

Fall Gardening Primer

by Mark Gilliland - for The Hudson Independent

With the coming of cold nights and dimming sunlight telling your plants it's time to sleep, Fall is the time to tuck your garden into bed. A few important chores will help ensure that they wake up full of energy come Spring.

First off, give yourself a break - your shrubs can wait till Spring for pruning and fertilization. Fertilization in the fall (especially evergreens) can be a disaster because shoots, leaves and stems won't have time to properly harden off before the winter freeze.

Stand back and take stock of your beds – Almost all of your perennials will be at full size, so its easy to see which areas are getting over-crowded or unbalanced. Are there some empty spots that need filling in? Or perhaps you've been planning a new or expanded bed? Now is a great time to transplant, divide and/or install new materials. Why not take advantage of many nurseries' Fall sales? Sure, deciduous shrubs and perennials are going dormant, but their root systems will continue to grow until the ground freezes hard. This gives transplants, divisions or new plant additions a jumpstart on next Spring.

Before you dig up a perennial for relocation or division, be sure to understand the plant's root and stem structure. Perennials can be woody (such as Russian Sage, Artemesia); have fleshy tubers (Daylilies), hard tubers (Iris, Peony), soft crowns ('Autumn Joy' Sedum); spread by rhizomes (Loosestrife, Lily of the Valley) or by mats of roots and runners (Monarda, Vinca, Pachysandra); or have bulbs (Liatris, Lilies). Each requires different techniques of digging and division. Probably the single best reference source about perennial care and propagation by division is The Well Tended Perennial Garden by Tracy DiSabato-Aust. No gardener should be without this book!

Once dug and divided, perennials need to kept out of the sun and replanted as quickly as possible to ensure their roots do not dry out. Always replant at a depth appropriate to the species. Typically this will be equal to the depth of the plant as it was originally growing in the garden or in the nursery container. But check your references to be sure.

Sometimes replanting with the crown slightly higher, for example, will result in better winter survival (by avoiding winter rot). Tubers and bulbs, on the other hand, each have a preferred depth for best results.

While you are standing amongst the chaos with various plants dug up and the bed in shambles, why not refresh the soil with a 2" top dressing of dark, rich compost before replanting? Then, consider planting more Spring bulbs such as Scilla, Daffodils and Hyacinths. Nurseries will have loads of fresh bulbs in the Fall as many of these require a cold season (Winter) to trigger Spring bloom.

Finally, once everything is (re)planted, don't forget to mulch and water, water, water! Continue to water as needed until the ground freezes. This is especially important with

the changing warmer & drier late fall/early winter weather patterns. Winter mulch tends to be lighter and less dense than a Spring mulch, avoiding water-logging and possible rot of dormant perennial crowns. I like to use a layer of fall leaves since its freely available, but I always avoid “smotherers” such as large Sycamore leaves.

Basic fall chores should include weeding, mulching (as discussed above), cutting back perennials and cleaning up debris (such as faded Iris leaves) to prevent disease or insect problems next year. When deciding whether or not to cut back a plant, you can use several criteria: Will the dried plant provide visual interest through the Winter (Astilbe or Sedum)? Will the seed head provide food for birds or animals (Echinacea)? Or does the plant self-propagate too readily from its seeds (Rudbeckia) so that it may quickly become a nuisance? Is the plant showing signs of disease (fungus, mildew or virus)? If so, cut back the plant and throw out the pile of leaves and stems. Do not compost! Note: in general, most grasses should be left for early spring cut-back or cleanup.

Remember, take advantage of the Fall weather to renovate your landscape. The cooler, wetter weather is gentler on both your plants and on you.

Mark Gilliland is the owner of Garden Artistry, a landscape design firm in Westchester.
