

September 17th, 2017 Garden Column

Make your bed
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A few weeks ago I read a speech given by a four star Navy admiral to a graduating college class. This man was a Navy Seal with a distinguished military career. His first words to the class were, "When you get up in the morning, make your bed. Then you will have accomplished an important task for the day." The more I thought about it the more impressive his words were.

Being a gardener, I made a segue to garden beds. Putting the garden to bed simply means getting rid of the plant messes, cleaning up what's left in the garden, packing away the things you won't need until spring and making sure everything is ready to go when you need it next spring. Then you can settle in for winter knowing that when you look out the window, your garden will look contentedly tucked in.

Basically, this entails cutting back spent perennial flowers, cleaning up plant residue and debris, planting bushes or trees, protecting perennial plants, and prepping soils for spring.

Don't try to do everything at once. If you've had a bad pest or disease problem, focus on correcting that issue. If you've been meaning to do something about your soil, take advantage of this calm season to get it done. And if you have a lot of tender new plants, make sure they're protected.

Most perennials can be cut back in the fall. Wait until a frost has caused the plants to dieback. You don't want to encourage new growth that will later be susceptible to the inevitable freezing temperatures following a warm autumn and that may kill the plant.

Dispose of plants that were diseased or had a pest problem by either burning or discarding them in the garbage. Do not compost this kind of residue. Compost plants only if they're relatively disease and insect free. And while you're removing perennial residue, discard the dead or declining annual plants. They're likely looking very unsightly and will be a source of secondary fungi that may overwinter and cause harm to other plants next year.

Don't prune woody plants, trees and shrubs until they're dormant. Leave some plants for the birds and for overwintering beneficial insects.

Harvest everything above ground in the vegetable garden and under fruit trees. Don't leave fruits, especially apples, and vegetables out all winter to rot, attract animals, and set seed.

Clean up overgrown areas, to prevent animals from moving in and prevent the growth of weedy trees and shrubs. A brush pile attracts rabbits and mice that may damage woody plants.

Empty all your outdoor containers to keep them from cracking during the winter and store them upside down. You can store the soil elsewhere if you plan to reuse it. An easy way to disinfect containers is first scrape out any adhering soil then wash them with a bleach solution. Clean and sharpen tools that are used to till soil or to trim plants. Remove all caked-on soil, sharpen edges with a file and give them a protective finish with a light coating of oil.

Clean and store stakes, cages and garden ornaments. They'll last longer if you don't leave them exposed for the winter. Hang a bucket over a hook in your toolshed or garage and use it to store hose nozzles and sprinkler attachments. On a mild day, run your garden hose up over a railing or over the shed to remove all the water then roll it up and put it away.

If some plants are still looking good, especially herbs, pot some up to bring indoors. Fall is a great time for planting trees and shrubs because they can put all their energy into their roots, but be sure to water them until freeze up. And it's not just trees and shrubs that need water but also all your perennial plants, especially during a dry fall. These plants may be going dormant, but they're not dead.

Shield or put fencing around shrubs and trees that larger animals, especially deer and rabbits, might eat. However, mice, and voles squeeze through fencing so a tree wrap is a better deterrent for smaller critters.

Make sure all tender bulbs are stored for the winter. Most bulbs should be exposed to a frost, before you dig and dry them.

Tag plants you want to divide in the spring. If your memory is like mine, you won't remember which ones you were going to divide when spring comes. Label plants while they're still in bloom, so you know what colors are where.

Test and amend your soil, at least for pH. Bloomers carries inexpensive pH kits. Amendments can be slow acting and adding them now will make them available in the spring. Prepare planting beds for planting in early spring now by adding compost and manure to the soil. The freezing and thawing will work the amendments into the soil. Till soil to expose insects that have burrowed into the soil for the winter. You'll disturb their dormancy and put them in view of hungry birds or cause them to desiccate when exposed to the air. Start a compost pile with all the residue you've pulled out of the beds. Shred or mulch your leaves, don't send them to the landfill. They're free fertilizer and they practically compost themselves. The result, leaf mold, makes wonderful soil.

Weeding out or destroying perennial weeds now, when the conditions are poor for them to fill back in, will cut down on problems in the spring. Mulching around perennials will suppress weed seed germination in the spring and eventually decompose to make better soil. If some areas have hopelessly gone to weeds, cover them with black plastic and leave it in place over the winter and into the spring to kill sprouting seeds.

Lastly Mow your lawn as late into the fall as the grass grows. Grass left too long when deep snow arrives can develop brown patches in the spring. Don't leave fallen leaves on the lawn. Rake them up and place in a compost pile mixed with old hay and other material. Or, rake the leaves into loose piles and run the mower over them to turn them into mulch for perennial and bulb beds.

And remember the staff at Bloomers are always available to answer any questions you may have. You've made your bed for next spring.