

September 18, 2016  
Goodbye summer, hello autumn

*“Life starts all over again when it gets crisp in the fall.” - F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby.*

Autumn is a bouquet of wood smoke, decaying vegetation, corn stalks, and freshly dug potatoes. Autumn has its own palette of muted light; yellow birches, brown oaks and red maples. A green growing season is ending and a white winter is coming.

Numerous songs are filled with brooding passages about Autumn. Maybe because human life is often compared to the four seasons and we “mature” people are reminded we’re in the autumn of our life. A crisp autumn reminds us of approaching winter chills.

So it is with gardens. At this time of the year, however, gardening should not be a passing but an anticipation of renewed spring growth. This has been a growing season of excess rain and wind. A challenge for gardeners. But not to worry. The Reverend Ellacombe, who lived in England in the early 1800’s, said, “A master gardener will observe and adapt.”

Plants are still storing carbohydrates, unless leaves have turned brown. The soils have had excess moisture but if Mother Nature does turn off the spigot, continue watering newly planted trees, bushes and still growing perennial flowers early in the morning or later in the evening until the first killing frost. Cut off seed structures of perennial plants as the plant is devoting energy into producing seed. Instead, a plant’s energy at this time of the year should go into developing roots and crowns.

Established green and growing lawns can be fertilized under cool autumn conditions. However, fertilizer applied to dormant grass will do more harm than good. Do not apply crab grass herbicide in the autumn but in the spring because crab grass is an annual whose seeds germinate in the spring

Do not fertilize trees planted late in the summer or early autumn even if they appear stressed. Application of fertilizer to newly planted trees causes damage to developing roots. The best remedy for young struggling trees is to frequently water if soils become dry. Apply fertilizer only after roots are well established, usually after a couple years growth.

Perennial flowers that have turned brown should be cut back now. Spring clean up activity often injures plants as gardeners unwittingly tromp on regrowth. Waiting until spring also hinders regrowth as new shoots attempt to poke through matted residue from last year. Another example are peonies. These should be cut back now to allow new stems to grow unhindered past the old stems. Daylilies are an exception as they tend to form a soft mat after they have died back that can be easily raked off in the spring.

Many gardeners like to leave tall, upright plants such as ligularia and turtle head to add winter interest and catch snow. However, these plants tend to break over from weight of the snow. In the spring there remains a hard stubble that is difficult to remove and painful to work in. Other plants, like lysmachia, also tend to “flop” over in the winter like trees blown down in a wind storm and become an unsightly and unruly mess. Another reason to remove dead plants in the autumn is to diminish disease inoculum. An example of this is bee balm (monarda), which frequently becomes diseased with powdery mildew. Removing the diseased plants will reduce the amount of fungus propagules that infect plants the next growing season.

Composting or mulching should be done at this time of the year. If compost is added next spring, new plant growth may be harmed as it struggles to grow through the mulch layer. Mulch is a blanket that protects the plant crowns and roots from extreme fluctuations in temperatures. One of the best mulches is a good snow cover; however, even in northern Minnesota we can have “open” winters where little or no snow falls. Mulch should consist of plant material that does not compact and retains a certain degree of “fluffiness” throughout the winter. Chopped leaves are excellent for this as are certain types of hay or swamp grass. Grass clippings are not suited for mulch because they

tend to form a hard compact mat. The proper depth of the mulch is variable but should be about one foot over the plant.

Mulch benefits plants that may be borderline winter hardy. As an example, bee balm (monarda) is listed as a Zone 3 in some references but as a Zone 4 in others. This plant tends to be border line winter hardy in this area. Additionally, even Zone 3 plants planted later in the growing season or that had minimal growth during the summer should be covered. Plants like clematis, that normally die back each winter, will benefit from mulch piled high on the vine as new growth will tend to emerge higher up on the plant the following spring and be more vigorous.

Mulch should be carefully removed the following spring after frost has disappeared from the mulch material. Taking mulch off too soon in the spring will result in plant injury. Leaving mulch on too late will cause underlying new growth to be chlorotic and spindly.

Most plants can be fertilized in the autumn with a 10-10-10 or similar fertilizer. Although there is obviously no active growth, the roots and crowns are still alive and will benefit from fall fertilization. Fertilizing at this time of the year is also a time saver in the spring. Fertilizer placed placed directly on the new plant growth in the spring may cause injury. And with all the other spring gardening activity, a gardener may forget to fertilize

Enjoy the last days of autumn, give your perennial flower gardens a head start for next spring and think about which vegetables grew the best in certain locations. To help you plan and get ideas for next growing season, look at the Bloomer's Garden Center and Landscaping website or stop to visit with one of the knowledgeable personnel.

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