

Horticulture

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Fall Perennial Gardens

Do not give up on your perennial garden after Labor Day. Early fall is the time to do some sprucing up so you can still enjoy your garden through October.

Prune overgrown plants to make them stand up again and give you additional blooms. Remove dead stems and spent flower heads to encourage additional blooms through the fall on such plants as echinacea, salvia, Shasta daisies, monarda, and veronica. Add fall garden color by planting mums, asters, pansies, ornamental kale and cabbage, Russian sage, dianthus, black-eyed Susan, anemones and blue mist spirea. A hay bale or two and some pumpkins and gourds will round out a beautiful fall garden.

The perfect time for renovating that perennial garden is in October after the first frost of the year. As the foliage dies and dries up, you can dig and divide most perennial plants that have overgrown an area or have started to decline from being overcrowded. The foliage can be cut back and the roots can be dug up and cut into sections for re-planting in a bigger area or giving to friends.

Spring and early-summer blooming perennials, such as peonies and poppies, are usually divided in the fall or when foliage dies (mid-September through mid-October). Plants that flower in mid- to late summer and fall, such as chrysanthemums and asters, should be divided in the spring before growth begins. Iris and daylilies usually are divided immediately after flowering. Cut ornamental grasses back to within 3 inches of the crown in late November or leave them standing until spring to create winter interest. Many gardeners love to see the snow on their tall grasses through the winter months.



Leaving some of the skeletonized plants in the garden over winter may be beneficial. Not only are all those seed heads lovely to look at, but they're even more attractive when overwintering birds descend to feed on them or to seek shelter in the dead foliage. Scores of perennials provide protein- and oil-rich seeds for birds. The giant perennial sunflower (which blooms in October and November), willowleaf sunflower, coreopsis, asters, liatris, blackberry lily, coneflowers of all kinds, and many

others provide a natural (and free) feast for your avian friends.

A few disease-prone perennials - herbaceous peonies come to mind - should be trimmed down and their foliage destroyed, as should plants that sort of turn to black, slimy mush after a freeze. Lobelias and fall-blooming anemones fall into that category.

Compost can be added in fall, especially if you cut back perennials. Fall compost application saves you one spring chore. Although compost will add some nutrients, it has many other beneficial effects, such as adding organic matter and microorganisms.

Tender summer bulbs (gladiolus, caladiums, canas, crocosmias, dahlias, and tuberous begonias) need to be dug in the fall and stored in a cool place where temperatures are above freezing. Spring bulbs (daffodils, tulips, and crocus) should be planted before the end of November to allow them time to get established. Do not plant them too early, or they may start growing above ground. And, if you have rodents and similar pests, avoid tulips (which they love) or plant them with ground oyster shells (which they supposedly hate).

If you have tall perennials, you may want to consider making supports for next spring. An effective staking method is to make a cage of wide mesh fence or concrete reinforcing wire to place around them. During the slower fall months when you're not busy mowing and weeding, make some of these and place them on taller plants after you cut them back. You may have to make different size cages for perennials of different heights. Plants will then grow up through the cage next spring, often hiding it entirely.



Water all perennials and grasses planted this year at least twice a month during the winter. Because its roots have not yet adhered to the soil, a new perennial will not survive its first winter without water.