

Clean up the garden after fall's first freeze

By Linda H. Yates

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The weather maps show the daily progress of frigid blasts coming down from Canada, leaving snow across the Dakotas and freezing temperatures as far south as Georgia. Tallahasseeans relax in our sunny comfort zone and enjoy the cooler fall weather.

Then it comes — the first freeze of fall. The date is so uncertain; TV weathermen make a game of guessing when it will occur. One morning — ready or not — it is here.

The savvy gardener will have taken in the pot plants several weeks before, cleaned, debugged and vigorous after a summer outdoors. The brown stalks of summer flowers will have been trimmed off, in part because they looked ugly and also so that their seed heads would not spill onto the garden soil to reproduce profusely next spring. Unless you want many more of the same plant, it is better to save the seeds to give away or add to your next wild flower mix.

The old mulch and weeds will have been removed from the flowerbeds, and from beneath the azaleas, roses and camellias. Old mulch frequently harbors harmful insect eggs and disease spores. A clean layer of compost, pine needles, chopped leaves or other mulch was added.

Or are you among the gardeners who waited to clean up? After all, the mums were still blooming and the impatiens never quit; until the first freeze. After the first freeze the flowerbeds are a blackened blob of melting mush.

Fall cleanup chores the gardener did not do earlier can no longer comfortably be delayed after the first freeze. The garden will look untidy. So, it will be time to pull up annuals and cut off drooping lily leaves, and cut mums, cone flowers, and other perennials down to the ground, where next year's growth is already emerging. It is also a good idea to renew the mulch. Do not add fertilizer to flower beds or shrubs now. It will encourage new growth that will be zapped when the next freeze comes.

Tender shrubs and trees damaged by a freeze should not be cut back yet. Wait until the last frost of the season is over to see how far down the damage goes; then prune just below it.

When the temperature is above 40 F, but not within 24 hours of a freeze, you may apply horticultural oil spray to deciduous trees and shrubs to kill overwintering mites, aphids and scale. With the leaves gone, it is easy to see the scale on the branches and trunks of trees such as Japanese magnolia.

Now that frost has killed their leaves, vines that are strangling trees and shrubs, such as wisteria, wild grape, poison ivy, kudzu, and Japanese honeysuckle, can be easily seen and removed. It is also a good time to get rid of a marginal perennial that never performed well no matter the care you gave it. It is easier to discard it now that its stalks are frostbitten and ugly.

Tree branches that cast too much shade over a flowerbed can also be removed in winter. A falling limb will not damage the plants now. In fact, assess all the trees in your landscape. Do you have evergreen trees or shrubs blocking a window where the sun's warmth would be welcome? Are there dead branches that can cause

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damage by falling on roofs? Trim and shape them now.

Frosty days are invigorating times to work in the garden, to clear away the old and prepare for a new start next spring.

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