



## Toronto Master Gardeners

Toronto Master Gardeners are trained volunteers dedicated to providing horticultural information to the public.

For answers to horticultural questions contact the Toronto Master Gardeners' Info Line at the Toronto Botanical Garden (416) 397-1345 (Mon. to Fri. 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and Sat., Sun. and Holidays noon to 3 p.m.) or our website, [www.questions.torontomastergardeners.ca](http://www.questions.torontomastergardeners.ca).

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### Gardening Questions and Answers.

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## Toronto Botanical Garden

Toronto Botanical Garden is a volunteer-based, charitable organization whose purpose is to inspire passion, respect and understanding of gardening, horticulture, the natural landscape and a healthy environment.

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## Putting the Garden to Bed for the Winter

### Description:

Putting the garden to bed for the winter is an annual necessity. This fact sheet describes the work that should be considered each fall. Much of this work will enable us to ensure that our ornamental gardens will survive the challenging conditions of winter.

### Lawns

- Re-seeding is best done in early September. Keep newly seeded areas moist. After September the lawn needs a slow growth period to harden off for winter. Wait for spring if you missed seeding early in the fall.
- Top-dress the lawn with compost or a product such as a triple mix (loam, peat and well-rotted manure). Spread a fertilizer with a high Phosphorus number (middle number in formula). In Toronto, the best time to fertilize your lawn is the first week of November.
- Rake leaves off the lawn before the snow falls. Leaves left on the lawn all winter will encourage snow mold.
- Chop leaves up with a whipper snipper in a garbage can or with a mower. Collect leaves for your compost bin or bag them in dark garbage bags for composting, if there is not enough room in your compost bin. Poke holes in the bags to allow air and moisture and add a shovelful of compost or garden soil to activate the composting process.

- Continue to mow the lawn until frost. Although it is recommended that you mow at a height of 2-2 1/2 inches throughout the growing season, the last cut before winter should be lower, about 1 1/2 inches. Mow the edges a second time. You could be looking at a bare lawn much of the winter so leave your lawn short clean and neat.
- If your lawn is damaged by diggers (e.g. skunks) looking for grubs, replace sod pieces temporarily and repair in the spring. Spraying for grubs now is ineffective.

### *Annuals*

- Remove and compost annuals if bitten by frost but not diseased.
- Consider removing plant markers. Some gardeners refer to these as little plastic grave markers.
- Do not remove all annuals because some are actually tender perennials and may survive a mild winter, e.g.. dusty miller, pansies, snapdragons.
- Some annuals can be over-wintered indoors. Take cuttings for houseplants from geraniums, impatiens and fibrous begonias.
- Lift tender bulbs such as dahlias, tuberous begonias, gladioli, and callas.
- Harvest vegetables. Wrap green tomatoes in newspaper to ripen them or use them for specific recipes such as fried green tomatoes or green tomato relish.

### *Perennials*

- Cutting back the perennial garden allows you to aim for something between the scorched earth look and leaving all the plant skeletons.
- The main objective of fall pruning is to cut off diseased parts and avoid providing overwintering spots for insects and disease.
- Leave seedpods and flower heads that will provide winter interest or food for the birds. These can be cut down in spring. Examples of these are astilbes, grasses, sedums, Rudbeckia (black-eyed susan), Echinacea purpurea (purple cone flower).
- Remove leaves if blackened and destroyed by frost (e.g. Hosta, Hemerocallis).
- Mulch around tender perennials after the ground has frozen. Mulch is not used to keep the plants warm but to keep them frozen in the spring sunshine, by minimizing the damage caused by heaving of the soil. Consider using the following as mulch - leaves (oak leaves tend to stay dry; maple leaves are best shredded), aged sawdust; conifer branches, hay.
- Freezing and thawing can cause the soil to heave and expose plant roots to extreme cold and drying wind. Raking fallen leaves onto your beds and borders can easily prevent this. The layer of leaves should be six to eight inches deep and anchored with branches; conifer branches are ideal.
- Do not put diseased plant remains (e.g. parts affected with powdery mildew) in compost.

