

Nothing like a hard freeze brings the gardening season to an abrupt halt. Once beautiful flourishing flower borders or succulent vegetable gardens transform to ugly, drooping, dead-plant material and quickly lose their aesthetic appeal. When that occurs, I often hear the question, “Should I clean the garden now, or should I wait until spring?” The fact is there are good reasons for both autumn and spring clean-ups. I normally do both. In the fall, however, I try to focus my attention on plants with certain qualities as well as on those plants with certain problems.

I often encourage gardeners to allow certain plants to remain standing after a killing frost. Here are some reasons why. These types of plants provide what is often called “winter interest.” Most people find the winter landscape to be dreary, drab and often disappointing. By allowing the remnants of certain plants to remain standing, one can create winter charm. If a plant has an attractive seed head or fruit, leave it. Most ornamental grasses provide this quality. When left standing, they continue to add intrigue, such as color, texture, and movement to the winter landscape. Often they create interesting contrasts, especially if they were planted near other plants such as evergreens. Ornamental grasses left standing for the winter can also provide food and shelter for birds and other wildlife. One might wish to leave other herbaceous perennial plants standing through the winter months. Many flowers have developed interesting seed heads. Rudbeckia, coneflower and most sunflowers are prime examples of these perennials. They not only add charm but are excellent food sources for wildlife. Keep in mind, those plants allowed to remain standing throughout the winter months should be cut back in early spring before new growth begins.

On the contrary, plants that are prone to diseases should be completely cleaned up in the fall. A prime example of this type of plant are herbaceous peonies. Peonies are often susceptible to a serious disease called botrytis that easily carries over in dead vegetation and results in reinfection the following spring. Fall cleanup is a must. Other plants that experienced diseases such as garden phlox with powdery mildew or hollyhock which is often infected with rust should also be cleaned up in the fall. A general rule is to focus on those plants that have experienced disease and or insect problems throughout the growing season. They are definitely the ones that need to be cleaned up in the

fall. After removing this plant material, dispose of it in the trash and not a compost heap to prevent future spread.

Similarly, immature larvae or eggs of insect pests are capable of surviving while inhabiting dead plant material during the winter months. If insects were a problem in certain plants this past growing season, clearing away that dead plant material this fall is crucial. Not only does it remove any existing pests, but it helps to eliminate the same insect pest problems from reoccurring next spring.

As the old saying goes, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

It won't be long now and frost will certainly bring the gardening season to an abrupt halt. Are you prepared to start fall clean up, or will you wait until spring?