

FABULOUS FALL by Kelly Noel    October 05

What a glorious time of year to be a gardener! Fabulous foliage colour; crisp fresh air! The first frosts usually hit in early October, several weeks before we are likely to get any significant amount of snow. Outdoor chores change now to season's end rituals. While my husband closes the pool, tends the lawn, rakes leaves and finds places to hang more bird feeders, I am busy putting our garden to bed.

There is always debate on whether to cut down perennial foliage in the fall or leave it until spring. The heap of withering foliage can protect the roots from the cold, but it can also harbour insects and diseases. Here in Ottawa, we can usually expect a nice blanket of snow to insulate the roots, so it is quite safe to do the cleanup now. The job can be stretched over several weeks and you don't have to worry about walking on wet soil, compacting it and damaging emerging shoots. I've already cut down some of the earliest blooming plants and will make sure to get to those that sprout early every spring. Evergreen perennials like sedums and heuchera won't get trimmed until they come out from under the snow next spring, and I will leave some late bloomers and ornamental grasses standing for winter interest.

The removal of all this plant debris is the reason we have to fertilize the garden each year. Plants absorb nutrients from the soil: nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium and smaller amounts of other elements like calcium and magnesium. In the natural order, all parts of the plant remain on and in the soil to be decomposed by the action of earthworms and other microorganisms, releasing all those nutrients back into the soil to be used by future generations of plants. When we weed and clean away foliage to get the manicured look we prefer, these nutrients are removed for good from that patch of land.

If you have room, you can put this plant debris and other organic materials in a container or pile somewhere out of sight, where it can slowly decompose into a crumbly black soil-like material called compost. It is important NOT to put weed seeds and diseased plant parts in there since it is possible that a small, home compost pile may not generate the kind of heat from biological activity that is needed to destroy seeds and disease organisms. If you have any doubt, put it in garbage cans or paper bags for pickup by the City of Ottawa's leaf and yard waste collection program.

Adding compost to the soil is a way of replenishing nutrients. Once I have completely cleaned out my tiny vegetable patch, I will spread on a layer of compost about 7-10 cm thick and work it thoroughly into the soil. But in the perennial beds, I just do a side-dressing: first roughing up the surface of the soil a bit without disturbing the roots, and then spreading the compost between the clumps. Amending the soil with compost or other organic materials such as well-rotted manure does more than just restore nutrient levels. It also improves the soil's ability to hold the water and air so necessary for plant growth. The city will sell your composted yard waste back to you at their Trail Road facility. Garden centres also sell compost and manure by the bag.

All during the growing season, I have been building up a list of things that needed fixing in the fall: overcrowded clumps, clashing colours, areas with no bloom in July, etc. My rule is: when you notice it, write it down! I have been working my way through this list for a couple of weeks now. I've cleaned up the irises and divided some hostas and daylilies. Next I'll move some shasta daisies that turned out to be too short for the spot they are in. For the next few weeks I will routinely water all these transplants to give them a better chance to knit some roots into the soil in their new location before the soil freezes. And I will make sure they are mulched well to insulate the root ball from alternate freezing and thawing which can cause it to heave out of the ground.

The bright sun and drying winds of winter can cause desiccation, sun scald and other injuries, especially to evergreens. I am still watering my larger needle evergreens and will continue to do that until it snows, to make sure they go into the winter well-hydrated. One of the last chores for the season is always to set up winter protection for my small broadleaf evergreen shrubs - rhododendrons, daphne, euonymus and box. I use white styrofoam rose cones to cover the smallest plants. For larger ones, I make a shelter out of the white felt which is sold in rolls at garden centres. It is reusable and I find it softer on the hands than burlap. I drive stakes into the ground around the plant, wrap the felt around, secure it with clothespins and poke a few pegs into the ground through the cloth to hold it down. By the time all these white coverings are in place, it looks like I have a troop of "ghosties" standing about. That is a sure sign that winter is close - Casper and his friends are back on guard in my garden!