Get garden beds into tiptop shape for winter

Snow and colder temperatures are on the horizon, but our flower and vegetable gardens may still need some attention. Investing time in fall cleanup activities can help improve the health of annual and perennial garden beds next year. Depending on your plants and goals for next year, consider the following questions:

- Are there plants that need protection to survive winter?
- Is there old foliage that should be removed to reduce potential disease spread?
- Are there plants that are better left intact?
- Are there weed or unwanted seeds lurking in plant materials that should be removed?
- Do the beds need a compost or other amendment boost?
- Is it time to plant some seed or divide plants?
- Have you taken care of your garden equipment?

Providing extra protection

Sensitive plants that can be easily damaged by cold temperatures and blowing snow or ice will need protected before winter. For example, strawberries greatly benefit from an insulating blanket of straw or other materials. Using several inches of straw to cover the crowns of strawberry plants can help reduce physical damage and protect the plants from cold.

To cut back or not to cut back, that is the question

In extension, we are often asked whether cutting back various perennial plants before winter or waiting until spring is best. The answer varies. Taller perennial plants left uncut can help collect snow and protect other sensitive plants next to them. Taller perennials include ornamental varieties of fescue and wheatgrass, or flowers such as brown-eyed Susans, delphiniums, or echinacea, to name a few. These taller perennials should be trimmed during late winter or early spring to help tidy them up.

Some perennial species do not hold up to wind and blowing snow.

Removing annual weeds before they set seeds is important.
and can create a mess when their
dead leaves, stalks, or flowers get
scattered across the yard and/or
mashed down by snow. These types
of plants are best cut in the fall to
help minimize the effort to clean up
the yard and trim back dead foliage
in the spring. Plants with known
disease issues can also be trimmed
to control disease spread.

Many of these considerations
are also true for annual vegetables.
For many vegetable beds, physically
removing dead plant material can
help reduce the potential spread of
diseases in future garden seasons
and remove material that may
contain unwanted seeds.

Volunteer seedlings from last
year’s crop (such as cilantro, dill, or
fast growing brassicas) in vegetable
gardens can be welcome – or a big
pain – to manage next season.

However, there are benefits to
leaving dead plants in the beds and
covering the soil with mulch (see
article page 7).

Controlling the weeds

Weedy annual plants still left in
vegetable or ornamental beds should
be pulled or removed before they
have time to shed their seeds. Seeds
left from weeds make more work
for following years. Many tougher
perennial weeds in ornamental beds
can be effectively controlled in the
fall with herbicides. Perennial weeds
take nutrients from their leaves to
their roots as they become dormant
for the year. Some herbicides will
move within the plant as this process
occurs and kill the entire plant,
including the root.

What about pruning?

Pruning helps control tree and
shrub diseases and to keep these
plants growing vigorously. Pruning
should occur as one of the last fall
(or more often, late winter) cleanup
activities. Pruning trees and shrubs
after the leaves have dropped and
the plants are dormant greatly
reduces the amount of stress these
plants undergo.

Fruit producing trees and shrubs
are some of the most common trees
and shrubs that benefit from periodic
pruning. Pruning helps stimulate fruit
production. More information about
successfully pruning shrubs and
trees is at Barnyards and Backyards
(www.uwyo.edu/barnbackyard/).

Remember to water evergreens
during the fall and winter when
the ground is thawed to help them
combat damage caused by dry
winter winds.

Adding a bit back

Adding amendments to the
beds is often recommended. Adding
compost in the fall can provide a
helpful dose of nutrients to next
year’s crops and ornamentals.
Compost can be placed on top of the
soil surface or incorporated into the
soil (depending on the type of bed).

If compost is not available, a
50-percent grass and 50-percent
dead leaf mixture placed on top will
benefit most beds. The mixture will
not completely decompose during
winter but will help protect the soil
surface, provide food for beneficial
soil organisms, and will provide
a small amount of extra organic
matter to the soil. One to three
inches of compost is the minimum
recommended amount.

Other types of mulches can also
be added. Mulches made of wood or
bark can be used around ornamental
plantings (or these mulches can be
“topped up” in spring if winter winds
have blown them away). Fertilizer can
also be added at this time. Please
refer to bit.ly/landscape-fertilizer
Time to plant or propagate?
Planting new plants or seeds should not be ruled out during fall cleanup. Many flower species that sprout from bulbs or corms (such as tulips, crocus, and snow iris), perennial grasses and flowers, and certain types of fruits and vegetables can all be planted in the fall. Fruit and vegetable species include garlic, rhubarb, apple trees, pear trees, and currant shrubs.

Early fall is also a good time to divide many perennial plants. Early fall provides time for the newly divided plants to develop new root growth. This can be especially helpful in areas with hot spring/summers. Try dividing plants in the fall if you live in such an area and haven’t had great success. This will give plants time to recover before the stress of hot weather hits next year. Fall cleanup for most of Wyoming will occur from late September through early November depending on the local climate.

Maintain equipment to make it last
Finally, removing and storing hoses and irrigation equipment away from the weather and UV rays is a good idea. Water should be drained from hoses and fittings to avoid freeze damage if the lines or hoses cannot be removed for storage. Properly store pesticides as well (among other issues, some of them lose effectiveness with freezing).

And consider winterizing any equipment powered by an engine.

Fall is a time for winding down our outside chores, but a little extra effort now will help set the scene for a great growing season next year. For more information on fall cleanup in your area, please contact your local UW Extension office.

Brian Sebade has left a trail of garden activity through various editions of this magazine. He’s eaten weeds and suggested growing practices for various vegetables, among other activities. He is a University of Wyoming Extension educator based in Albany County and serving southeast Wyoming. He can be reached at (307) 721-2571 or at bsebade@uwyo.edu.