

Winterizing Your Landscape

If you're a lazy gardener like me, this is what you do in the fall and early winter.

Pruning

The only plants I prune in the fall are those that reseed a little too vigorously. For me that's Russian Sage, purple prairie clover, little bluestem and sand bluestem grasses, and golden aster. I cut them just below the seed heads. For most plants I leave the remaining stalks in place since I feel the stalks and the foliage provide insulation for the roots. If it snows, the dead bloom stalks keep the snow from mounding on top of the basal foliage.

If you have bear grass, please don't cut this like you see grasses cut. Bear grass is in the agave family – it's not a grass - so all you need to do is cut out dead stalks.

Since pruning gives a signal to the plant to replace the snipped off parts, I try not to prune until spring when putting on tender foliage is a good thing. If I prune now and the plant puts out new foliage, the foliage gets killed with the frosts.

New Plants

In Albuquerque, plants have more difficulty making through our summers than our winters. This makes fall the best time to put in new plants. Since the nurseries put their plants on sale at this time of year you have the opportunity to buy new ones cheaply. Of course the selection isn't always that great and you won't get to see the plant in bloom! In the fall and early winter, soil stays warm until we get a number of freezes - so roots continue to grow even as the top of a plant may die. In fact plants can put all their energy into growing roots instead of leaves.

And don't forget to plant some bulbs for spring. Bulbs originally came from Persia and were adapted to desert conditions. When they were transported to Europe the bulbs were hybridized until they could withstand the cold wet conditions prevalent there. So we have to be careful which bulbs we select because the ones that perform best in Holland in cold wet conditions don't do well for us. High Country Gardens has a great selection of bulbs for our area which include tulips, daffodils, crocus, star flower, alliums, and many others.

You want to plant bulbs after our first freeze. Dig a hole for the bulb at the recommended depth for the specific bulb type, put bulb fertilizer in the bottom of the hole, cover the fertilizer with a little soil so it doesn't burn the bulb, cover the bulb with more soil, and then water the bulb at least once per month during the winter. There's nothing like the thrill of seeing bulbs peeking out from the snow. Get some that bloom early and some that bloom late. Planting them within groundcovers or native grass is a good idea because the dead foliage is hidden once the tops die. And when the tops are completely brown, fertilize the soil where the bulbs were planted. Don't cut off the dead foliage until it's completely brown - energy from the foliage goes back into the bulb for next year's bloom.

Rabbits love bulb foliage so you may need cages or do what I do and put daffodils around the ones with tasty foliage. Daffodil bulbs are poisonous. I was actually able to see my tulips bloom after doing this - previously the foliage was eaten to the ground and they never bloomed.

Irrigation

Don't forget to reduce the frequency (not the length) of your irrigation. Irrigation valves may be damaged if run when frozen. When the daytime highs are in the 50's I water my xeric plants once every 14 days. When the daytime highs are lower, I water once per month on warm days - well after the sun is up. Trees in particular need winter watering and that includes conifers like pinons. Roots grow out from the trunk in a circle that's 2-5 times the height the tree. Apply the water from the drip line or canopy edge out. Run the water slowly for an hour. If we get an early warm spell, you may need to water more frequently.

Ponds

If you have an automatic fill mechanism, you may want to shut this off for the winter (it may freeze) and fill your pond manually. Be sure to mark the appropriate pond level so you know how high to fill the pond. Again, fill the pond on warm days after the sun is well up to keep the fill valve from freezing. And don't forget to move water lilies lower in the pond to help them overwinter.

Grass

Cool season grasses, like blue grass, need to be fertilized with a low nitrogen fertilizer. Cool season grasses grow when it's cool and try to go dormant when it's hot. Low nitrogen fertilizer encourages root growth. Organic fertilizers release more slowly and may help improve soil as well. Ideally this is what you want to do. Warm season grasses need to be fertilized when they're growing which is May and August. I often use a thin layer of compost as fertilizer, watered in, on my warm season meadow.

Snow

If we get snow and it collects on the top of trees and shrubs, use a broom to brush off the snow. Heavy accumulations of snow break branches. If you do get broken branches, wait until they die to prune them off.

Catalogs

And finally, when it gets really cold, read all those wonderful spring catalogs that come in the mail.

Master Gardener Classes

Applications for Master Gardener classes are available on the web site: www.abqmastergardeners.org or call 243-1386. The application deadline is November 15. Classes are held Tuesday mornings from January through mid April. It's a wonderful experience for anyone interested in gardening. If you have any other gardening questions, send an e-mail using the above web site address.