

HOW TO BEST WINTERIZE MY GARDEN

Sustainability gardening is an extremely popular catch-all phrase right now. In a nutshell “sustainable” literally means enduring, long-lasting, viable and consistent. In gardening it simply means the capacity of our environment and us as humans. to be able to co-exist for a long time. Now that we have had our first hard freeze, you may be thinking about what to do with the gardens around your home. Let’s take a look at some sustainable ways to care for our little part of the planet.

Most of our annual plants and many of our perennials have turned brown and may be just a clump on the ground. Our natural tendency is to “clean-out” this plant material and cut back stems that have turned brown or contain seed heads on them. Considering ways to co-exist with our natural environment, it is feasible in the winter months to allow the seed heads to remain to provide food for birds and small wildlife. The array of limbs or stalks also provide cover from cold winter winds and precipitation. Did you also know that beneficial insects like lady bugs, praying mantis, soldier bugs and beetles that are so necessary in our gardens to control insect pests find their winter homes in decaying leaves and undersides of fallen plant material? Indeed, it is wise to allow fallen leaves on the garden bed to remain, so they decompose into compost during the winter months to provide much needed nutrients for the next growing season. Rake leaves off fescue grass to allow sun penetration during the cold months, then mow over the piles of leaves to shred into smaller pieces to allow for quicker breakdown into soil nutrients for placement on the garden. Excess leaves can be removed in the spring and placed in the compost bin for further decomposition. This is an example of a sustainable practice that promotes greater use of beneficial insects instead of pesticides later in the growing season. It also allows the natural progression of nature to rebuild good nutritious soils by breaking down the leaves.

Frozen and dead vegetation in the vegetable garden is a different matter, especially if you had a summer season with many garden pests such as squash beetles. Discard insect or disease-carrying plants in the trash can and do not place them in your compost bins. Over-wintering temperatures in the compost may not fully

destroy insect eggs or fungi. If you don't have a compost bin yet, just simply pile excess leaves in one corner of the yard toward the back and occasionally turn the leaves to improve air circulation for decomposition. Some gardeners prefer to bag their leaves, then poke some holes in the bags to allow rain and air to enter to aid in breaking the leaves down and make them ready to spread as mulch in the spring. If your gardens are covered with a bark-type mulch material from the summer, it is good to allow some leaves to remain on top of that mulch, then add an additional layer of mulch. Be sure the mulch is not touching stems or trunks of plants which can cause disease. This is a sustainable practice which promotes existing mulch to decompose while simultaneously allowing newly applied mulch to provide cold protection on plant roots.

Some plants that have grown over sidewalks or porch entries can be pruned back now to allow easy access and prepare for the application of holiday lights. Hold off until late January or early February to do major pruning of evergreen shrubs or deciduous trees when the sap is not readily flowing. This will prevent any winter kill on newly emerging shoots where pruning has been done.

This is the season to enjoy the natural scaffolding of your trees and shrubs and the beauty they provide when leaves have fallen. Consider planting shrubs and trees that provide fruit and nuts for the birds to enjoy. This is a sustainable practice to provide sustenance for birds who have been displaced in our neighborhoods or have had their natural habitats destroyed. Planting trees and shrubs with colorful barks and defoliating uniqueness adds much beauty for us to enjoy in our landscapes, which is also an enduring and consistent pleasure.

Sustainability in gardening is all about providing for all the different areas of life for long-lasting, enduring, viable, and consistent enjoyment for all of God's creatures.

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