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Fall Care for Perennials

November 20, 2022. Specifically for Zone 8/ Oregon or Washington

Many of you have asked me what I do with my perennials in the fall – cut them down or not? I've also heard people say things like “I can't get my delphiniums... or penstemon... or salvia...or dahlias...to come back after the winter.” These tips are for you. The main thing is – cut down as little as possible – this will protect from winter sogginess (especially given our wet winters and clay soil), result in fewer weeds, and is good for wildlife. BUT, there are some you should definitely cut! Read on...

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Nov 2022. Salvia Amistad, Peruvian Lily and Tiger Eye Sumac

WHEN to cut down perennials

I wait until we get freezing weather, preferably a hard frost, and the leaves are brown/black before I cut them down. November is when I do most of my cutting back, IF, I cut back. Many perennials I leave up all winter.

Why? First, in the fall the plants are taking nutrients from the leaves back down into their roots until the leaves fade and fall off, so the longer they have leaves, the more they can grow their roots, resulting in a stronger plant. Second, if the plants are cut too early and we have warmer weather, they will start growing new foliage and that tender foliage can get freeze damage if it doesn't have enough time to harden off before cold weather comes.



Mid October 2022 - Aster Purple Dome and Penstemon Ruby, with roses and crepe myrtle

Which ones? To cut... or not to cut... and why

I've divided this into three categories of perennials for fall care and included pruning & mulch recommendations. First off, mulch is great. I put 2" of wood chips or compost on top of most of my perennial beds every year or two.

1. Evergreen perennials.
 - a. Pruning. Don't cut. Nice to have pretty green leaves all winter plus this leaves less bare ground for weeds.
 - b. Some examples: Geum, Wallflower, Flag lily, Candytuft, Phygelius, Butterfly bush, Lavatera, Bergenia, Red Hot Poker, and Jerusalem Sage.
 - c. Mulch. They all like mulch. But Wallflower and Candytuft need good drainage so those benefit from a layer of gravel around their base to protect from getting too wet over winter. 2-3" of ¼" 10 gravel.
 - d. Sometimes evergreen perennial's foliage looks tattered by spring. Trim that back around Feb/Mar to clean it up and make way for the fresh new foliage.
2. Perennials that like good drainage.
 - a. Pruning. Don't cut. Our winters are very wet, which can be hard on plants that need good drainage. One great way to help them through the winter is to leave their foliage on them so they get less wet underneath. This works really well for me. Examples: Penstemon, Salvia, Agastache, Rudbeckia, and Echinacea.
 - b. Mulch. Important! With plants that need good drainage, I add 2-3" of ¼" 10 gravel (that is clean gravel that drains, no sand in it) all around their base to keep water from pooling/soaking their roots all winter.
3. Other perennials.
 - a. Perennials that have seedheads. I leave these up for wildlife until spring. Echinacea and rudbeckia/ gloriosa daisy are good examples.
 - b. Perennials that are disease or slug prone: Cut them down. Hostas and Delphiniums are slug favorites. Less foliage means less slugs/ slug babies. I slug bait these in Feb/Mar to prevent them from being eaten before they even come up. Phlox and Bee Balm are susceptible to powdery mildew and you don't want that carried on them through winter.

- c. Fuchsias. I'm taking hardy fuchsias here, not the annual ones. Do not cut them down (until spring). Clean up any of their dead/fallen leaves around them (that can overwinter disease). Then put 4-6" of wood chips all around their base.
- d. Perennials with some green over winter. For example, with sedum and yarrow, if you cut off the tops, they have some growth at the base that is nice and green over winter. For hardy geranium, it sometimes stays green most of the winter, I just trim a bit off around the edges.

Dahlias. My favorite. When they turn black, cut them all the way to the ground (you can do this before they go black but I like to wait until at least early Nov). ALL the way. The stems are hollow, and if you leave the stems up, it's like a straw for water to go down to the tuber and rot it. Then cover it with a 'cone' of gravel, 2-3" tall and at least 1' wide. I usually wait as long as I can because some years they're looking good until December. No need to take off the gravel in spring, they come up through it.



Dahlia was cut down (it was inside the cage) so no stem showing and covered with 3" of 1/4" 10 gravel.

If you have questions about this, I'm happy to help. Just email me at LuxPerennials@gmail.com.

I am grateful for my family, my wonderful garden, and customers like you!
Lisa

Happy Thanksgiving!

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