



Trowel Talk!

October, 2013

Priming perennials

An important project in any perennial garden is the annual cutting back of herbaceous plants in the flower bed to within about 4 cm. of the ground. Some experts recommend cutting back in the spring, some in the fall, and some say either is fine. Advocates of spring cut-back claim the untrimmed plants will trap snow around the base of the plant during the winter. Snow coverage is important protection for perennials and may increase their survival rates. The snow acts as insulation during freezing and thawing – the more snow, the better.

In the course of 30 years of gardening I have tried both ways with equal success. My preference is to cut back and tidy up the garden during the fall. This is an opportunity to thin out plants such as phlox and bee balm in the middle of the clumps so they will have good air circulation next year.

With all the dead leaves gone there are fewer hiding places for earwigs and other bugs you don't want to over-winter in your garden. This is an opportunity to pull out the last of your weeds that are easier to find and get at now that things are trimmed down. When you are disposing of weeds and cuttings make sure not to add any infected or seedy material to your compost. I am especially careful with the stalks of the bearded iris just in case they have iris borer.

Another reason I like to cut back in the fall is that sometimes spring gets ahead of me. With a little rain and warmer temperatures, the perennials are suddenly several centimeters



Photo by Kelly Noel

A neatly cleaned perennial bed ready for winter

above ground. This makes it more difficult to cut away the soggy remnants of last year's stock without damaging new growth.

Some plants I leave standing to add visual interest to the winter garden. I support a thistle plant, some rudbeckia, and the taller of the grasses with bamboo stakes. This allows them to sway in the winter wind but not be knocked down by snow. The birds love the seeds and often perch on the grasses for us to enjoy viewing from our window.

A consistent snow cover is definitely the best winter protection against damaging freeze-thaw cycles. However, with Ottawa winters, that is not guaranteed so mulching is a good idea for your less hardy plants. You can mulch with straw, compost, or dry peat moss. This is placed around the crowns of the plants but not on top of them. The objective is to insulate the earth, just as snow would do in order to prevent the freeze-thaw cycle. This mulch is usually applied after the ground is frozen. Christmas tree boughs can be used to keep the mulch in place. Just before the ground freezes I water my garden generously. This helps to prevent

roots from drying out during the winter.

Cleaning up should include removing piles of leaves. Otherwise the moisture may cause mold to grow. I also clean out my flower containers and store them for the winter. My tools deserve and get a good cleaning too and oiling to protect them from rust.

Finally, to brighten up my window boxes I dry some snowball flowers and spray them with gold paint. Then I add bright red branches of dogwood, string cranberries and add a few cedar branches. They catch the snow, last all winter, and add a cheery visual element to our winter view of the garden. Bring on the snowflakes, sleigh bells, and the crisp winter air. I'm ready to nestle down and dream of next year's garden.

Jean Bedford
Master Gardener (Deceased)

Trowel Talk!

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Announcing our upcoming workshop: The Modern Day Victory Garden

Go to page 2 for more details!

October TO DO List

- If you haven't already, plant your spring bulbs now. They need a chance to grow roots and re-hydrate before the ground freezes.
- Divide and transplant perennials (if needed).
- Add a fresh layer of mulch to garden beds. The plants will appreciate this extra insulation on their roots.
- It's too early to cover/wrap shrubs but you can take advantage of the nice fall weather now to install the stakes. Then, once the ground is frozen, all you need to do is staple the burlap or perennial cloth to your stakes.
- If you have a gardening or plant identification question, ask a Master Gardener (contact information to the right).

Tip of the Month

This may be your last chance to harvest some seeds from garden plants before clearing out the spent plants. Or perhaps you've already collected some seeds that have been drying out since their harvest.



Make sure the seeds have dried out completely before putting them in containers. A paper envelope works well as it allows the seeds to breathe and let any moisture escape (in case they weren't dried thoroughly). Many people use jars or pill bottles for seed storage, but then it is absolutely imperative to be sure

Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton



Where to find us this month 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

- monitored daily
- send photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for ID

CLINICS:

No clinics until spring.

SPEAKING EVENTS & WORKSHOPS:

Little Roses for Small Gardens – November 18 – 7:00 pm

Edythe Falconer, Master Gardener

Ottawa South Community Centre, 260 Sunnyside Ave., Ottawa

Hosted by Old Ottawa South Garden Club (guests welcome – \$7 for non-members)

Today's Urban Indoor Gardener: House Plants Galore! – November 21 – 9:15 am

Edythe Falconer, Master Gardener

Bell's Corners United Church, 3955 Richmond Road, Nepean

Hosted by Cope Kit (guests welcome)



For information on arranging a lecture for your group: speakers@mgottawa.mgoi.ca

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

the seeds are dry or to puncture an air hole in the lid.



Regardless of the container, it is important to label them with the seed type, colour and year of harvest. All seeds should be stored in a cool, dry environment for the winter months. Many people use the crisper drawer in their refrigerator for this purpose. A cool room in the basement would work also but place the seeds in a sealed tote (just in case there are mice in the house). Commercial seed production nurseries pass the seed through sieves to remove stalks and chaff

– this is not a necessary step for the home gardener.

The Modern Victory Garden

Growing A Modern Day Victory Garden

Please reserve this date on your calendar: October 26, 2013

A one day technical update on breaking ground to grow a small space sustainable garden



Saturday,

October 26, 2013

Carleton Place, ON

Click here: [For full details](#)