

Things to know as you put your summer garden to bed

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BY AMY STONE / SPECIAL TO THE BLADE

As day length shortens, some may reminisce about summertime as it slips away, while others may anticipate the winter days to come. Either way what are some tasks at hand in the garden? Some can be accomplished now and into the fall, while others could and even should wait until next year.

Wonder no longer. Here are some garden activities that can be done in anticipation of the upcoming season. Yes – the season hasn't even ended, and gardeners get excited about the next one to come.

Still time to plant

Now is a great time for fall planting. Many trees, shrubs and perennials can be planted in the fall as air temperatures cool, but soil temperatures are still warm. The earlier these types of plants are put in the ground, the more time they have to begin to establish. One problem that can occur if the roots don't begin to establish and knit themselves into the existing soil is that with the freezing and thawing of the soil in the months ahead, the root ball can pop-out of the soil, becoming exposed to the cold temperatures, drying out, and die.

Continue to monitor plants throughout the fall, winter and into the spring to make sure this doesn't occur. New plants should be watered up until the ground freezes. A 2 to 3-inch layer of mulch can moderate soil temperatures and moisture levels and keep mowers and weed whips away from the trunk and base of the plants. Mulch should never be placed directly in contact against the trunk, but rather create a donut-like appearance. Never pile mulch against the tree in a practice commonly referred to as volcano mulching. It is a common, but unfortunately an incorrect practice to see in the landscape. Please help stop what I refer to as the Miss Mulching of America.

Soil Test

I often talk about soil testing. If you have thought about it, but haven't done it yet, fall is a great time to collect samples from your lawn, garden or landscape and submit the soil to the lab. You will have your results, and any fertilizer recommendations specific for the site in a matter of weeks and not have to wait until the spring to make any necessary changes in pH or nutrient levels. Don't guess – soil test.

Add Organic Matter

A simple layer of compost can be added to the garden and landscape area to improve soil conditions. There is no need to work it into the soil profile; instead let the worms and other living organisms in the soil do the work for you. This is a simple task that can pay-off big.

Cover Crops

In vegetable gardens, you may want to plant a cover crop. Cover crops planted in the fall will protect the soil from erosion as a result of wind, and ultimately enhance the organic matter in the soil with its roots and residue next year that can be either chopped up and left on the soil surface, or incorporated into the soil. There are a variety of options for gardeners out on the market. If you want to learn more, Ohio State University Extension, or your local Soil and Water Conservation District, can be an excellent resource.

Know Your Pests

If you have had some pest issues in the garden, whether it be unwanted weeds, troublesome diseases or pesky insects, be sure to correctly identify the pest, know how serious the pest is, and understand its lifecycle. While some pests may appear troublesome in the garden, they may or may not impact the overall health of the plant – and that is what is important. Understanding how these pests overwinter can be very helpful in the future management of that particular plant, disease and/or insect. If you have something that has been troubling you or your plants, the first step is identification and local experts in garden centers and nurseries could help you solve the mystery. Extension is also available to help.

To Prune or not

This is a common question that gardeners ask. While there can be confusion and questions, I have found the best “general” answer is if you have a flowering tree or shrub that you don’t want to negatively impact future flowers – prune immediately after flowering. Pruning spring flowering plants now will eliminate next year’s bloom. While it doesn’t hurt the plant to remove those buds, if the goal is to have flowers, wait and prune after flowering. If you are not sure if the plant blooms on new or old wood, do your research before reaching for the pruners.

If you have oaks in your landscape that need some pruning, dormant pruning is highly recommended. We live in an area where oak wilt is present and pruning during the growing season can expose those trees to insects that are attracted to wounds that could have the fungus that causes oak wilt on them. It is better to be safe than sorry.

Don’t go crazy cleaning up

While you may have time in the fall to do some garden clean up, don’t go crazy. Some of the stems from our perennials and spent annuals can be home to some beneficial insects overwintering that we want to encourage and have them make our gardens their home. It is those wanted insects that can help naturally manage other insects that are considered pests. It is great to get out in the garden and just observe. You will learn so much about the insect and plant interactions and begin understanding what to leave and what you can remove.

With that said, as mentioned above, understanding lifecycles can be a useful tool. For example, if you have viburnum leaf beetle, simply removing the tips of the branches where the female laid eggs, you have eliminated some of next season’s pest pressure.

Garden Design

And finally, now is a great time to look around. What worked? What didn’t work? Where can you expand garden areas, or if you are downsizing, what needs to go? Take photos this season to refer to over the winter as that is a perfect time to plan your garden and landscape. It is also a great resource to have if you are bringing in an expert to assist with the design process. There

are professionals that are knowledgeable and can help make your gardens and landscapes shine. They have extensive training and experience and should receive compensation for that expertise.

So, farewell to this growing season and I look forward to sharing more next spring. As always, you can reach out to me. I love to hear from readers about their experiences, successes and the occasional, what is this?

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