



Coastal Plant Care

Preparing Your Garden For Winter

As winter approaches and our focus turns to the holidays, our gardens are usually low on the to-do list. However, a little effort in the Fall can go a long way to ensure your trees and shrubs are safe and healthy during the dormant winter months and upcoming growing season.

Soil:

Fall is the perfect time to address nutrient supplementation and pH levels for most trees and shrubs. As plants begin dormancy and the beloved fall color begins to appear, the plant diverts stored resources to its root system. These resources are utilized for root growth and next spring's bud break. Using a slow-release, high Nitrogen fertilizer and incorporating nutrient rich organic matter such as compost into the soil will help ensure the plant has a successful fall and spring.

If your plants have experienced signs of stress such as yellowing of leaves or early leaf drop, it's quite possible you have a soil pH imbalance or micronutrient deficiency. When soil pH is improper for the species, the plant's ability to uptake the existing nutrients in the soil is inhibited. For example, a Willow Oak prefers an acidic soil with a pH of 4.5-5.5. In cases where you have a soil pH above 6.5, you may note yellowing of leaves, increased instances of pest or disease, and general decline of the plant. Regardless of how much you fertilize or improve the soil, the plant will be unable to utilize the available nutrients if the pH is incorrect. A soil analysis can determine if your soil pH is ideal for the plants in your garden. Fall applications of lime to raise the pH or sulfur pellets to decrease the pH would be prudent in these scenarios. In many cases, it may take additional Spring and Fall applications to fully modify a soil's pH to ideal levels.

Lastly, addressing your soil coverings is advisable in the Fall. A 2-3" layer of mulch or composted leaves is highly recommended for all trees and shrubs. Keep in mind that most plants are native to environments void of manicured turf, automatic irrigation, soil compaction, or soil and air contaminants prevalent in our rural and suburban environment. Providing the soil with a covering of mulch, dehydrated manure, and/or compost helps to re-create the soils native to the plant's ideal growing environment. These coverings help increase the nutrient quantities in the soil, keep soils insulated during extreme cold and warm spells, keep soils moist during periods of drought, and have been proven to reduce the instance of root diseases and insect pest problems. Be sure to keep mulch away from the base of trees and shrubs. Excessive organic matter applied over the root flare or base of the plant can cause decay of the bark and vascular tissue, increase the instance of wood boring insect attacks, and increase the instance of girdling roots which will limit water and nutrient uptake.

Risk Assessment:

When preparing for our windy Fall and Winter, its critical you understand the risk associated with your larger plant material. This is an exercise in inspecting a tree's structural root system, trunk, and canopy to determine if there are any pre-existing defects that may increase the risk a tree poses during periods of high winds, snow, or ice. Once the leaves

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fall from deciduous trees, it becomes easier to perform visual canopy inspections to identify potential defects. Assessing risk is also an exercise in evaluating what would happen should the tree or any portion of the tree fail. For example, a 75' tall Loblolly Pine that sits in a field 200' away from any structure has an inherently lower risk than one that is 10' from a home's foundation. Easily identifiable signs you may have a tree with moderate to extreme risk can include:

- Excessive lean
- Mushrooms growing on the trunk or on the ground near the base of the tree
- Visible decay or squirrel holes along the trunk or limbs
- A lack of flare at the base of tree
- Dead or broken limbs in the canopy of the tree
- The tree was previously "topped"
- Dead or missing bark
- Soil near the tree has lifted or been disturbed in the recent past

The International Society of Arboriculture provides a Tree Risk Assessment Qualification (TRAQ) that enables arborists, homeowners, and property managers the ability to fully quantify risk with trees. Visit www.isa-arbor.com to find a qualified arborist in your area.

Pruning:

Fall and Winter are perfect seasons to prune your plant material. Regular maintenance pruning such as removal of dead branches, thinning, reductions/shearing/punch pruning, structural pruning young plant material, or pruning to clear buildings or other structures is best performed in the Fall and Winter months in most cases. This is due to the lack of active pest insects or disease pathogens that can often enter pruning wounds when performed during the growing season. In addition, pruning during dormancy eliminates the response growth you may experience following pruning during the growing season (has anyone sheared a Euonymus shrub during May and its larger in July?). The added benefit of reduced bee, tick, and chigger activity during the dormant months of November-March makes working around the garden that much safer.

Pest Management:

Fall is your last chance to effectively treat any residual pest infestations you may have fought during the growing season. Although most pests are inactive after October, you can often treat trees and shrubs with a horticultural oil solution in the Fall to help reduce harmful insect populations that will lie dormant until next Spring. In addition, you may apply your soil



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based pest control measures in the Fall so your plants are protected as soon as the growing season begins next year. As with all pest or disease control products, always adhere to the product label or hire a professional to perform these treatments for you. An effective pest or disease treatment program starts with proper identification and assessment of the severity of the issue. The goal of any treatment program is to reduce pest populations to non-harmful levels and not necessarily to eradicate a population. This can be achieved through regular inspections of the plant material and treating only when necessary.

I find many gardeners are still applying anti-desiccants to their gardens in an effort to reduce winter drying of foliage. The implied benefits of these products have been disproven and I do not recommend their application. Although I do not condemn those applying these products, I cannot justify their expense or intent and therefore, are never a part of my plant care program.

The work you put into your garden this dormant season will make a big difference next year. I want to remind everyone with gardens that are unexpectedly producing fruit or flower this November that our plants are confused with our warm start to this Fall. The implications of this are yet to be determined but for now, enjoy the encore performance your favorite plants are providing. Keep a close eye on the frost reports and be sure to properly house your over-wintered plants before the first freeze. Happy gardening!

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