Preparing Your Gardens for Winter and Spring

As ***a frugal and sometimes lazy gardener***, I have developed a great way to handle late fall:

If you have not cleaned up your beds from the summer vegetable crops, you can leave the healthy plants and produce you don't want, move them ***into*** the beds as **neatly** as possible, cover them with a heavy layer of mulch of leaves (up to two feet) and wait for the free plants to sprout up next spring! This sounds strange, but my best lettuce, tomatoes, squash and nasturtiums have come from "volunteer plants" from the year before, when I neglected my tending the previous fall… The thick layer of leaves will decompose the dead material to provide good fertilizer and the seeds will grow through the winter. The lettuce plants will show up in odd places, but recognizable in April through May. My volunteer nasturtiums show up in May, as do the volunteer squash varieties. The Tomato plants will show up, also in odd places, in late June to be transplanted to where you would like them to be for the season. So, if you are willing to be patient and observant, you will have some of your best produce for free! These plants are very hearty and have the best flavor because they made it through the winter in their own time, rather than being forced, by starting them indoors.

By mulching the vegetable garden with leaves, I plant through the leaf mulch in the spring, so as not to expose the weed seeds to the air and light, to germinate. The sturdy volunteer plants, bulbs and perennials will come through this decomposed layer of mulch fine

Mulch:

- The insulating blanket for the gardens through the winter,
    - the material covering the soil
    - to prevent weeds,
        - hold in the moisture and
        - keep the temperature of the soil more consistent,
        - without dramatic rise and fall of temperatures
        - That would damage the root system of the plants.
    - It is best to mulch between the base of the plant, tree or shrub to the ***drip line***.
        - The point in the soil that is farthest out from the planting, where the end of the foliage "drips" excess water.
        - This is how far out the majority of feeding roots are,
            - That needs to be protected and fed.

Mulch for Vegetable and fruits:

I **start a new bed** with eight inches of straw mulch, not hay, then plant through the straw, without exposing the soil to the light and air, to let the seeds and plantings get a good start without the competition of the weeds. This covering will also keep the moisture in the soil longer and keep the earthworms happy. **Earthworms** provide free fertilizer and aeration of the soil to keep our crops growing, without a lot of extra care from the gardener!

I fluff the straw mulch *through the season*, if the mulch becomes compacted for any reason. I will also add to the mulch if it becomes too thin.

In the fall I cover the remaining straw mulch with, *up to two feet* of fallen leaves. I use any variety of leaves, as they come from the ground, not chopped up. The leaf cover will compact and decompose to just a few inches by the spring, with the biodiversity leaving an inch of rich, black crumbly soil (earthworm castings, rich in all of the natural fertilizer you could need in the spring) under the thin covering of much that is left.

In the fall, also load up any extra leaves into paper bags to save for the following summer mulching and composting, as there are few leaves available at that time. I store them in a dry area of a garage, basement or shed.

In the early spring, I slightly "fluff", do not turn over, the existing cover of mulch to allow the sprouting plants to be able to poke through any thick layer of leaves, without exposing the soil. Sometimes leaves do not decompose as well as expected, or compact too much because of heavy snow cover. By lightly lifting the mulch with a pitch fork, the sprouts can better penetrate the mulch for better growth.

For spring planting of vegetables, fruits and flowers, I plant *through* the mulch without exposing the soil to the air so weed seeds do not have a chance to germinate. For the summer I may add a little more straw mulch to the bed for the season, before new planting, to increase the insulation for the summer. I may also add a cover of leaves over the straw, if I have them.

Perennials:

- May be pruned as they fade
    - Leaving the healthy stems and blossoms
- Die back in the fall, but the *root system* is going to grow through the winter
- **Cut stems** and foliage to *6-8 inches* high
    - Prevents animals from eating the new foliage in the spring
- Fall is the best time to ***divide*** them, after a good rain
    - Using a digging fork to *loosen* the root system
        - Pop it out of the ground
    - Two digging forks, back to back, in the center of the "clump" to divide them
    - Repeat the process until you have the size plant you need
    - **Plant** the new pieces where you need them,
        - then put the rest in containers close together
        - in a protected area of the yard to have available in the spring
    - **Cover** the container plants with a heavy layer of leaves
    - *Loosen* the leaves in Late February
- **Mulch** to the drip line with leaves
    - As deeply as possible
        - To protect the root system and add nutrients to the soil
- Grasses may stay up through the winter, until they fall,
    - then cut back to 8-10 inches to protect the new foliage of the spring

- The seeds are good for the birds and other animals

Shrubs:

Deciduous shrubs and trees lose their leaves in the fall.

