

Fall Clean-Up & Winter Prep

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SPEAKERS

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- C** Christa Hartsook 00:15

Hello, and welcome to the Small Farms Podcast, a production of the Small Farms Program at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Our podcast covers the opportunities and challenges associated with rural life.
- O** Olivia Hanlon 00:29

In this episode I visit with Aaron Steil, Consumer Horticulture Specialist with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Today we are talking about fall wrap up and winter preparation. I'm Olivia Hanlon, Small Farms Extension Specialist, and we hope you enjoy the show. Aaron, welcome. We're glad to have you joining us today.
- A** Aaron Steil 00:48

Yeah, thanks for inviting me. I can't believe we're already talking about this topic.
- O** Olivia Hanlon 00:53

It seems like fall came crazy quick, and I'm sure winter will come even quicker, Aaron.
- A** Aaron Steil 00:57

I don't wish it but, yeah.
- O** Olivia Hanlon 01:01

Alright Aaron Well we've had you on before and I'm sure you get tired of answering this

Alright, Aaron. Well, we've had you on before, and I'm sure you get tired of answering this question for us, but just as a quick reminder for everyone out there, why don't we start with an introduction on what your role here at Iowa State includes?

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Aaron Steil 01:14

Yeah, so as the Consumer Horticulture Extension Specialist, I am tasked with working with all 100 County Extension offices across the state to help them answer the many home gardening questions that come into their office every day.

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Olivia Hanlon 01:29

Alright, so let's dive into fall wrap up first, since that is what is upon us here. It's about that time of year where everything's coming out of the garden. And what do we need to do, or what do we need to be thinking about doing in terms of fall cleanup of our garden, Aaron?

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Aaron Steil 01:45

Yeah, so this time of year, we're often really thinking about, you know, what should I cut back, when should I cut it back, and for the most part, most of our garden doesn't need a lot of cut back. The only areas that need good cleanup, typically are the vegetable gardens, and any containers or annual beds. Vegetable gardens, or vegetables in general, have a lot of potential disease and insect issues and removing all of that debris. After the first hard freeze when it kills everything is really beneficial to reducing the amount of inoculum or larva or eggs or those kinds of things that could potentially overwinter and cause problems the following season in your vegetable garden. And the same is true for annuals, although they don't have the same disease pressure. Often annual beds don't look as attractive when you leave them there and some annuals can get quite weedy. So removing all those seed pods and other things can really be beneficial. Otherwise, your perennial border, it can stay just as it is through the winter, there's actually a lot of benefits to doing that. Leaving the dried leaves, stems, all of those things, seed heads, those kinds of things make the garden more interesting through the winter months, there's not a lot out there. So we got to grab on and latch on to anything that we can. So the dried pods of coneflower, for example, can be really nice through the winter months, even if it is fairly minimal. The other nice thing is that all that plant material, if you let it in place can actually help the perennial overwinter better by providing a little bit of a blanket, and even catching leaves and some other things that can help kind of insulate the crown of the perennial. And you know, there are many native insects and animals that really benefit from having that stuff in place. So it really is best if you can just leave it be and clean it up in the spring.

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Olivia Hanlon 03:42

Alright, Aaron. So we talked a little bit about gardens there, and you did go a little bit into flower beds. But maybe let's talk a little bit more specifically about flower beds. We talked a couple of weeks ago, I think it was about some new fall flowers that folks could be putting out still. But if there's folks out there that are not putting anything new in, what kinds of things should we consider pulling? What should we leave? Give us some good tips.

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Aaron Steil 04:07

Yeah, so in the perennial border, it can be beneficial to deadhead certain perennials. I think things like garlic chives, some of the alliums, sometimes Amsonia, or blue stars, cat men, some of these plants can really set a lot of seed. And so if you do a nice job of either deadheading or clearing out all of that, it can kind of reduce how weedy they might become in following growing seasons. So for some of those aggressively spreading by seed perennials, deadheading can be really beneficial this time of year. There's also some perennials that are really prone to heaving through the winter months. The top layer of soil frequently thaws and refreezes because of the sun and radiant heat from the sun through the winter months. And that freeze and thaw cycle can work shallow rooted perennials up out of the soil and then when the crown and roots are exposed, they dry out and potentially die. So those shallow rooted perennials, think of things like coral bells, mums, pin cushion flower, these are plants that are notorious for being very shallow rooted. And also those perennials that you planted within the last year, especially those that if you planted in the fall or even this last spring, they haven't fully established yet, they could benefit from a blanket of mulch, and you put this down really late in the season, so it could be Thanksgiving before you put this down. You have to wait until the ground freezes, but before your mulch pile freezes. There's kind of like a balance there. And you're gonna put about four inches of this mulch over the crown of the plants, once they have gone fully dormant, and the ground is frozen or nearly frozen. That's typically mid to late November for much of the state of Iowa. And then you're gonna leave that there until spring, and you'll pull it off of the crowns and plants, usually around mid March after it thaws.

