



Garden Tips

Good Night, Garden: Finishing Fall Cleanup

December 2011
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Now that the leaves are off the trees, it's time to finish the fall clean-up and put our gardens to bed for a long winter nap. They have performed exuberantly for us and have earned their rest.

Following such a rainy season, many of the trees, perennials and even shrubs have developed some form of fungus. Many leaves are spotted with the common fungus anthracnose. (This explains, according to our town's deputy Tree Warden, Sean McNamara, the lackluster fall foliage we have had this year.) Fungi can overwinter in the fallen leaves and revive in our plants next spring. So this year especially, it is important to remove the leaves and other dead plant material from our planting beds. As the University of Connecticut teaches in its Master Gardener program, the key to a naturally healthy garden is sanitation.

There are, however, many plants that do not need to be cut down for winter. These include plants that retain decorative seed heads that can also feed the birds – ornamental grasses, Sedum Autumn Joy, Astilbe, Echinacea, Rudbeckia and even Caryopteris. They will be striking against a background of snow. There are also some perennials that retain their leaves through the winter, for example, Carex grasses, Liriope, Hellebore and Christmas fern. And, then there are the bulbs (such as Muscari) and biennials (like Digitalis and Myosotis), which send up new foliage in fall to prepare for their spring blooms. All of these can be left alone.

Once the beds are clean, they can be dressed with a layer of protective mulch to insulate the soil, minimizing the heaving caused by the common freeze/thaw cycles of our winters. Two inches of shredded leaves, compost or straw can be spread around the bases of plantings. (A wood mulch will draw nitrogen out of the soil as it decomposes.) It is important to keep the mulch from touching the stem or trunk of the plant, because this can cause rot. I try to hold off spreading the mulch till we've had a good frost so rodents like voles and mice have already burrowed in for the winter. Otherwise the mulch offers a cozy nest. By spring, the mulch will have pretty well decomposed into the soil, adding nutrients. With our gardens tucked in neatly for the winter, we can rest easy and dream of the glories to come next spring.