### *Roses*

Hybrid Teas, Floribunda and Grandifloras:

- Cut back to about 18" to avoid wind damage and possible upheaval of roots in strong winds.
- After the ground has frozen, hill up the soil to cover the crown where the graft is located. Use friable soil left over from an annual basket or retained in a warm place (e.g. garage). Do not use manure or compost. Once the soil is frozen cover with more soil, damp sawdust, leaves or hay. Chicken wire or plastic collars can be used to hold the mulch in place and provide further insulation. Cut up conifer branches, laid around the crowns of roses, will also act as an insulator by holding the snow in place and minimize the possibility of rodent nesting in the mounds.

#### Shrub roses

- All shrub roses including David Austin roses can be cut back to about 2 or 3 feet.

#### Climbers

- Secure or remove branches to avoid possible wind damage.

#### Miniatures

- Most are hardy but consider hilling up with soil.

#### Bulbs

- Begin planting bulbs in September. Narcissus, allium and small bulbs should be planted by the end of September or early October. Tulips can be planted as long as the ground can still be worked before freeze-up.
- Plant in groups or clumps. Plant larger bulbs in uneven numbers for a more natural look.

#### Trees and Shrubs

- Wrap trunks of young trees or fruit trees to protect from sunscald. Sun damage or south-west injury causes the bark to split exposing the tree to insect damage and disease. If severe sun damage can cause the tree to decline or even death. Wrapping tree trunks will also protect against rodent damage. Remember to remove the wrap as the tree grows.

#### Evergreens

- After freeze-up on sunny days during the winter months, warm air speeds up transpiration or loss of water, but the roots may still be frozen. Leaf desiccation commonly shows up in late spring as brown foliage. Desiccation can cause the death of a plant. To reduce the possibility of desiccation, water regularly and abundantly until freeze-up. If the weather is dry water deeply once every seven to 10 days.
- An anti-desiccant can be sprayed on evergreen foliage but be careful to follow directions.
- Layer fallen leaves around the base of evergreens.
- Consider the planting location and the need for protection. Wrap evergreens (particularly if newly planted) with burlap, if exposed to prevailing winter winds or salt spray.

## *Rhododendrons*

- Mulch with pine needles or oak leaves to keep soil acidic.
- Create burlap tents or 'surrounds', using stakes, for protection during winter. Ensure that the burlap does not touch the foliage.

## *Soil Improvement*

- Top-dress around perennials using organic material such as compost, shredded leaves or well-rotted manure.
- If using leaves as a mulch consider leaving this on the beds in spring. This organic matter will soon decompose and add nutrient to the soil. Oak leaves are the exception because decomposition typically takes a long time.
- Dig new beds, remove all weeds and work in organic materials. Double dig if possible.

## *General Clean-up*

- Clean and put away furniture, pots, hanging baskets.
- Store clay and ceramic pots inside.
- Drain all hoses and store inside.
- Turn off outside water sources.
- Window boxes left in place can be used for bows of Christmas decoration.

## *Cleaning Tools*

- Clean, sharpen and oil all garden tools. Lawn mower and hedge clippers may be best left to the professionals at your local hardware or garden centre. It is important to get the right angle on the blade.
- Paint handles bright colours so you won't lose your favourite tools.

## **References:**

The Toronto Botanical Garden Weston Family Library is an excellent source for horticultural information.

- Time-Life Books Inc. *Complete Guide to Gardening Landscaping*. New York: St. Remy Press, 1991
- Hole, Lois. *Lois Hole's Perennial Favorites*. Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: Lone Pine Publishing, 1995

Factsheets are produced by the Toronto Master Gardeners in association with the Toronto Botanical Garden. They provide introductory information about a broad range of horticultural topics and are intended for personal use and study purposes. Should your gardening group or organization wish to use multiple copies we ask that you inform the Toronto Botanical Garden at [info@torontobotanicalgarden.ca](mailto:info@torontobotanicalgarden.ca).

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