

Fall Cleanup and Perennial Dividing Time

by Susan Camp

It is the time of year when the days grow noticeably shorter and the mornings and evenings are cooler. The Halloween candy is on display at the grocery store and people are starting to talk about apple cinnamon cake and pumpkin bread, rather than Key lime pie. September 22 is the Autumn Equinox, the first day of fall. How can that be possible? The July 4th weekend was just a few weeks ago, right? Mother Nature has a sneaky way with the calendar, and time moves forward, whether we expect it or not.

One way to tell that fall is upon us is to take a look at the garden. The summer vegetables are finished and the corn stalks are brown. The flower beds are looking pretty ragged and leggy, too. If you grow perennials, now is the time to clean up the garden and divide or plant perennials, especially ones that bloom in spring or early summer.

If the hardscape forms the bones of your garden, perennials provide the muscle. Perennials can perform beautifully for years with the appropriate care through each growing season. They are expensive to buy, but reward us with gorgeous color from early summer through the fall, when stems and leaves die back, leaving only the crown visible. In winter, perennials enter a dormant state, but still require specific care if they are to bloom the next year.

Some gardening authors recommend leaving stems, leaves, and dried seed pods in the flower beds to provide winter interest. This practice is controversial, as failure to remove debris can result in infestation by insects or the development of disease. Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-203 “Culture, Maintenance, and Propagation” recommends removing all plant debris from flower gardens.

The Cornell University article, “Home Gardening - How to Grow Perennials”, provides more detailed information on fall clean-up and winter mulching. Perennial stems should be cut back to three inches to avoid damaging the crown. Old mulch can be removed and replaced with fresh mulch after the soil has cooled from several hard frosts. According to the Cornell article, mulch spread over warm soil may encourage plants to put out new growth that cannot survive the winter. Mulch applied too thickly can cause moisture retention, leading to rot. Mulch should be removed gradually in the spring, as the soil warms.

As you clean the garden, inspect perennial plants for weak or dying crowns or signs of disease. These plants should be removed and discarded. Overgrown perennials can be divided while they are dormant. Dig up the entire plant- a spading fork is an ideal tool for this task- and clean and wash the roots, looking for disease or decay. Separate the newer, healthier roots from the “mother” or old crown, which should be discarded. Replant the smaller divisions in prepared beds. Do not fertilize dormant plants. Fertilizing will cause the plant to break dormancy, and the new growth may not survive the winter cold. The author of the North Carolina Cooperative

Extension article “Fall is for Planting and Dividing Perennials” notes that some perennials, including columbines, baby’s breath, and hellebores are resistant to dividing and transplanting.

If many of your perennials looked less than robust during the summer, it may be time to discard them and plant new ones. Whether you decide to try growing new perennial cultivars or want to replant your favorites, there is a huge selection available from local nurseries, catalogs, and online sites. If you have not had your soil tested for more than three or four years, contact the Gloucester Cooperative Extension Office at (804) 693-2602 for information.

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