

The Winter Gardener

The weather is cold and maybe snowing, so there's not much to do in the garden, right? Actually, there is a lot to do in the off season. Every hour spent on lawns and gardens in the off season will save three or four hours in the spring and will give noticeable results. Below are some pointers on lawns, flower beds and vegetable gardens.

After the long growing season we just experienced, it is a good idea to have your soil from all areas tested. Directions for the soil test can be found on our homepage at tulsamastergardeners.org, under "*Our Diagnostic Center*" section. Looking at the results will allow you to determine what, if any essential nutrients (minerals) that are missing or out of balance as well as the pH which can really make a difference in nutrient absorption.

Lawns:

When thinking about lawn care in the winter, there are really two main things to consider: water and weed control. The yard does not have the same water requirements that it will have in the warmer months, but the root systems in turf grass are still alive and we need to remember to water if we have a dry winter.

While weed control is important year round, now is not the ideal time to apply pre-emergents. Instead, apply pre-emergent herbicides 2-3 times yearly, with the timing as directed by the label. A mid-February to mid-March application helps prevent summer weeds. And, depending on the product used, they can help control several weedy grasses such as crabgrass and a number of common broadleaved weeds. Some brands labels suggest a second application 60 days after the first. Winter weeds, such as henbit, annual bluegrass (*Poa annua*) and others are best controlled by applying herbicide from mid-August through the first half of September. These products are usually sold in granular form and are applied with a mechanical spreader.

Flower beds:

Now is the perfect time to mix organic material from your compost pile into your garden soil. There are no plants to be disturbed and this will allow the organics to

further break down, integrate with the soil, and add micronutrients. It will also improve soil tilth by keeping it loose. If we should have a very dry winter, it would be beneficial to water the beds occasionally which can help promote the breakdown of organic materials. The ideal flower bed would have about 2" of compost dug well into the soil with a 2" layer added atop the soil.

Vegetable Gardens:

If one is not growing a fall garden, this is the ideal time to clean the garden well as some pests will over-winter under the debris. After harvesting crops, remove all plant debris from the vegetable garden. While many pests dig into soil for winter, others are content to shelter beneath leaf litter. Many vegetable garden pests and diseases can and will over-winter in a resting state on previously infected plant material. Pull spent vegetable plants and weeds to eliminate places where pests and diseases can hide. Don't toss diseased or insect-infested plants into your compost pile as most homeowner compost piles don't get hot enough to destroy all problem organisms. Dispose of plant debris with yard waste that's composted at a local landfill where giant composting piles heat up enough to kill problem organisms. Many other vegetable garden pests also pass colder months tucked into soil, including squash vine borers, Colorado potato beetles, cabbage maggots, cucumber beetles, and others. Typically, insects bury themselves 2-10 inches deep so till the soil after frost to expose overwintering organisms to cold temperatures. You can even cover soil with a layer of fallen leaves first and till them into soil where they will decompose and enrich soil. Many gardeners prefer fall tilling because the soil tends to be drier in the fall and makes it ready for early spring planting. For a maximum killing effect, till the soil just before a hard frost.

Don'ts:

Just a few general notes about what NOT to do in winter. We all think that now is the perfect time to prune but pruning of shrubs, and especially roses, should not be done until just before the growing season starts. Pruning can stimulate new growth and this new fragile growth can be damaged and stunt by the cold. In some cases, it could actually kill the plant. This is also the case with fertilizer because an application of fertilizer can act like a cup of coffee and stimulate the plant into a growing mode. Again, new growth could be in danger of a hard freeze.