- Do not prune spring blooming shrubs in the fall
    - Blossoms for spring are set right after blooming
    - Pruning in fall will remove them and spoil the spring show.
- For most deciduous shrubs, prune stems back to 3-4 feet
- Avoid hedge trimmers
    - They cause thick outer foliage
    - Dead inner stalks
    - Potential bug and disease problems
- Prune between two buds
- Prune in a curve at the top, not straight across the crown of the shrub
- Mulch the drip line with leaves
    - As deeply as possible
        - To protect the root system and add nutrients to the soil

Evergreen shrubs and trees keep their outer foliage all through the year.

- This is not a good time of year for major pruning of evergreens
    - Only prune for health of broken or rubbing branches
    - "Insulation" for the winter by the foliage is necessary for survival through the winter
- Fall is the best time for transplanting shrubs
    - The root system will develop through the winter and shrub will "perform" well in the spring
- Mulch the drip line with leaves
    - As deeply as possible
        - To protect the root system and add nutrients to the soil

Trees:

Deciduous shrubs and trees lose their leaves in the fall

- In the fall, as the leaves drop, the sap, or life blood, of the tree goes into the root system for the winter
    - Corrective pruning may be done in the fall
- Major pruning may be done in the winter, if necessary, when the tree is dormant
- Fall is the best time for ***transplanting***
- Mulch the drip line with leaves
    - As deeply as possible
        - To protect the root system and add nutrients to the soil
        - The mulch will decompose through the winter and provide nourishment to the roots

Fruit trees: January and February of winter is the best time for serious pruning of fruit trees

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- Fall is not a good time of year for major pruning of evergreens
    - Only prune for health of broken or rubbing branches
    - "Insulation" for the winter by the foliage is necessary for survival through the winter
- Fall is the best time for transplanting trees
    - The root system will develop through the winter and shrub will "perform" well in the spring
- Mulch the drip line, to near (not next to it) the trunk,
    - with leaves and/or evergreen needles
    - As deeply as possible
        - To protect the root system and add nutrients to the soil
            - Up to two feet of leaves
        - The mulch will decompose through the winter and provide nourishment to
        - the roots

Lawns:

Each lawn is different

- Each ***area*** of each lawn is different!
- Generally, in New England, we have an acid soil environment
- Our lawn grasses like "sweet" soil, not "spicy" acid soil
    - **Lime** and gypsum are all most lawns need
    - Lime sweetens the soil
    - **Gypsum** neutralizes the chemicals, pet damage and road salt
    - Most lawns need lime, with gypsum only necessary along roadsides and driveways.
    - A soil test will determine your needs.
- Mow the lawns short in the fall, with your last cut being at the lowest setting
    - This will help the leaves to blow across your lawn and will automatically mulch under the shrubs and trees
        - Just tidy up the leaf mulch to your edging
        - Pile in more leaves for the winter
        - Lift any remaining in the spring that are too thick
    - Summer lawn settings are higher to protect the grass from droughts

Vegetable Garden:

The garden is like having a child. Nurturing and planning ahead for their needs is the key. Putting a "child" to bed is the process in the fall of the year.

"**Pick up Your Room**"

- Cut back the spent vines and plants
    - Remove any diseased vegetation
- leave the mulch in place,
    - so you don't expose weed seeds,

- don't worry about leaving the rotten vegetables in the garden,
    - as they will provide "volunteer plants" in the spring
    - To transplant around your garden!
- Add the plant material to the compost pile,
    - or start a new one,
    - to provide good food for next season for your soil

"Have a glass of water, or milk"

- Add a little compost or other organic material
    - to help the soil through the winter
    - Leaf mulch will do well
- For Acid loving vegetables,
    - add manures or pine needles
- For Sweet soil needs.
    - Add pulverized limestone

"Tuck in for the night"

- Add a layer of leaves to the bed,
    - up to two feet,
        - Wet down to stay in place
    - to insulate the soil for the winter
    - and add nutrients to the soil through the winter
    - They will decompose to 2 inches by spring!

"Dream Sweet Dreams"

- Think about what you would like to see next year
- And make plans for the season ahead!