

NORTHWOODS YARD & GARDEN

Weekly Column

October 14, 2024

Preparing Landscape Plants for Winter

Freezing temperatures this past week have brought the growing season to an end. Gardeners now should focus attention on getting yard and garden plants ready for winter.

Most herbaceous plants will be dying back to the ground over the next few weeks. In vegetable gardens and annual beds, we simply pull those plants out. In perennial beds, it is beneficial to allow dried foliage and stems to remain until spring. In addition to visual appeal, this foliage may provide some winter protection to plant crowns and catch a little more snow to insulate roots. Plants prone to leaf diseases, such as peonies, or with foliage that just collapses after freezing, such as hostas or daylilies, are examples of species for foliage best cleaned up in fall.

Additional winter protection for perennial flowers and strawberries comes from winter mulch. Winter mulches do not prevent plants or the soil from freezing. Instead, they keep perennial flower and strawberry beds from going through damaging freezing/thawing cycles. Snow cover provides this protection, but as we saw last year, we cannot depend on adequate snow cover throughout winter.

Make sure perennial plants are completely dormant before mulching and even allow the soil to start to freeze. There is plenty of time, as ideally November, rather than right now, is best to apply winter mulch. It depends on how our fall weather transitions to winter, but winter mulches should be applied by Thanksgiving. Once the soil freezes it is best kept frozen. Mulches such as straw, leaves, or evergreen boughs (and snow cover) help keep things stable.

Landscape shrubs are prone to feeding from rabbits, voles (field mice), and deer over the winter. With our recent cold nights, rabbits may already have started gnawing on stems of shrubs and small trees with tender bark. Remove debris and excess vegetation adjacent to shrubs and younger tree trunks this month, as it is prime habitat for voles and rabbits.

While repellents may reduce damage, the best step for protection through the winter months is to put up barriers around plants prone to damage. Poultry wire placed around shrub plantings and secured with a few stakes creates an effective temporary fence for winter. Individual tree trunks can be loosely wrapped with a cylinder of hardware cloth. Both are much easier to do in October rather than in December when the soil is frozen, and damage has already occurred.

Next week I will discuss more about winter yard preparation, including issues facing trees.

Interested in learning more about Horticulture in Iron County?
Feel free to contact:

Bruce Spangenberg
Horticulture Educator
Extension Iron County
300 Taconite Street, Suite 118
Hurley, WI 54534

Phone: 715-561-2695
Email: bruce.spangenberg@wisc.edu

