

Tucking the Lawn and Garden Away For Winter

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

In spite of the fact that we have yet to have a really hard freeze in most parts of the region, lawns and gardens and landscapes are quickly settling in for a long winter's nap. While it is sometimes tempting to just walk away from the lawn, the garden, the flower beds, park the lawn mower and toss the tools aside and forget about them until next spring, there's really a better way to tuck everything away until spring.

Make sure you give your lawn at least one good fertilization sometime between October 1 and Thanksgiving. If you have any broadleaf weeds at all, you need to also apply a weed killer too. While it is tempting to drop the lawn mower down low and take everything off including many of the leaves, mowing too low can expose the crowns of the grass plants to winter temperature extremes. Keep mowing the lawn at the 3 to 3½ inch height until it finally quits growing, which should be some time soon. If you want to lower the cutting deck on the last mow, lower it no more than ½ inch from normal height. But I'd rather you wait until spring and do it then!

When you are through with the mower for the season, don't just park it and walk away. Clean it up good getting all that dust, dirt and grass clipping off of it. I'd recommend getting it to a small engine repair firm and have them give it a tune up and winterize it for you. If you prefer to do it yourself, change the oil, change the spark plug, put on a new air filter and sharpen the blade so it's ready to go next spring. If you don't drain the gas, at least add a stabilizer over the winter. Shoot a little oil into the spark plug hole and crank it over a couple times to keep the piston lubed up. Then, if it your mower has a battery, remove the battery, clean the terminals and store the battery out of the way for the winter. This way, when spring arrives and you're roaring to go, your lawn mower will be ready too!

You don't have to remove every leaf from your yard, but don't let the leaves get too deep. As frost kills down flower beds and gardens, clean off the debris and then till the garden yet this fall. Take this time to till some leaves into the soil to increase organic matter and improve the tilth of the soil. Fall tillage also exposes many insect eggs to predators and winter weather hopefully reducing at least a few of the early spring pests. Tillage also works left over crop material into the soil where it, and any diseases on the leaves, hopefully decay and go away over winter.

I'm hesitant to do too much pruning in the fall. Roses can have a lot of winterkill so only prune them back far enough to keep long canes from being in the way or hitting the side of the house. Don't touch spring flowering shrubs this fall and do minimal amounts of pruning on evergreen shrubs. It is getting kind of dry again so be sure to do a good soaking of the area under the drip line of all evergreen trees and shrubs especially things like spruces, boxwood and holly or anything that was just planted this fall.

As you get done with hand tools process them so they are ready to go next spring. Use a good steel brush and get all dirt and plant debris off the tools. Most tools have an "edge" so using a file touch up that edge. Then lubricate bare metal parts with a lightweight oil and give a shot of oil into any joints or moving parts. Tools with wooden handles need to be inspected, touched up with sandpaper to remove rough spots and then a coat or two of exterior polyurethane varnish applied. I know that many of us are ready to pack it in for the season. But taking a little bit of time to tuck everything away properly will go a long ways towards getting us rolling next spring!

