

Delay Cutting Back Plant Tops and Add to Winter Mulch

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By this time of winter, some of us may be getting the itch to do some yard or garden work. If thinking about cutting back the tops of asparagus, perennial flowers, or ornamental grasses, it is best to wait. But go ahead and check on winter mulch to be sure it is thick enough and securely in place.

Cutting plants back is a task we might turn to when there is little snow cover and above average winter temperatures. However, these are the very reasons to hold off on this task and to be sure an adequate amount of winter mulch is in place.

There has been little to no snow cover this winter and many days of above average temperatures. Cutting plants back will further speed drying of exposed plant tissue and soil. If we receive snow yet this winter, plant tops left in place will trap and hold snow for much needed moisture.

Waiting as long as possible to cut plants back also leaves stems in place to insulate the crown, or growing point, of plants. During warm winter temperatures, exposed crowns can break dormancy too early in spring and be damaged or killed by subsequent cold temperatures.

These are also reasons winter mulch needs to be left in place until just before plant growth begins in spring. Late winter is the time of year is when winter protection methods are most beneficial in preventing plant injury from cold temperatures and winter drying.

Take time to check winter mulch on tender plants like roses, strawberries and mums. Add additional mulch if winter winds have blown some away or mulch has settled. If you did not have time last fall to mulch, it's not too late to mulch. Placing wood chips, straw or leaves in a secured chicken wire cage is a good method to reduce loss from wind.

A layer of mulch also maintains moisture around plants to reduce drying of plant tissue on warm, sunny and windy winter days. And if soil is dry, it is fine to water plants on warm winter days to help reduce desiccation injury. Avoid water pooling around plant crowns.

Another important reason to wait on cutting plants back is pollinator protection. Some insects are cavity nesters that overwinter inside plant stems. Cutting plants back in fall, winter or early spring and cutting them too short will kill overwintering pollinators.

To protect pollinators, delay removal until as late in spring as possible. And because most insects nest near the base of stems, leave ten inches of stems rather than cutting plants all the way to the ground.

Pollinators do not emerge from stems at the same time in spring. Depending on the insect and its life cycle, emergence occurs from spring through summer and leaving ten inches of stems allows for this.

If wondering about pruning trees, fruit trees, shrubs and roses, it is best to wait on these too but not as important. The hardier the plant, the less risk of winter pruning. But the closer to spring growth a tree is pruned, the quicker the tree begins to seal the wound.

Some general rules of thumb are to hold off on pruning less hardy plants like many fruit trees and roses. March into early April is best for fruit trees and mid to late April is best for roses. Prune any spring blooming shrub after it blooms or flower buds are removed.

If needed, hardy shade trees, shrubs and apple trees can be pruned in February and early March, especially younger, vigorous plants as these respond better to wounding. Pruning best done while plants are fully dormant removal of diseased branches such as those infected with fire blight or black knot.