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Winterizing Your Landscape

As fall approaches and the days get shorter, one thing is certain, winter is coming. All year we labor over and make sure all of our trees and shrubs are well taken care of. There are several things that we need to consider before we shut things down for the winter. The first thing most of us think about is raking all those leaves off the lawn. Leaving leaves on the lawn over the winter could result in smothering your grass. Shredded leaves make a great compost that you can use next year to enrich the soil in your planting beds. We will discuss composting as well as pruning plant material, weeding, dividing and cutting back your perennials and mulching certain plants before the cold, dry winds of winter are here.

Fall is a good time to prune your trees and shrubs. As deciduous plants reach their dormant period, they will drop their leaves. This will make it easier to see broken, dead or diseased branches that need to be removed. Pruning in the fall will also mean less work for you in the spring. Be sure to rake up all debris, material left on the ground can harbor insects and disease through the winter which can surface in the spring. Fall is also the time of year when weeds go to seed. Be sure to do a thorough job pulling all of the weeds in your planting beds, if they are left to seed you will have a much bigger job next year trying to get rid of them. Be sure to dispose of weeds in the trash pile and not in the compost bin.

Fall is also a great time to divide perennials. Many perennials benefit from dividing every three or four years. Perennials that have died out in the center, or are not blooming as profusely as they have in the past will certainly benefit from division. Fall is the time when plants go into dormancy, during this time they will not go into shock when being transplanted and divided. For the perennials that do not need to be divided, this is also the time to cut them back for the winter. Some perennials can be attractive in the winter landscape and don't need to be cut back, but for the most part, perennials need to be cut back after the first frost. Just as with your clippings from pruning, if foliage is left to lie on the ground it can harbor disease and insects through the winter. It is best to cut back these perennials and compost debris that is not diseased. Some perennials that can handle the cold temperatures of winter and can be left until spring, are ornamental grasses, Black Eyed Susan, or Coneflower and Liriope.

Apply fertilizer to your lawn in the fall. Winterizing your lawn is an important step in keeping a healthy, green lawn from year to year. Fertilizer will stimulate root growth helping it to withstand the cold winter months. It also lets the grass store nutrients to get your lawn off to a good start in the spring. Giving all your plants - from perennials to trees - a good watering is also very beneficial. Before the ground freezes in the fall water all of your plants thoroughly. This will help protect them from drought through the winter. Some plants need a little more protection through the winter. Roses and any other plants that are of borderline hardiness benefit from a 4-6" layer of mulch over the base of the plant. This will protect them from the cold temperatures and dry winds and help them emerge in the spring with little winter damage and looking healthy.

Many of us have a compost pile or bin that we use regularly. Composting is a great way to gain rich nutrients for your planting beds and flower pots. It is also a great way to recycle your yard and kitchen wastes and maybe most importantly it can greatly reduce the amount of debris that is needlessly sent to landfills. There are several ways to store your compost. Some choose to go "bin-less", simply selecting an area in a far corner of your yard to store waste. A simple cage built from 2 x 4's and chicken wire will suffice. There are also many devices on the market available to purchase at your local Lowes or Home Depot. In nature composting happens naturally, as

trees and shrubs drop their leaves they decay on the ground and become part of the soil feeding the very plant they came from. Creating a good compost pile requires several important things. First, every compost pile needs air. Most of what you put into a compost pile does not allow for good air circulation, such as grass clippings and leaves. There are other things that may not mat down as easily and allow air in such as straw and a lot of food waste. It is always a good idea to use a shovel or spade and turn the pile to fluff it up allowing air in. A common misconception is that composts need to be hot. This is not true, if you have good aeration and the proper ingredient mix, your pile will decompose just fine at 50 degrees or above. A proper ingredient mix should consist of dry and dead plant material such as wood chips, fall leaves, straw, sawdust, along with green leaves, fruits and vegetables, trimmings from your plants that you have pruned, coffee grounds, and manure. Do not compost chemically treated wood, meat or bones, human waste, pet waste or diseased plants.

Whichever method you choose to compost, they all work great and the benefits of composting are too great to ignore. It is said that in ten years composting will be as common as recycling aluminum cans is today. Many states have stated goals to drastically reduce the amount of waste being sent to landfills. Yard and kitchen waste make up 30% of the waste in our landfills, imagine what a difference it could make if we all composted.

Fall is here and winter will be here soon, by following these tips for your landscaping, your plants will emerge in the spring healthy and ready to go.