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Ten Common Gardening Mistakes

Julianne Labreche

As any gardener knows, gardening mistakes are as common as dandelions. Heaven knows, I've made a fair share of them myself during nearly four decades of gardening. As the old saying goes, everyone makes mistakes but wise people learn from them.

Here are a few common gardening mistakes that many novices make. These suggestions might even save you a little time, labour and money when next year's gardening season rolls around.

1. Prevent the Perils of Fabric Weed Cloth

Many years ago, I purchased a roll of black fabric cloth for a new perennial bed planned at the family farm. Once the ground was ready, I cut and draped big pieces of it over the bed, then covered the cloth in soil. It seemed like a sensible idea at the time. I anticipated it would save me hours of weeding. Big mistake! Instead, after a few years, weed seeds in the soil grew up through the cloth. Other weed seeds grew on top. It was impossible to amend the soil, and really difficult to yank out those weeds or split the perennials. In the end, I pulled up that fabric; not an easy job.

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2. Avoid Planting Too Close to Your House

Walk down any suburban street and chances are you will see lots of trees, shrubs and plants planted under the eavestroughs of homes. The challenge in planting too close to the house is that the roof overhang will block sunlight and prevent rain from soaking into the soil. Consequently, plants may not flourish. Sometimes too, the roots of trees planted too close to a foundation can damage the house. Before digging, look around the property to determine if there's a better location to plant.

3. Don't Start to Garden Too Early in Spring

Ah, the smells and sights of spring and the feel of the warm sun after our long, cold, dark winters! If you're like me, you can't wait to get outside to start a new gardening season. Trouble is, the ground is too cold and wet at that time of year. If you start to work on your garden too early, you'll end up doing more harm than good by compacting your soil and perhaps killing a few plants too.

4. Leave the Leaves

Busy homeowners are even busier in fall raking up leaves to pile into leaf bags, left at curbside to be picked up by the city's recycling trucks. I learned too late in my gardening years that those leaves are pure garden gold, an inexpensive and efficient way to add compost to the garden. These days, I pile leaves onto my garden beds and leave them for winter. Large oak leaves, which take longer to break down, are put in the compost bin. In spring, earthworms and spring rains go to work and break them down. By late spring, those leaves provide valuable soil nutrients.

5. Read Your Seed Packet Labels

Seed packet pictures are so inspiring, leaving gardeners to imagine those gorgeous plants growing in their own gardens. But facts are found in the fine print, which gardeners sometimes forget to read, or read too quickly. Check carefully before you plant to determine the best time to start your seeds, and where and how to plant them. Remember too that seed packets don't always show how long your seeds will last. It's best to consult viability charts to see if ones you've saved are still likely to germinate.



Always read plant labels carefully.

Julianne Labreche

6. Grow the Right Plant in the Right Place

Gardening ABCs involve checking first to ensure you're putting your newly acquired plant in the right place. Some plants need sun. Others thrive in shade, or semi-shade. Some plants like their soil on the acidic side; others prefer soil more alkaline, or sweet. It's important to check on the eventual size of the plant too. Remember that a tiny seed can grow into a big tree.

7. Clean and Sharpen Your Tools

Always clean your garden tools to help prevent plant diseases from spreading. Ideally, tools should be cleaned and sharpened regularly. Most certainly, they need to be cleaned after cutting infected limbs or branches. Use a solution of nine parts warm water to one part chlorine bleach. At the end of the season, garden tools can be cleaned the same way, dried and stored for the winter. Similarly, pots and containers should also be cleaned to prevent the

Tools ready for winter storage
Julianne Labreche



Fall is a good time to wash garden tools.
Julianne Labreche

spread of fungus, aphids, and other plant diseases and pests.

8. Beware of Invasive Plants

Pity a new neighbour of mine who has a front yard nearly covered with goutweed (*Aegopodium*). Many gardeners are only just waking up to realize that some plants are not only garden thugs, often difficult to remove entirely, but are also invasive species that can cause terrible harm when spreading to

Ask a Master Gardener

Compiled by Amanda Carrigan, Agnieszka Keough

Master Gardeners answer helpline questions.

I noticed this year that there were leaves on some of my green hostas that had yellow spots or speckles – like drops of bleach had fallen on them. Not every leaf on a plant, though, just a few, and I cut them off. Why would this be happening? Is it a disease? They look healthy otherwise.

Sadly, this is probably a disease on the hostas, and there's a good chance that it's incurable. If you're lucky, it might be a fungal problem. That said, most fungal diseases on hostas with leaf spots as symptoms tend to produce spots with brown centers or edges. Your description sounds more like the symptoms of a viral disease.

