

Spring Cleaning in the Perennial Beds

As spring begins to creep back into town, the urge to get back outside and get your hands into the soil can be overpowering. Once the blanket of snow has melted the final remnants of last fall are revealed: leaves blown across the lawn and garden, and last year's perennial foliage matted to the ground. A stroll through the garden and closer inspection may reveal hints of green popping up along with any signs of damage or stress from the harsh winter season.

The main goal of spring gardening is to prepare the beds for incoming growth before the plants really take off, but timing of this task can be hard to pinpoint. The typical last frost date in our area varies between the first and second week of May, though you'll want to keep an eye on the weather for anything out of the norm. Luckily not everything has to wait until the threat of frost has passed; there are plenty of tasks to keep you busy while Mother Nature sorts herself out. Prioritize areas of your garden based on your plant selection and hardiness. Postpone removing winter protection from tender plants until you are sure you won't be risking their survival. While each garden is different, the main tasks to cover for spring cleanup are similar:

- **Check for Winter Damage**
Most often rabbits and deer cause the greatest plant injury, but check also for plow damage and winter burn on evergreens. Take notes of damage that could have been prevented, and make changes to your fall routine as needed.
- **Remove Winter Protection**
Once the threat of harsh weather has passed, remove boughs or covers from the beds. Tree wraps and cages can be removed as soon as the rabbits and deer have additional food sources available.
- **Cut back "winter interest" and other spent foliage**
Ornamental grasses can be cut back nearly to the ground to make room for new growth. Deadhead hydrangea blooms that had been left up for winter interest, and cut down old stalks or browned foliage that overwintered in the perennial beds.
- **Lightly Rake / Remove Debris**
Accumulated leaves or perennial debris should be removed, especially where it's heavily matted or covering the foliage of your ground-cover plantings. In a natural or mulch bed, removal of all organic matter is unnecessary as small amounts will breakdown and add to the soil structure. However, rock or pebbled beds rely on the lack of stray organic matter for weed control. Leaving organic matter on top of weed barriers only circumvents their ability to prevent weeds, as the weeds will take root above the barrier and sprout into your garden.
- **Check for areas that may need additional mulching to keep out weeds**
Now is your chance to re-apply mulch in thin areas before weed seeds begin germination.

While it may seem like an overwhelming task so early in the season, a thorough spring clean up can give your garden the boost it needs to flourish throughout the season. The removal of plant debris and increased air flow will help eliminate conditions favored by disease, and spring fertilization will help to wake plants up from their winter slumber.