

Fall is a great time to work on your perennial garden

Don't give up on your perennial garden just yet! September is a wonderful month to finish up those last minute gardening chores before the winds of winter arrive. The weather is cooler and less humid. We can work longer and more comfortably now than in those hot summer months.

Shop soon for those spring blooming bulbs. Carefully examine each bulb for signs of injury, softness, or disease. Discard any diseased or damaged bulbs. Plant healthy bulbs as soon as possible, incorporating fertilizer and organic material into the soil. Water after planting and mulch the bed with 3-5 inches of straw, leaves, or grass clippings. Remove most of the mulch as the plants emerge in the spring, leaving some mulch for weed control and moisture retention.

We can still plant perennials this fall. Most garden manuals recommend division of perennials in the spring, but we have been very successful in dividing and replanting most perennials in early fall. It is one less chore that we need to do in spring, when thousands of other gardening chores suddenly appear. In fact, if you divide those perennials now, replant them in pots, carefully water them until cold weather arrives, and then protect them with a thick mulch or bags of leaves, you will have plenty of plants to donate to your local garden sale. Make sure to label your potted plants, to avoid the mystery of "What is it?" in the springtime. Other divided plants can be planted in new spots in your garden.

Most perennial plants can be divided at this time of year. Some are easily divided with a garden trowel, others with a shovel or pried apart with two garden forks, but some woody roots will need an ax or Sawz-all to do the job. Be careful, since it is easy to injure yourself when trying to divide a tough perennial root.

Look at your perennials. What performed well in your garden? What did not? Record this information in your garden journal for next year's garden renovations. You may even want to take a lot of pictures of this year's garden to study in the middle of winter. Make sketches of your garden layout to know what will come up where next spring, and to know what to change if you don't finish the rearrangement task this fall.

Visit the local garden centers. Often hardy perennials are on sale at this time of year, since the nursery does not wish to carry them over the winter. Potted plants already have a well-developed root system and are generally more successfully planted at this time of the year than bare-root plants. Plant perennials at the same soil depth as they were in the pot. Planting too deep can result in rotting of the crowns; planting too shallow can cause drying of the root system. Water them in well.

Clean up the garden. Remove diseased plants and weed seed heads and dispose of

them. Other materials can be composted to enrich next year's garden. We are gifted with an abundance of leaves at this time of the year. If we chop them up with a lawn mower and incorporate them into our soil, they should be well on their way to rotting completely by spring. It is pure joy to work in a fluffy soil, well amended with compost or leaves. The soil is easy to work with, and the weeds are easily pulled out. Fall is also a great time to get a soil test from the University (<http://soiltest.cfans.umn.edu/>).

Between autumn rains and your own watering, perennial plants, shrubs, evergreens, and trees should receive an inch of water each week. A single, deep watering each week will encourage the roots to grow strong. Keep watering until the ground freezes or the weather is consistently cold. After cold weather arrives and the ground freezes, remove dead vegetation from your perennial flower plants and mulch them with six inches of loose organic material such as pine needles, weed-free straw, or oak leaves to keep the ground frozen over the winter. Do not use grass clippings, chopped leaves, or leaves other than oak because these mulches often mat down and cause rotting of the plant crowns. Mulching is especially important in the fall for newly planted perennials to prevent the freezing/thawing that might heave the new plants out of the soil and kill them.

If you are considering wildflowers for the garden, now is a great time to plant seeds. Many native plant seeds require cold/freeze/wet/thaw cycles before the seeds will even sprout. Planting the seeds in the fall will help insure good germination in the spring. Check out the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources web site, Landscaping with Native Plants (<http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/gardens/nativeplants/index.html>) for more information.

Happy Gardening,
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