There are several viruses that hostas can get which produce leaf spots. Hosta virus X is probably the best known one. Viruses are transferred between plants via the sap, so if you are cutting leaves or stalks on different hostas, or digging and splitting multiple hostas without disinfecting your tools between plants, you could be spreading this virus. An infected plant can take over a year to show symptoms, so it is very easy to unknowingly introduce it to your garden via a new plant that looks healthy. It can then spread before you even realize there's a problem.

Unfortunately, there is no cure. The recommendation for plants with viral diseases is to dig them up and destroy them, remembering to disinfect your tools afterwards. Do not compost the diseased plants. Put them in the garbage instead. There is some evidence that viruses, notably Hosta virus X, can survive in the soil for some time. By replacing a diseased hosta with another one in the same location, it may mean your new hosta will also be at risk.

wild spaces or planted near water. Because they spread so quickly, it's tempting to 'gift' an invasive plant to a friend, pass them along at plant sales, or take them to the cottage. For a detailed list, as well as ways to get rid of them, check out the Ontario Invasive Plant Council at:

<https://www.ontarioinvasiveplants.ca>



Fast-spreading goutweed.

Julianne Labreche

9. Remember to Water

After purchasing a new plant, it's too easy to dig a hole, plant, water and then walk away. For the first few weeks after planting, a new plant will require some TLC. The general rule of thumb is to remember to water it until the roots get established in their new location. Unless it rains, herbaceous perennials should be watered at least biweekly for a few weeks. After that, remember to check the plant and water as needed, especially during periods of drought.

This fall, one of my neighbours asked for pieces of some of my perennials. I know you can plant things in the fall, but how late is too late to be dividing and replanting perennials?

How late you can divide and replant perennials will depend on your local weather, as well as the plants themselves and the care that you provide. Later in the fall season, plants are heading for dormancy. They may not grow and establish themselves as quickly as when transplanted in spring or summer. The general recommendation is to give plants at least four weeks, and ideally six to eight weeks, to establish themselves and grow new roots before the ground freezes for the winter.

In the Ottawa area, most years this would mean transplanting before mid-October. To give plants the best chance after a late planting or transplanting, make sure they get watered regularly right until freeze-up. Plants that don't have time to grow new roots may still survive, but will have to be checked for frost heave in the spring and replanted if necessary. Planting a little deeper than usual can help guard against frost heave. Adding a thick mulch around the plants can buy them more time to become established before the ground freezes. Hardier plants and those that transplant more easily, such as irises, hostas, and daylilies, will likely survive even if they are transplanted a little later than ideal. 🌱

10. Don't Forget Pollinators

Given that bees, wasps, flies and other insects pollinate many fruits and vegetables and are under some significant threat these days for various reasons, it makes sense to plant for pollinators too. It's easy to forget our buzzing, flying, crawling beneficial insects. Every gardener can make a difference. For information on planting for pollinators, go to Bee City Canada:

<https://beecitycanada.org> 🌱

Fall Season: To Prune Or Not To Prune? That Is The Question

Caroline Koehler



Prune dead or diseased branches in fall

Julianne Labreche

Summer has gone by in a jiffy (if only it could stay a little longer!), and now fall is right under your feet. While your annuals may still be flowering and some shrubs may be showing off their last blooms, you might be considering the next steps in your gardening calendar. A question arises: should you be pruning any of your shrubs before winter is really here?

Pruning at this time of the year is a point of debate amongst horticulturists. Here are some accepted recommendations.

First things First - SHOULD You Prune at all in Fall?

Before taking out your favourite secateurs or the pruning saw, you need to ask yourself if pruning is necessary at this time of year, and if it will benefit your shrubs and trees. Consider inspecting your plants first, taking the time to look for any damage, for pests, diseases and noting the general condition of your plants. Have they received sufficient water recently? Do they look healthy? Can you see signs of nutritional deficiency? You may want to make sure your plants are in good health before pruning, as they might not respond well if already under

stress. The weather factor is also an important one. Look at the upcoming forecast and consider last week's conditions. Damp weather is conducive to disease outbreaks and you may therefore want to postpone your pruning regime for a later, drier date.



Hydrangea paniculata

Caroline Koehler

While you are inspecting your garden, remind yourself that wildlife may enjoy nibbling on plant seeds, or use some shrubs for cover during the coming winter. You could leave the seed pods on and postpone the pruning until late winter or early spring and perhaps enjoy visits from songbirds during the cold period.

Once you have inspected your garden, it's time to put those secateurs to work. But... wait, make sure to sharpen and clean your tools first! I like to mix nine parts water to one part non-scented and no-additive bleach in a spray bottle and, between cuts, I spray the blades knowing that it helps to prevent transmission of diseases.



