

Don't Be an Overzealous Cleaner

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Fall cleanup of the yard and garden spans the extreme range among gardeners and homeowners. Some homeowners walk indoors on October 1st and don't think about it again until April. Others are out in the yard well into December making sure that each leaf and frozen plant is quickly removed from the yard, landscape beds and gardens. We've had the first scattered frosts with more on the way. I would propose that in most cases, homeowners would be better off in the middle of the cleaning spectrum rather than to one extreme or the other.

There is some cleanup that we need to do each fall to remove disease or insect risks from the yard or garden or to lower the risks. On the other hand, many frozen/dead plants can provide cover and food for wildlife through the fall, winter and early spring. If you clean your back yard to the point of sterility, but then put out bird feeders, your actions are actually working against each other!

Vegetable gardens do need to be cleared off in the fall. Tomato plants need to be removed and sent to the trash or the burn pile. There's just too many diseases living on those leaves by the end of the season to try to compost them or till them under. The diseases simply survive and come back to haunt us next year. If the ground adequately dries out in the next several weeks, fall tillage of the garden will help you get a jump on the season next year and also help to reduce the number of grasshopper eggs and other insects overwintering at ground level or in the soil.

Likewise, peonies need to be carefully cut off at ground level and trashed or burned. Those peony leaves are loaded with diseases that will overwinter. If you just mow them off, all that leaf material gets shredded and scattered but the diseases still survive. Cut and remove is the action you need to take.

Beyond those items, much of the rest of the yard and garden can be left as is as we head into winter. Ornamental grasses close to your house should probably be cut down as they can be a fire hazard. Many perennial flowers, like mums, can be left standing all winter long. Birds and other critters will take shelter in those flower beds and eat the seeds. If you grew sunflowers, definitely leave those standing. Not only will songbirds eat the seeds, woodpeckers will work on the stems extracting tasty little insects as the winter goes along.

Tree leaves are often a topic of hot debate. Do we rake or not? Lawns can handle a fairly heavy leaf load as long as they don't get matted down by heavy rains, ice or snow. I prefer to just mow over the top of them with a mulching mower to shred the leaves up and then let them break down to return the nutrients to the soil. If you want to bag the leaves with your mower, that is fine as well, but don't toss this valuable resource away. Put the grass clippings and leaves in the compost pile, use them for mulch or add them to your flower beds or vegetable garden to be tilled into the soil for organic matter and nutrients.

Evergreen (cedar/juniper) shrubs can be pruned now, but unless they are in the way, I'd prefer to wait to prune them until spring. Trees can also be pruned as leaves are falling off, but in the long run, waiting until late winter or early spring to prune them may be better for the long term health of the tree. Waiting to do these until spring also gives you good tasks to do when you have spring fever in March!

A certain amount of cleaning up around the yard and garden is a good thing in the fall. But don't go overboard now. Do only what you have to do, go enjoy some football games, and the majority of it can wait until spring!