

HOME-GARDEN

October's here, and that means its time to prep your garden for the cold months ahead

Grace Elton Special to the Telegram & Gazette

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In October, walls of verdant green leaves transform into shades of yellow, red and orange, signifying that it's time to prepare your garden for colder months ahead.

Use Your Compost

The first fall gardening task I do is turn my compost. I use a three-bin system that I made from reused pallets, and the bins are usually very full in the fall as I've filled them with kitchen scraps and plant material from my garden all summer. I use my finished compost as a natural fertilizer to topdress my lawn and fill in holes from dividing perennials. I also try to use it at this time of year because I need to make room in the bins for excess leaves!

Leave the Leaves

My urban yard in Worcester is surrounded by a perimeter of maple and oak trees and they drop tons of leaves, so I utilize multiple forms of leaf management. In the early fall, I regularly mow the leaves that fall on my grass. This breaks them into smaller pieces and allows them to break down and feed the soil. Later in the fall, when the volume of leaves becomes overwhelming for my mower, I rake them off my lawn and compost them. The leaves that fall into my garden beds are left in place. Leaves are a wonderful habitat for

insects to overwinter. They also insulate dormant perennials, retain soil moisture, and feed the soil as they break down over the winter.

Divide Perennials

Fall is also a good time of year to divide most perennials. Dividing perennials stimulates growth, allows you to manage the size of the plants, and, perhaps the best part, creates free plants that you can plant elsewhere in your yard. It is important to note that while most perennials benefit from dividing in the fall, perennials that bloom in the fall and ornamental grasses should be divided in the spring. Some perennials don't respond well to dividing at all, so always do a bit of research first.

Having the correct tools will make your job of dividing much easier. My list always includes a digging spade or small shovel, digging fork, hori hori knife, pocketknife, pruners, and a saw. These are tools that I designate for dividing and they are different from those that I use for pruning because contact with the soil will dull them quickly.

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Knowing what type of root system your perennials have also helps. Plants with fibrous root systems like bee balm and phlox and rhizomatous root systems such as hosta and cardinal flower can be divided by using a digging spade to slice the plant into pieces. The root systems of these plants extend to the drip line, or the outer edges of the leaves, so dig a trough around the plant at the drip line before you slice inward and under the plant to keep most of the roots intact. Peonies have a combination root system of fibrous roots and thick storage or tuberous roots. I find it best to dig the whole plant out and wash all the soil off the roots so I can use a spade to slice between the tuberous roots rather than through them. Fern roots will form a thick mat so the serrated edge of a digging knife or a saw works best. The tuberous roots of daylilies make them very easy to divide with your

hands after you dig them up and knock or wash the soil off. Most ground covers such as bugleweed, sweet woodruff, and lamb's ears are also best divided by hand.

Reconsider Cutbacks

After dividing perennials, many people cut them back in autumn, but there are good reasons to save yourself some work and embrace a “less is more” approach when it comes to tackling last season's growth. Like leaves, dry, hollow plant stems serve as overwintering shelter for beneficial insects. Seed heads provide winter interest and food for foraging birds. By avoiding cutbacks altogether or trimming perennials shorter instead of cutting them back completely, you can increase the ecological benefit your garden provides.

Preparing your garden for winter with these and other activities not only ensures that your garden is ready for cold weather, but also establishes the roots of an easier gardening season when spring arrives.

Gardening Central Mass. is written by New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill CEO Grace Elton and other Garden experts. Located on 200 acres in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at www.nebg.org. The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.

