



# Trowel Talk!

October 2019

## No time to chill

Before you know it the “woollies” weather of winter will have passed and the first spring flower will peer through the receding snow. So make the most of this lovely autumn interlude. Your efforts will pay off handsomely next April.

Some of us clean up the garden in the fall, while others prefer to leave the plant material until spring. Faded foliage can provide some winter protection for plants and the soil – but clean-up in the fall can make things easier come spring when you have to wait for the snow to disappear and the soil to be dry enough to walk on. If you do cut back perennial beds in fall, leave enough stubble (10-25 cm/4-10 inches) to catch snow and hold winter mulch, and add the stems with foliage and spent blooms to a compost pile. If you decide to divide or move any plants, make sure that you put them in at least as deep as they were before and pack down the surrounding soil. Then add an extra layer of mulch around them and water well.

Now is the time to apply compost and well-rotted manure to annual, perennial and mixed beds. Amendments can be worked in with a hoe, a small cultivator or a shovel. Perennial beds often require working in more confined areas and exercising a little more patience and delicacy with tools. Carefully loosen soil around each perennial and then gently work in organic matter at the base of each plant.

When tidying up annual beds you can leave roots in the soil as added

organic matter and then compost the tops. You'll be able to get rid of any weeds that have previously escaped your notice.



**Before (top) and after (bottom) fall clean up**

Photos: *Mary Ann Van Berlo*

Vegetable beds can be spaded over, compost added, and possibly plant matter incorporated, ready for spring planting. Roto-tilling on a regular basis is not recommended any more, as it is considered better to leave the soil and its helpful organisms to develop a natural soil structure – and keep weed seeds buried.

In nature trees and shrubs are left to their own devices. Leaves fall and annually fertilize the surrounding area. In the city leaves are routinely raked up and removed from the site. Urban trees and shrubs need some-

thing back for the pleasure they provide. An annual top dressing of compost or well-rotted manure can do the job. For conifers regular watering until the ground freezes can be a veritable life-saver.

The easiest winter protection is a heavy layer of snow that stays put as winter progresses. Since there is no guarantee this will happen it's best to mulch all fall plantings each year for their first two years in the ground. We may also need to protect plants from nibbling by rabbits and voles or mice, by wrapping tree trunks from the base up past the snowline, and even putting fences around shrubs to discourage deer and rabbit browsing.

Hedges benefit from being sloped or somewhat rounded at the top to encourage snow to slide off before its weight does damage. Winter burn can be hard on hedges. If you live near a road that is salted during the winter a blind will protect hedges from salt spray and subsequent severe damage. A blind can be built using stakes and heavy plastic or sheets of old plywood. In either case the materials must not touch the hedge so that air can circulate freely.

As you complete each fall task you can be planning next year's projects. What do you want more of, less of, or not at all? Where will you put that new shrub you've coveted for years? What pleased you most this year? Is everything sorted out now? Yes!

Winter? Bring it on!

*Edythe Falconer, Master Gardener*

## October To Do

- If you like to do some clean-up in the fall, cut back perennials when they start looking tired or frost-bitten. Leave interesting seed-heads (like coneflower) for winter interest and for the birds.
- Drain rain barrels, and store inverted for the winter.
- Plant bulbs before the ground freezes.
- Get any remaining potted perennials into the ground.
- Collect and shred leaves for mulch or to add to your compost pile.
- Ask an MG if you have any gardening or plant ID questions.

## Tip of the Month

Landscape fabric, geotextile, and the similar products sold as weed barrier, are usually woven, felted, or perforated black plastic sheets. It may sound like the magic solution to weed problems, but consider carefully before choosing this option.

On the plus side, it acts like a mulch—it inhibits weeds and weed seeds underneath it from growing and decreases moisture loss and soil erosion. When adding stone to gardens, such as river-wash, landscape fabric may be put underneath the stone – its function is to keep the stone and soil separate.

On the negative side, though, consider the following. Covering the ground in black plastic makes it impossible for earthworms to live under there – they need to come up to the surface. And despite the perforations or the porous nature of a woven or felted fabric, less water and nutrients get through it to your plants' roots. So, over time, the soil under weed barrier becomes compacted and nutrient poor. In a garden, you need to either wrap the fabric around the plants or cut holes in it to put the plants in – which leaves gaps for the weeds to grow. Weeds can also sneak through where pieces of the weed barrier overlap, and weed seeds can sprout in mulch or dirt on top of the weed barrier (the plastic is not attractive, so it is usually covered in mulch or similar). Roots from weeds can also grow into the plastic, which makes it impossible to eradicate them.

## FULL DAY SEMINAR

Saturday, October 26<sup>th</sup>, 8:30 am — 3:00 pm

**Ontario Native and Invasive Plants: Friends and Foes**

Kitchissippi United Church, 630 Island Park Dr. Ottawa

Master Gardeners of Lanark County & Ottawa Carleton, guest fee \$35

To reserve space register at [www.lanarkmg.blogspot.com](http://www.lanarkmg.blogspot.com) or [www.mgottawa.ca](http://www.mgottawa.ca)

## Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton



### Where to find us for free gardening advice!

#### ONGOING:

**Telephone Help Line:** 613-236-0034—Wednesday and Thursday 1–3 pm (all year)

**E-mail Help Line:** [mgoc\\_helpline@yahoo.ca](mailto:mgoc_helpline@yahoo.ca) - monitored daily

Send photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for ID.

#### CLINICS:

**Closed for the season**

#### SPEAKING EVENTS & WORKSHOPS:

Tuesday, October 15<sup>th</sup>, 7:30 pm

##### House Plants

Diane McClymont Peace – Master Gardener

Stittsville Community Centre, 2 Pretty Street, Stittsville

Stittsville Goulbourn Horticultural Society

Monday, October 21<sup>st</sup>, 7:00 pm

##### Climate Change

Diane McClymont Peace – Master Gardener

Old Ottawa South Community Centre, 260 Sunnyside Ave

Old Ottawa South Garden Club, guest fee \$7

Tuesday, November 5<sup>th</sup>, 7:30 pm

##### Making Scents of your Garden

Judith Cox – Master Gardener

Old Town Hall, 821 March Road

Kanata-March Horticultural Society, guest fee \$5



For more information on Master Gardeners, visit us at: <http://mgottawa.ca>

From an environmental perspective, there are other concerns. The barrier does start breaking down over time under UV light, leading to plastic bits and microplastics in your garden. Also, the edges of woven fabric types often fray, and the exposed strands of tough plastic are a potential wildlife hazard. In a garden bed with frayed plastic exposed, I once found a dead bird with its legs tangled in the strands!

In summary? Weed barrier may be useful in applications where you will be putting stone on top, keeping the fabric well covered, and not making many changes thereafter. In a garden setting, the payoff isn't worth the trouble. If you have persistent perennial weeds, a better solution would be to thickly layer newspaper and cardboard, wet it, and

cover it with an organic mulch layer. It will last long enough to kill most weeds or grass, but will break down and contribute to soil over time, and allow you to plant, feed, water, and weed your garden without causing trouble.

*Amanda Carrigan, Master Gardener*

- Newsletter of the Master Gardeners of Ottawa Carleton
- <http://mgottawa.ca>
- Vol 10, number 19
- Editorial team—Josie Pazdzior, Amanda Carrigan, Judith Cox, Kelly Noel, Susan Bicket, Rob Stuart
- [newsletter@mgottawa.ca](mailto:newsletter@mgottawa.ca)