Clethra before cutting
Caroline Koehler



Clethra after cutting
Caroline Koehler

Recommended Pruning Tasks for Fall

- Removing broken branches and dead limbs is always acceptable, at any time of year.
- Pruning to remove branches that present a danger should always be done as soon as possible.
- Diseased branches or those affected by a pest can be removed if you have read from a reliable source that pruning would be the appropriate method to reduce their impact on the plant.
- Pruning suckers, water sprouts and overlapping branches is acceptable at any time of year, but best done during late winter.
- If you have summer or fall flowering shrubs, you can prune them when the blooms are spent (unless you want to keep them for wildlife). I prefer to prune them in late winter or early spring instead.

Here are some examples of fall flowering shrubs:

- Panicle hydrangea (*Hydrangea paniculata*)
- Butterfly Bush (*Buddleja*)
- Rose of Sharon (*Hibiscus syriacus*)
- Summersweet (*Clethra*)

What NOT to Prune in Fall

1. Early-blooming deciduous shrubs usually set next year's flowering buds during summer. Pruning in fall will remove some of these buds, reducing flowering in spring.

Examples include:

- Lilac (*Syringa*)
- *Viburnum*
- Dogwood (*Cornus*)
- Oakleaf Hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*)

2. Evergreen shrubs, as this can stimulate new growth, which might not have enough time to harden off before the winter, resulting in dieback, leaving unsightly dead stubs. Among them are popular conifers as well as broadleaf evergreen plants.

Such as:

- Cedar (*Thuja*)
- Yew (*Taxus*)
- Spruce (*Picea*)
- Juniper (*Juniperus*)
- Pine (*Pinus*)
- Boxwood (*Buxus*)
- Azalea (*Rhododendron*)

All Things Considered...

Early Spring may be your best bet for pruning late flowering shrubs.

Many reasons make early spring the best season

for pruning late flowering shrubs. In spring, plants are in a growing mode and will heal wounds faster, reducing the chances of diseases or pests affecting the plant. When pruned in late fall, extreme temperature fluctuations may cause some exposed wounds to crack, which can interfere with the wound sealing properly in spring. Additionally, fall pruning will diminish wildlife habitat and remove food resources for many species. Early spring means your shrubs probably have bare branches, making it easier to see where to make the cut and your pruning task much easier.

So, next time you find yourself thinking of pruning in the fall, ask yourself if you need to prune at all. When plants are slowing down and preparing for the winter, perhaps we ought to do the same. Clean up and store your tools instead. That way, they are ready for the arrival of spring. ♻️

Gardening for Birds: Planting for Sparrows

Julianne Labreche



Chipping sparrow

Julianne Labreche

rows, white-crowned sparrows, and white-throated sparrows, among others. Even the dark-eyed Junco is part of the North American sparrow family.

In fact, there are over 20 species of sparrow in Ontario. Each species can be identified by differences in colouration on their head and breast. The house sparrow, though a frequent visitor in our backyards, is not native to the Americas. It was introduced by European settlers in the mid-19th century.

Sparrows are so common that they are sometimes underappreciated. Yet they are frequent and delightful visitors to backyard feeders, eating sunflower seeds, cracked corn, millet and other grains and seeds. Generally, these birds are ground feeders but will use a tray feeder. However, putting seeds on the ground will also attract squirrels, chipmunks and other small mammals. In winter, these small birds often forage in flocks for safety.

Many different species of sparrows visit my backyard garden, no matter the season. Sparrow sightings in the Ottawa area include: song sparrows, chipping sparrows, swamp sparrows, house spar-

Sparrows love thickets and tall grasses, so planting willow or a thicket of blackberries will attract them, as will planting native grasses.

To attract sparrows to your garden, try growing these native grasses:

Big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*) – With its lush stems that turn a reddish-copper colour in fall, this is a tall grass that is lovely in any garden. This native North American plant from the prairies attracts butterflies and also provides safe habitat and food for birds. It grows in full sun or partial shade, in well-drained dry or moist soil. It tolerates drought and poor soil conditions. This grass dies back to the ground in winter and should be cut back in late spring to provide new growth. This grass needs space in any garden, growing about 2 m tall.



Big Bluestem
Julianne Labreche

To listen to the sounds of a chipping sparrow, visit the Cornell Lab of Ornithology:

www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Chipping_Sparrow

Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*) – This is another tall North American grass, growing about 2.5 m tall. With its bronze seed heads, it will add beauty to any garden and provide shelter and food for birds. It spreads quickly through its rhizomes, therefore Indian grass is better suited to larger properties. It grows in full sun and in a variety of soil conditions, including clay, loam, sand and coarse soil.