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Olivia Hanlon 05:56

Okay, Aaron, you beat me to it here a little bit. Aside from our mulching, maybe on some of those perennials and other things that we maybe just recently planted, is there anything that we need to do aside from that little bit of cleanup that you talked about on our gardens or our flower beds in order to prepare them for the winter.

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Aaron Steil 06:14

The other things that you can do are kind of related to protecting plants over the winter, so some plants may really benefit from a layer of straw, some of our marginally hardy perennials like butterfly bush, some of our roses, they can really benefit from putting like a cylinder of chicken wire or hardware cloth around the plant after it goes dormant, and filling it with about three feet of straw or pine straw. You want to avoid leaves, because they can really compact down and potentially suffocate the plant over the winter. So that can be something that's really beneficial and then protecting them, potentially from hungry animals over the winter, in particular rabbits and deer, if you can cage or fence them in to exclude them, that can be really helpful both for perennials that may see browsing, but more so for things like shrubs and those kinds of things.

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Olivia Hanlon 07:12

Okay, very good, Aaron. Along with wrapping up our gardens and our flowerbeds, fall is also a

good time to take a look at our lawns. What should we be doing for our yard in the fall?

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Aaron Steil 07:24

Oh, there's a lot of stuff you can do in the yard in the fall. Fall is actually one of the best times to do a lot of seeding, a lot of fertilization, and just a lot of other care things. So early fall is the best time to seed new grass. The soil is warm, so it germinates quickly and it gets nicely established with less weed pressure than it has in the spring. So seeding and sodding are good things to do in the fall. Core aeration is another good thing to do in the fall. This is where you remove little plugs of soil, it helps kind of break up the thatch layer. And it also helps to kind of un-compact the soil. Lawns can overtime get quite compacted. And when you think about it, you walk over every square inch of that thing once a week. So it can get compacted. So core aeration can help with that. It's also the time for broadleaf weed control. So if you have weeds in your lawn that you want to get rid of fall is the best time with that stuff down herbicide wise if you plan to do that. And it's also a great time for fertilization, we typically can put down two rounds of fertilizer in the fall, one in September and the other one about six weeks later. And that can really help get a strong root system established for overwintering and allow that lawn to really take off in a big way in the spring.

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Olivia Hanlon 08:43

Aaron, if we've got trees on our acreage, fall is also a good time to get things cleaned up and prepare them for winter as well. Is there anything that we need to do to get them cleaned up this fall?

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Aaron Steil 08:53

Yeah, so the one thing you don't want to do is prune. This is not the time of year to be pruning. If we prune in September, October, or even November before the trees go dormant, we encourage that plant to grow and replace what was lost rather than to go more dormant. And so we can see more winter damage on plants that we prune this time of year. It's very tempting to prune this time of year, I don't know what it is. But I feel it too. I get out in the garden and I'm picking things up and I just like I want to trim things off of the trees and stuff and now is not the time to do that. Dormant period is the time to do that. That's December through March roughly, so resist the urge to prune. That's one of the best things we can do to our trees this time of year. The other two things that we want to do is a lot of younger trees in particular will benefit from wrapping the trunk in some kind of protective, with some kind of protective material, a plastic tube or some kind of tree wrap to keep rabbits and other rodents from stripping bark. And it can also help reduce a phenomenon called sunscald which can affect young Trees, especially those with smooth bark, and it has to do with the sun during the winter months warming and then refreezing that very top surface layer the bark, and it causes us to split. So if we can wrap those young trees, to protect them from those animals and from sunscald, it can go a long way to keeping those trees healthy more long term. And then you know, some of those, especially folks who are in areas that are prone to deer damage, now is the time to be putting out fencing, or posts to discourage antler rubbing on young trees that can completely destroy a tree in one kind of event if you're not careful. So you can put like, what a lot of people refer to as hog panel fencing around the tree to prevent antler rubbing.

