

Putting the Garden to Bed

Five ways to help your plants survive the winter

Cool, crisp autumn days mean it's time to get out into the garden and tuck your plants in for the winter. Fluctuating temperatures, drying winds and snowfalls that come and go wreak havoc with perennials and shrubs. Now is the time to take steps to help your plants survive the winter. Here's how:

1 Discard diseased debris

Guard against the spread of disease next year by discarding the leaves and stems of plants that showed signs of fungal diseases or insect damage during the growing season. Make sure you destroy these or put them out to the garbage; never add them to the compost.

2 Let stems and grasses stand tall

Fight your tidy instincts. The stems of perennials like black-eyed Susan, purple coneflower, sedums and grasses add winter interest to the garden, their seeds providing food to wintering birds. Most importantly, the stems trap snow, helping to insulate plant roots over the winter. If you must clean up, remove the leaves of hostas, daylilies and Siberian irises -- these tend to turn into a soggy, scraggly mess by spring.

3 Topdress with compost

Keep your plants healthy by adding a layer of compost to the surface of garden beds. Compost acts like a multi-vitamin for plants, providing nutrients that are released slowly at a rate that plants are able to absorb. If you don't make your own compost, contact your municipality; many cities and communities offer free compost to residents.

4 Mulch garden beds

Thank your neighbours for raking and bagging fallen leaves -- they're recycling the best protection for your garden beds. A mulch of shredded leaves insulates the roots of perennials, protecting them against the freeze and thaw cycles that cause spring heaving -- that's when plants are pushed out of the ground, their roots exposed. Collect the smaller leaves of trees like linden, mountain ash, birch and crab apple. These make the best mulch, allowing water to pass through to the soil surface instead of matting and forming a barrier the way the leaves of Norway and Manitoba maples do. Once the ground has frozen, cover perennial garden beds generously, applying the leaf mulch to a depth of about 10 to 12 centimeters (four to five inches).

5 Water shrubs and trees

One of the best ways to protect your shrubs and trees over the winter is to water them. Timing is important: water shrubs and trees after their leaves drop but before the ground freezes. Water thoroughly and deeply, giving the roots a good drink to help them combat drying winds and sunscald caused on warm, early spring days. In addition to a long drink of water, rhododendrons and other broad-leaved evergreens benefit from an anti-desiccant spray applied when temperatures are cold but not freezing -- around 4 degrees C. The spray coats the leaves, locking in moisture throughout the winter.

Satisfied that you've done your best to help your plants survive the winter, relax by a

cozy fire with your gardening journal, making notes for next season.