Bottlebrush grass (*Elymus hystrix*) – This eastern North American native grass will grow where others will not, in full sun to full shade. Its spiky, soft seed heads emerge in mid-summer. It is a medium-sized grass, 1-1.5 m tall. Its natural habitat is the forest. Bottlebrush grass grows best in well-drained soil, and is suitable for an urban garden. 🌿

Tip: To create a winter food patch for birds, especially small songbirds, wait until next spring to cut back any perennials and grasses with seed heads. In winter, birds will enjoy seeds from purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), Canada goldenrod (*Solidago canadensis*), Joe-Pye weed (*Eupatorium purpureum*) and other native perennial plants, as well as annuals such as sunflowers and cosmos. If you must cut back perennials in the fall, then create some 'bird bouquets' by sticking cut stems with seed heads in the ground or in a planter. Birds will benefit from these bouquets as winter progresses, eating the seeds and using the twigs for spring nesting materials.



Coneflowers
Julianne Labreche

In the Alcove Garden: New England Aster—*Symphotrichum novae-angliae*

Candace Dressler



New England aster

Anna Tjepkema

Botanical Name: *Symphotrichum novae-angliae*
(formerly *Aster novae-angliae*)

Family Name: Asteraceae

Height: 60-300 cm usually 60 – 90 cm

Spread: 60 – 90 cm

Type of Plant: native perennial

CDA Hardiness Zone: 2-8

Identifying characteristics:

Leaves: Light to dark green alternate oblanceolate (narrow with a pointed base) with entire or ciliate edges. Basal leaves are more spatulate and are usually gone before the plant starts to flower.

Flowers: Branching clusters of pink to purple flowers at the top of the stems. Flowers are 2-4 cm across with 40 – 100 petals, and a yellow centre that turns reddish purple with age.

Stems/roots: 1 – 5+ stems. Stout brown to purplish hairy stalks. Roots are a combination of caudices (thickened basal stems) and rhizomes and sometimes even have small corms.

Fruit: A hairy cypsela (small and dry, containing one seed, with a tuft of hair at one end)

Other characteristics: Important late season food source; attracting many bees, flies and butterflies.

Larval Host: Pearl Crescent and Checkerspot butterfly caterpillars.

Propagation and Control: Primarily by seed but also by division. Seeds need a 4 month cold-moist stratification, making them a good winter sowing candidate. Divide periodically to keep plants vigorous and so they don't need staking.

Culture: Moist clay soil. Does best in part shade

Landscape Use: Backdrop plant. Grows in ditches, ponds or wetland edges.

Native country: Eastern Canada and USA

There are 250 – 300 species of asters worldwide. Recently, botanists have limited the genus name *Aster* to plants from Eurasia. Although aster is still the common name used in North America, the genus names are now *Symphotrichum*, *Doellingeria*, *Oclemena*, *Canadanthus* and *Euribia*.

I think New England asters are the most cultivated of all the North American species, with at least 50 named cultivars, so it can be tricky to get a species New England aster. The asters in your neighbour's yard are probably a cultivar.

New England asters are one of the showiest of all the asters. Their adaptability makes them a low maintenance plant in your garden. Plant them at the back of the border where they will give a green backdrop for your other plants for most of the season. Then, when almost everything else is done, they will give you a show. If they are stressed at all during the summer they will lose their lower leaves - another reason to put them towards the back. To have a shorter bushier plant, cut it down by half in early July.

For rural gardeners who want to replace their ditch lilies, New England asters are a great choice.

I love that these asters prefer part shade. They start to glow in the woodland garden in early to mid-September, giving colour until the hardest frosts. 🌿



New England aster
Anna Tjepkema



New England aster
Anna Tjepkema

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Send questions and photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for Identification.

Trowel Talk can be found on the [Lanark County Master Gardener's blogsite](#) and Ottawa Carleton Master Gardener's Website <https://mgottawa.ca/>



Clinics

Ask a Master Gardener, face to face, gardening questions.

Will be resumed next season

For information on gardening in and around the Ottawa valley:

<https://gardeningcalendar.ca/>

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This is your chance, as a reader, to suggest an idea for an article you would like to see in Trowel Talk. Click on the button.



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Banner Photograph: Garlic chive seedheads, S.R.Bicket.



Talks and Events

Talks given by Master Gardeners for garden clubs and horticultural societies. If you wish to attend please contact the host organization to confirm venue. Zoom or other virtual meeting software is still in use by some societies.

We are planning now for our yearly series of presentations via Zoom in collaboration with the Friends of the Central Experimental Farm