You can also put stakes in about four foot, they should be about four foot tall, and about 18 inches apart. And when they're that way, usually it only takes about three around a young tree, they can't get their antlers into the tree to rub it off. And so they leave it alone. And that can also be quite beneficial, especially for folks who have acreage is or lots of trees that are prone to that once trees get bigger. The deer don't rub their antlers on it. They just like those really flexible young trees. They work really well for that. And they can cause a lot of damage to those trees if that actually happens.

O Olivia Hanlon 11:17

Absolutely. And if anyone is having problems with that issue, we did have Andy Kellner from the DNR on a few weeks ago, so be sure to check out that episode on some more prevention tactics there. Aaron, you mentioned a little bit wrapping things for animals and we talked about the deer. Rabbits seem to be a big area of concern in the winter, is there anything that we need to do to maybe trees or shrubs to keep those rabbits away from this winter?

A Aaron Steil 11:42

Yeah, especially when there's a lot of snow cover, rabbits can cause a lot of damage over the winter because they're just desperate for something to eat. And the cambium layer, which is a little green layer right under the bark of trees and shrubs isn't great, but it's better than nothing. And so they can cause a lot of damage trying to eat that. tree wrap helps a lot for young trees, shrubs and other like multi stem trees or things that are a little harder to wrap. You can put fencing around them just a simple chicken wire fence, just make sure that it's at least 36 inches tall, because you'll want to make sure that the fence is tall enough to keep the rabbits out even if there's snow cover so that they don't hop up over the fence when we have a foot of snow on the ground, for example.

O Olivia Hanlon 12:23

Absolutely. Aaron, we kind of did a quick hit on everything here, it feels like. Is there anything that we missed that you want to talk about a little bit more? Or are you good for today?

A Aaron Steil 12:34

You know, the only thing I'll add is that you can absolutely do a lot of successful planting in the fall. I mean, we talked a little bit about planting new lawns but many woody plants, trees and shrubs are easily planted this time of year. Evergreens like conifers should be planted before the end of September. And any other woody plant can be planted until you can't put a shovel in the ground anymore because it's frozen. So planting trees and shrubs this time of year is possible as our spring flowering bulbs. So don't forget about tulips and daffodils and the hyacinth and all those things. October is the best month for us to put those bulbs in the ground, hopefully be pleasantly surprised by them when they're colorful blooms pop up in the spring.

O Olivia Hanlon 13:19

Olivia Hanlon 13:25

For sure. Aaron, if we do get some of those bulbs or woody plants in, is there anything that we need to do for them to overwinter well or do we just need to get them in the ground good?

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Aaron Steil 13:28

Get them in the ground and watch for watering. Fall does tend to be a little drier than spring. And so we can't rely on Mother Nature to water our newly transplanted or planted plants as much in the fall as we do in the spring. So making sure that you water regularly, check for water regularly and water when needed, all the way up until when the ground freezes. And for many of us this might be after we put our hose away for the season. So you'll have to make sure that if the ground is not frozen, that you're checking for soil moisture on a regular basis and applying water if it's needed.

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Olivia Hanlon 14:04

Okay, very good, Aaron, if people are wanting any more information on some of this fall cleanup or winter winter preparation stuff, where should they look? Or who should they reach out to?

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Aaron Steil 14:16

The best place to get your home gardening questions answered is your local county extension office and they have a lot of resources available to help you get your questions answered at the extension office.

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Olivia Hanlon 14:27

Perfect. Aaron, is there anything else before we go?

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Aaron Steil 14:31

No, it's just this is a great time of year. I know a lot of people who love the fall, the colors, the crisp air, hopefully folks can get out and enjoy it in their gardens.

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Olivia Hanlon 14:40

Absolutely. I have to say Aaron, I'm really enjoying having my windows open everywhere in the house!

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Aaron Steil 14:46

It is really nice!



Olivia Hanlon 14:48

All right. Well, thank you for joining us, Aaron, and I'm sure we'll have you back again soon.



Aaron Steil 14:53

I look forward to it. Thank you.



Iowa State University Extension and Outreach 14:55

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