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If the interior needles of an evergreen tree, like pine or spruce, turn yellow or brown in fall, this is likely natural needle drop and it is harmless. Although most conifers are considered "evergreen", their needles do not live forever. What makes them evergreen is that younger needles persist for more than one year before dropping off the tree. Since new needles grow each year, there is overlap between persisting green needles and those that drop off. All older needles on the inside of evergreens eventually are shed. Pine trees hold needles for 2 to 5 years. Spruce trees generally hold needles for 5 to 7 years. Fall needle drop is natural, however, stress on evergreen trees will increase the amount of fall needle drop. Stress factors include drought, herbicide injury, root damage and insect or disease damage. Because we are in a drought, we're seeing an increase in natural needle drop which is a good reminder to water evergreens this fall.

We haven't had a hard frost yet and so there is no need to cut back the tops of perennials and ornamental grasses just yet. Ideally, wait until after a hard freeze kills these tops before removing them by cutting the stems close to the ground. If the dead tops of perennial flowers or grasses can be left until spring to cut back, this is a good idea. Some plants add winter interest to landscapes; but more important they can trap and hold snow for added soil moisture next spring; and equally important, the stems may contain over-wintering eggs or larvae of native solitary bees who are important pollinators. Many of these pollinators overwinter in soil but some overwinter in hollow stems of plants. By leaving the garden a little messy over winter, we can help conserve these native pollinators. If you do not like the messy look, consider leaving about 18" of the stems which can still help conserve pollinators and trap snow over winter.

Mulch mowing leaves into the lawn is beneficial. However, it should not be relied on for weed control. There has been a few reports that mowing leaves into lawns suppressed weeds like crabgrass. While a one year research study showed this might be the case, the results could not be replicated. A healthy, dense lawn does compete better with weeds; and since mulch mowing grass clippings and leaves returns some organic matter and nutrients to soil, this practice benefits turfgrass and increases competition with weeds. Instead of raking and hauling away leaves, mulch mow them into the lawn. And continue mowing until the grass stops growing. Turfgrass should not go into winter too tall. Too tall of grass promotes diseases like snow mold and can increase vole activity. Maintain the same mowing height of 3 to 3 and a half inches all season for Kentucky bluegrass and Tall fescue.

Squash bugs are very harmful pests of winter squash and pumpkins. Adult squash bugs are 5/8 inch long, shield-shaped, and brown or dark gray. Immature squash bugs are gray and tear drop shaped. Both feed by sucking sap from plants which leads to leaf browning, wilting and plant death. Because adults over-winter in leaf litter and debris, fall sanitation is the start of trying to reduce squash bugs. Remove and bury or destroy garden debris in the fall to eliminate insect overwintering sites. Mow weedy vegetation around the garden to minimize insect habitat. Add to your garden notes a reminder to plant squash and pumpkins resistant to squash bugs next spring. These include Butternut, Royal Acorn and Sweet Cheese. As plants emerge in spring, scout for adult squash bugs and egg masses. One egg mass per plant indicates control is needed. Always read and follow all label directions and precautions when using insecticides.

Ornamental Pears, such as Bradford, Chanticleer, Redspire and others are commonly planted trees because of their white spring blooms and compact size. Unfortunately, in many areas ornamental pear has become an invasive species, taking over natural areas, urban lots, and vacant fields. When I recommend not planting ornamental pear trees, people often voice that they have not seen any invasive issues with them. This is because this has not yet occurred in Nebraska, meaning we are in a good position to prevent this from happening in the future. So what can be done to avoid invasive issues with ornamental pear. For starters, we need to stop planting this tree in homes and on streets. Many towns in the US have already made it illegal to do so; unfortunately it remains a "cheap" tree for homeowners and developers. Second, if you have a property where ornamental pear are growing wild, consider removing them before they get out of control.