beds, potentially causing problems in the spring. Regular cleanup ensures a healthier environment for your plants. While these debris can be used for composting, moving them to a different location is important to ensure disease or pests do not begin growing and contaminate your garden and flower beds.

2. Mulch Your Garden and Flower Beds

After removing unwanted organic material, mulching offers multiple benefits for soil and plant health. Applying two to four inches of mulch such as straw, dried leaves, or wood chips increases water retention will increase and insulates plant roots. This layer helps retain moisture, reduces weed competition, and prevents excess moisture accumulation. Although plants' metabolic activity decreases during the winter, they still require water and should not be allowed to dry out. Mulches insulating properties can help the plants acclimate gradually and transition into winter dormancy more effectively, reducing stress. Applying mulch one to three inches away from the stems to decrease chances of rot and fungal issues.



Compost is also an excellent choice for mulching. It provides essential macro and micronutrients with greater nutrient density than other mulches. Additionally, compost has the added benefit of increasing organic matter content, water retention, and nutrient holding capacity in the soil. Using compost either as mulch or integrating it in the soil can decrease the fertilizer requirement for the upcoming season while also enhancing soil health.

3. Divide Perennials

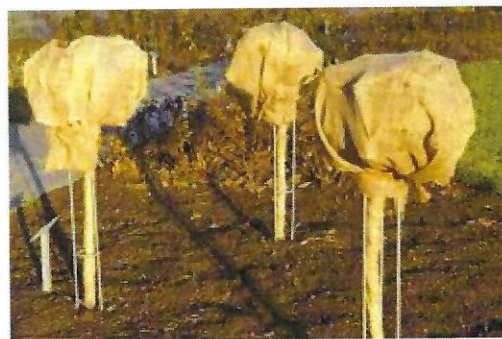
Hardy perennials like irises and hostas that return season after season tend to become overcrowded. To encourage better blooms and growth in the spring, division and transplantation provides space for the hardy perennials to grow and develop stronger root systems that will produce healthier plants. To divide the plants, use a shovel or trowel to separate the leaves and stems down to the base of the plant, either in the center or third of the plant (depending on size). Then, use the shovel to do a circular cut around the part being moved to a different location. Water the plants immediately after cutting to reduce stress on the roots.



4. Protect Your Plants

The fall and winter can be a harsh environment for tender shrubs and plants. To extend the growing season in the garden and protect plants from early cold snaps, row covers, frost blankets, and cold frames can be used to shield plants from cold stress. Monitor night temperatures closely and provide protection when temperatures drop to around 40 degrees Fahrenheit. Potted plants should be moved to a protected location or put in an enclosed area that will not freeze and can receive light.

Certain tender bushes and shrubs may need protection from the harsh winter conditions. Applying covers can help shield them from temperature fluctuations. Some examples of not fully hardy shrubs are Hydrangeas, Rose of Sharon, Butterfly Bushes, and Boxwoods. Not all varieties of these types of shrubs will need protection although some level of protection may be beneficial depending on the location and exposure to winter elements. Since these bushes and shrubs can be several feet tall wrapping the base with burlap and/or surround the base with mulch can help insulate and protect them from rapid temperature changes and frost heaving. Be sure to keep the mulch one to three inches away from the stems to prevent moisture from accumulating and causing rot or fungal concerns. A good rule of thumb is if you are worried about the plant surviving, early protection is a promising idea.



5. Plant Spring Bulbs

The saying goes, "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago; the second-best time is now." This applies to spring bulbs, too. Examples of spring bulbs are tulips, daffodils, garlic, and shallots. Spring bulbs must go through vernalization (required cold period) to initiate flowering and proper growth. Plan in the fall to plant spring bulbs and of course mulch. Watering should be done until the ground freezes. It is important to ensure the soil does not become waterlogged or completely dries out. As winter approaches the soil should take longer to dry in between waterings and once the ground freezes watering should stop. Once the ground has frozen applying a thin layer of mulch (0.5 to 1 inch) (if not already present) can help the bulbs remain frozen and decrease the chances of a freeze-thaw cycle that can damage the bulbs.



6. Pruning

After the leaves fall in autumn, planning to prune dead and diseased branches will help shrubs prepare for growth in the upcoming season. It is important to identify the shrubs or bushes to determine the most opportune time to prune because some shrubs will produce new blooms on old wood (previous seasons growth) or new blooms on new wood (seasonal growth).

A general rule of thumb to consider is when the shrubs bloom. Shrubs that bloom in the spring typically flower on old wood, as they have not had considerable time to produce new growth in the spring. These spring-blooming shrubs should be pruned after flowering to stimulate growth for the next season. In contrast, shrubs that bloom from summer to fall usually bloom on new wood and should be pruned once the plant has finished blooming to encourage new growth for maximize blooms for the following season. Additionally, light pruning during the dormancy period can be done to shape and reduces the stress on the plants allowing for more time to regroup for the next growing season.



Conclusion

By following this fall checklist, you can enhance the garden and flower beds overall health and encourage them to thrive in the spring. Cleaning up debris helps prevent pests and diseases; while mulching and composting enrich the soil and insulate plant roots. Dividing perennials allows for stronger growth and better blooms, and protecting tender shrubs shields them from harsh winter conditions. Proper planting of spring bulbs ensures a colorful start to the new season, and pruning enhances the health and bloom potential of your shrubs. With these steps, you will not only safeguard your garden through the winter but also set it up for a successful and flourishing spring.

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