

Today, it is all about the when, the why and the where. As often happens, my inspiration comes when I least expect it. Writing a weekly column can be a challenge, especially when it comes to picking a topic. Each week I attempt to write about a subject matter that is timely, practical and hopefully informative. This week's inspiration comes from you, my readers. Thank you.

For the past few days, I have received numerous calls and emails inquiring when to start cutting back the vegetation from perennial flowers and other plants. Interestingly, most of these inquiries focused on peonies and iris.

Such curiosity prompted me to think of another closely related question that I frequently hear at this time of year. Is it better to cut away the spent, dead vegetation in the fall, or is better to remove it in the spring? With this question, it seems safe to assume that most gardeners think dead vegetation should be removed. It is the when that concerns them the most.

To answer the when, let us examine the why. Why remove the dead vegetation in the first place? Mother Nature certainly doesn't whip out a pair of pruning shears in the fall or in the spring, cutting away the previous season's growth, so why should we?

The answer to this question might be twofold: (1) aesthetics and (2) mutual harmony. There are those who think dead vegetation is unsightly and messy. Allowing all that vegetation to stand in one's yard through the winter months certainly does not make one the most popular person in the neighborhood, especially with those neighbors whose yards are as bare as a parking lot. Do not forget, a fall cleanup certainly helps to keep you in good favor with your neighbors. Eventually, Mother Nature does get out her pruning shears in the form of wind, ice and snow, causing some of that vegetative debris to sift around the neighborhood, often into someone else's yard.

A better question might be, "Where is the value in removing dead vegetation for the benefit of the plant?" Peonies fit this situation well. Peonies are extremely susceptible to a blight disease that can easily be transferred from old vegetation. It

is best to remove peony vegetation in the fall, usually after the first frost when photosynthesis stops. Such action applies to other plants, especially if they have been bothered by disease during the previous growing season

When spring arrives, many other demanding gardening tasks, in addition to cleanup jobs, need the gardener's attention. Removing the dead vegetation in the fall allows more time for spring tasks. Oh yes, do not forget, a fall cleanup certainly helps to keep you in good favor with your neighbors.

Allowing the dead vegetation to stand until next spring also has its advantages. Perennials often succumb to the freeze/thaw cycle during the winter months. The crown of a plant is frequently lifted with the movement of the soil during this cycle, thus exposing it to frigid, deadly temperatures. If dead vegetation is allowed to stand, it traps materials such as leaves and blowing snow. This layer of accumulation insulates the soil surface minimizing the damage of the freeze/thaw cycle.

Lastly, beauty truly is in the eyes of the beholder. For the avid gardener, seeing standing dead vegetation against the starkness of winter often adds a flare of charm and winter interest.

From all this one might gather it is not always easy or absolute when it comes to answering the when, the why and the where of removing spent vegetation. In most cases, it is a matter of choice. However, I am most appreciative for your inspiration.