

Not Every Plant Needs TLC

I know, we want to tuck all the plants in for the winter with mulch up to their chins. But wood chips and pine straw eventually break down and enrich the soil and that is wonderful for azaleas and boxwood and acid-loving shrubs and those plants native to woodlands. Other plants from Mediterranean climates are not in danger from winter cold but from winter wet. Above all they need good drainage.

You can usually spot them by their grey, silvery, or wooly foliage, an indication that they thrive in dry heat. Artemisia and sages come to mind and a few of them actually survive our hot and humid summers although most tend to mug out . Artemisia 'Powis Castle' and the Lamb's ears *Stachys byzantina* have more staying power here but they too frequently succumb after too many rainy winters. Well you can't have it all?

If you want to keep roots of these plants from heaving out of the ground during the season's on-again-off-again cold, mulch them with pea gravel. Lavender is an example of the plants that do not need overly rich soil nor an organic mulch. Unfortunately, they can be winter-killed by poor drainage. Grey foliated ground covers benefit by being planted in a slightly raised bed so dampness doesn't sit on their crowns.

If the plant is described as being suitable for a rock garden it doesn't necessarily need a rock, but it does require a quick-draining spot. However, for an Alpine type rock garden a cooler moister soil is required and in many cases a higher elevation. Sometimes we have to remind ourselves when planning a garden that we do live at sea level! Creating a rock garden in our rock-less Eden requires a certain suspension of disbelief. If one is determined to find the large rocks, their placement does afford the possibility of tailoring the soil in small pockets to the specific needs of each plant. A successful rock garden is a singular achievement.

HOLD THAT RAKE!

Why is it that we claim to love maples, oaks, ashes, beech, dogwood- love their vibrant autumn red and gold-yet the minute those leaves begin to fall we attack them in a frenzy as if they had the power to turn into a nest of snakes? We really should relax a bit. Leaves do have a power: they turn into fertilizer. Naturally you have to clear them from wooden decks and your eaves, and the front steps lest they become slippery in the rain and trip a visiting attorney.

Because the state of Connecticut prohibits burning leaves or dumping them in landfills, there is a town there that collects them for composting (they decay to the consistency of coffee grounds) and applies the compost to their athletic fields instead of expensive fertilizer. You can do the same thing, either running a mower over them and leaving them on the lawn or gathering them to the compost pile or to an out of the way corner.

They can be swept under the shrubbery to feed the plants and prevent weeds. A three to six inch mulch of leaves keeps the soil from eroding or crusting and prevents soil compaction. Because they hold water and neutralize acid, they are valuable spread over flowerbeds, releasing nutrients as they break down. In an area where you plan to put next spring's vegetable garden, they can be left on top or worked into the soil to improve the tilth and water and nutrient holding capacity. They will decompose more quickly with a little fertilizer added. To use them on paths, you don't even have to run over them with the lawn mower, just leave them whole.

Another way to mitigate the leaf problem is to plant evergreens and trees with small leaves. The large and lovely willow oak has such slender leaves they seem to vanish as they fall. Generally small trees have smaller leaves, something to consider before you plant a tree? No comment on that great grown boy toy, the leaf blower. Quiet is not a guy thing. Because of the pollution emitted by leaf blowers, the city of Los Angeles prohibits their use within 500 feet of a residence. From what I have seen of California lots, 500 feet and you would be in a different neighborhood.

SHOPPING:

A neat gift for a gardener new to this area is the enlarged (by more than 20%) and updated "Home Gardening in Gloucester". It would be a perfect housewarming gift, providing the knowledge needed in planning a new property or improving an older one. Copies may be purchased at Twice Told Tales or you may call the Master Gardener marketing expert, Betty Durette, 642-1598.