

Doing less is doing more

Fall is here again, the days are blustery with the rain pounding on the windows, colorful leaves covering everything on the ground and the nights are foggy and chilly. It is a beautiful time to walk outside and see the changes everyday. The garden looks different in the morning and in the afternoon; colors creep in slowly, explode and disappear overnight. Many of our fall flowering plants quickly burst into bloom than drop their petals and go dormant in just a matter of days so missing even just one day in the garden can mean we miss to see something wonderful for at least another year.

Fall is often the time to feel guilty for many gardeners. It is great to just be outside, or to watch everything change and turn colors from the inside with a hot cup of cocoa or big bowl of soup, but the task seems overwhelming and uninviting: clean-up in the garden.

Well, I am here to tell everyone the good news: Doing less means doing more and there is no need for guilt if little or nothing gets done. Our gardens are part of nature regardless if they are very naturalistic or highly formal spaces and nature is messy during autumn. It is not by chance that the leaves fall on the ground and flowers turn into seed heads: it is an important part of the natural cycle and most of the time our clean-ups interfere with the cycle thus creating a need for further action by us down the road.

Let's see what we really should do and what are the things we can just leave alone in the fall garden:

1. The first thing to do is leave as much plant debris on the ground as possible. Plants in nature do not get fed by fertilizers, they get what they need from the organic material that decomposes and becomes soil over time. Leaves, twigs and normal debris are great mulch unless they are diseased.

When a garden is raked clean, any new material which could build the soil is taken away and the soil then will need fertilizers to maintain healthy plant life.

The 'stuff' that falls this time of the year and the 'stuff' that is dead and stays on the plants, old flowers, seed heads, dead foliage is all very important food source for not just the plants, but for the critters in your garden as well. Birds, bugs, and many others will eat this 'stuff' during the winter and also use it to line their nests as the months go by and the weather gets colder.

Sometimes the debris is too much or too large for the actual plants in the bed, which is the case with groundcovers or perennials planted under Big Leaf Maple trees. Removing some of it in these situations, not all of the debris, just some,, will benefit the smaller plants.

Too much woody debris, large branches and such that does not brake down fast can become fire hazard during the summer months. The goal is to allow for natural cycles to take place without endangering our home and property so large woody debris should be chipped if possible than used as mulch. Some twigs and branches can be collected into piles allowing for birds to nest in it as spring comes.

If a path is covered with the leaves, by all means, clean it. Safety comes first. Most built water features (ponds, fountains, etc.) need to be cleaned out as well to function properly.

2. If an irrigation system is in place, it needs winterization. Shutting down the system isn't complicated, but the best way of doing it depends on what kind of irrigation it is. Hiring professional help can simplify the process if there are any questions. It is easier to winterize than to fix a system that froze and leaks in the spring.
3. Winters around here are wet and drainage is crucial! Water can cause serious damage to driveways and foundations so taking care of it is important.

The best way to deal with run-off is to reduce it in the first place by using pervious surfaces wherever it is possible and/or directing it through rain gardens and bioswales filled with vegetation that will slow down the flow and reduce the amount of water.

If the drainage issue still remains or the above solutions are not feasible, a well designed drainage system can reduce the amount of standing water or moving run-off. It may not solve the situation completely given site specific conditions, but will help.

Existing drainage systems like everything else need maintenance. Cleaning them and repairing them before the heavy rains start will eliminate the headaches caused by sudden emergencies later.
4. If lighting systems are installed, fall is a great time to make sure that they are in working order. Lights are a matter of safety during the dark winter months so maintaining them is important.
5. Pruning can be done on certain plants, some trees and shrubs respond very well to fall pruning and others should not be touched unless it is a plant emergency or the plant itself is a safety hazard.

Rhodies, camellias, lilacs, most of the native plants, hydrangeas, some of the woody perennials and many others can be pruned this time of the year without risking the health of the plant material.

Roses, plums, cherries, may get damaged during the winter if the temperatures drop below freezing so if any trimming is done, it should be done with care. Roses will do better if pruned early in spring and plums, peaches, cherries are best pruned in the hot and dry summer months because they are susceptible to many diseases abundant in the fall.
6. Cleaning out areas for new garden beds, turning lawns into beds, and removing blackberries, ivy, and other nasty weeds the fall and winter is the best time. The soil is moist and these plants pull easier than other times. With less foliage around it is also easier to see what the shape of the project looks like.
7. Planting the new or existing beds in the fall and winter is the smart way to go. The new plants will grow their roots by spring well enough that less watering will keep them alive and flourishing than if they were planted in March or later. Plants are also less expensive in autumn.

8. Lawns need attention too in the fall. If leaves and debris is left on the grass, the lawn will rot and die out so raking and cleaning up on the lawns is important. Fall is a good time to aerate, topdress with compost and reseed. Lawns are higher maintenance than other plantings so reducing or eliminating them are best, but if they are in the garden, they do need attention this time of the year.

9. Weeding is easiest when the soil is moist and the weeds pull out easily with roots and all. If beds were weedy from the summer, weeding can be done easier now than other times. Letting weeds sit in the beds is a sure recipe for real trouble in the next year so on the days when it is not pouring rain the exercise is well worth doing.

10. OK, the garden is messy! If it really is such a bother to look at (after all we are not birds...) and all the foliage or at least most of it fell to ground already, sprinkle a touch of bark on top of the leaves, twigs and small branches to make the beds look like they were cleaned, than forget about the rake, grab a cup of hot cocoa, and enjoy the garden.

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