



# 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.*



photo: Austrosol Shutterstock



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/](http://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](http://bit.ly/landscape-fertilizer)

for more information on fertilizer recommendations for landscape plants.

### 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.

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**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](mailto:bsebade@uwyo.edu).

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