

It's all about putting the flowerbeds to bed for the winter. Every year, about this time, I am asked, "Is it best to clean flowerbeds in the fall, or is it better to wait until spring?" Although I clean ours both in the fall and in the spring, allow me to share some advantages and disadvantages of both.

The most important advantage for fall cleanup is to prevent the future spread of disease and insect pest infestations. Fall cleanup is imperative if, during the past growing season, the flower border was seriously plagued with disease and/or insect pest problems. Certain plants are extremely susceptible to certain diseases. For example, peonies are prone to a dreaded fungal disease called grey mold or botrytis blight. Once peony plants are infected with this disease, it is nearly impossible to cure them. Since this fungal disease can readily survive over the winter months on dead vegetation, the vegetation's removal in the fall is a priority.

Other plants such as garden phlox and monarda are frequently troubled with powdery mildew. The spores of this disease also thrive in dead vegetation. Any surviving spores will then serve as an inoculum the following season resulting in re-infestation.

Fall cleanup of dead vegetation removes insect eggs and living adult insect pests that could otherwise survive the winter. Fall cleaning also removes potential hiding places that could harbor mice, voles and other harmful critters.

Although less important, cleaning the flower borders in the fall, frees up one's time in the spring for other demanding gardening chores. Also, fall cleanup gives the landscape a neat and tidy appearance.

The biggest disadvantage of fall cleanup is exposing the crowns of sensitive perennials to the ravages of winter weather. Standing dead vegetation captures leaves and other blowing material, including snow. This accumulation of debris insulates the soil and protects vulnerable dormant perennials from the consequences of life-threatening dangers such as the freeze/thaw cycle.

Fall cleanup destroys a fantastic food source. Allowing seed heads of certain plants to remain standing serves as winter food for many birds and other wildlife. Rudbeckia (black-eyed Susan), sunflower and many ornamental grasses are plants that can provide this valuable food source.

Fall cleanup destroys the potential for plant propagation. When the seed heads of annual flowers, as well as perennial flowers, are allowed to remain standing throughout the winter, they often become the seed source for new plants the following spring. Like opportunistic weed seeds, fallen flower seeds will germinate in the spring, creating a new generation. I am always delighted when volunteer flowers appear in the spring. If they germinate in an area that I prefer they not occupy, I simply lift them and transplant to a new location.

Earlier I listed an advantage of fall cleanup as a way of ridding the flower border of harmful insects. Keep in mind, fall cleanup will also destroy beneficial insect eggs and surviving adults that could have been advantageous next season.

I also stated that fall cleanup creates a neat and tidy landscape. Interestingly, for many gardeners, that neat and tidy landscape would be nothing more than a dull and boring landscape. For them, it is just the opposite. Allowing certain dead vegetation to stand through the winter months adds beauty and charm. I always allow our ornamental grasses to stand through the winter. For me, their grace and form break up the monotony of a barren landscape, often making the long winter season more bearable. One word of caution, if one chooses to allow ornamental grasses to stand through the winter; it is necessary to cut them back in **early** spring, before the new growth begins.

In summary, one might ask, “Is it best to put flowerbeds to bed in the fall, or is spring cleaning better?” I suggest a compromise. Do some now and the balance in spring.