Winterizing Your Garden

Source: Joshua Hartelt and Britt Buxcel, McLeod County Extension Master Gardeners

It is a bitter sweet time of year heading into fall, but nevertheless there's gardening work to do! Whether you're an avid flower gardener, vegetable producer, or a native landscape restorer, there's always something to do.

As we look forward into the tail end of our growing season there's a few things to consider. What needs to be trimmed or cut back? Does my garden need mulch or cover? What nutrients can I add now for a strong, spring start next season? Let's get into it.

First, many shrubs, perennial plants and flowers need to be trimmed to promote healthy growth for next season. Be sure to consider researching your own specific garden plants to see if they have specific fall pruning needs. It is also important to promote habitat for native insects that rely on stems to overwinter in. So, sometimes it's okay to leave a little extra stem above ground for our pollinators to survive the harshest winter temperatures.

Next we need to think about "tucking in" our plants; be it with mulch, leaves, or an actual cover like burlap or cloth. Certain shrubs and bushes greatly benefit from being protected from cold winter temperatures (and wind) with burlap cloth to prevent those tender branch tips from freezing. Other plants require a nice thick layer of mulch or leaf litter to help insulated their roots and protect the microbiome living within the soil around their base.

While removing excess leaves helps prevent smothering grasses, a layer 4-6" thick over garden beds can be a major benefit to your soil health, and the health of insects! Just be sure not to gather leaves too thick near the foundation of your house, as pests might see it as an invitation to move in.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly for a head start on next spring, add nutrients to your soil in the fall. Compost is an excellent addition any time of year but it is

especially so in the fall. Adding a layer of compost 1-2" thick around the base of plants will add back expended nutrients from the past growing season, as well as add soil texture and composition that will jump start the spring season. During winter, microbiomes go dormant and heavy snow pack can really compact soil making it dense. Adding compost can help alleviate this problem by acting as a cushion. Then, as moisture moves in late fall and early spring, it will transport nutrients and provide soil texture to benefit your plants roots.

This fall is a perfect time to tackle these simple, yet necessary garden chores that will set you up for success next spring. Remember to research which plants of yours need trimming or pruning, cover your beds with some excess leaves or mulch, and be sure to add compost so your gardens have the energy they need early to grow their best next spring.

If you have further questions about garden clean up or the McLeod County Extension Master Gardener program, please contact horticulture Extension educator Emily Lindenfelser at hans6005@umn.edu



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