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GARDEN NOTES

FALL GARDENING REQUIRES FAITH

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Mutual funds, religion and fall gardening all require exceptional faith and abstract thought. The work you put into the garden now will not show much immediate profit. Your reward will come, maybe not in heaven, but in spring.

"One of my favorite fall gardening activities is planting spring blooming bulbs," says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. "It is sort of like playing Santa Claus. You hide the bulbs in the ground, then all winter long anticipate the bulbs emerging in the spring to bring exciting colors never seen before in the landscape.

"To add even more surprise to spring, I just throw the bulbs out and plant them where they fall. I normally select a color scheme, but I do not believe in planting bulbs in rows or patterns. I like the way Mother Nature plants bulbs, and she seldom uses rows and symmetry."

Another productive fall activity is putting organic matter on the garden and flower beds, Goodspeed says. A thick blanket of good organic matter covering the area eliminates weed problems, so you can forget about them until spring. Second, the soil improvement from adding organic matter promotes healthier plants the next year. The process of mixing in the organic matter also helps control some weeds and insects by bringing them to the surface where they are exposed to the harsh winter elements and, hopefully, destroyed.

One thing to remember when adding organic matter to the soil is to apply a little nitrogen to fuel the microbes that break down the material into a nice humus, he adds. Microbes are the good guys and need all the help they can get. As they eat and break down the rough organic matter, they use lots of nitrogen, often robbing it from our beautiful and productive gardens.

It is critical to add nitrogen to the soil when working in raw organic matter such as saw dust, dry manure, leaves and other dead plant materials, Goodspeed says. The amount of nitrogen required depends on the type of organic matter used. As a general rule, apply about one quart of 21-0-0 fertilizer per 100 square feet of ground. This should break down a good inch layer of brown organic matter.

Another important fall activity is dead heading and cutting back all the perennials, he says. This prepares them for spring and makes the garden look nicer and cleaner through the rest of the fall and winter. Make sure you throw the spent seed heads away or into a good compost pile. Just throwing them back into the bed can cause some serious weed problems the next year.

“Dead leaves and stems removed from perennials can all be worked back into the soil,” Goodspeed says. “I also throw it out on the grass, then run over it a time or two with the lawn mower to shred it and throw the contents of the bag back onto the garden to compost during the winter. This improves the soil and reduces the waste sent to the land fill.”

Fall is also an excellent time to control broadleaf weeds in the garden and the lawn, he says. This time of year most perennial plants take energy down to their roots to store for the winter. Applying a good herbicide now will more likely kill the entire plant as it is also taken down to the roots. Some chemicals take longer to work in the fall but are actually more effective.

This is especially true for lawn weeds such as dandelions and knot weed, he explains. A good broadleaf weed killer is probably most effective this time of year and can eliminate worry about those nasty yellow flowers spotting the lawn come spring. Annual weeds such as spurge and crabgrass die with the first good frost, so don't worry about treating them right now. If they have been a major problem in the past, remember to use a pre-emergent next spring.

Normally you don’t need to prune roses in the fall, he says. But, to prevent the canes from breaking due to a heavy winter snow, cut back anything that grows over six feet tall.

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