

GARDEN TASKS FOR FALL AND WINTER



BY DEREK THOMAS

Fall is a challenging time for many gardeners; the summer has ended, the days are getting shorter, the last of the late blooming perennials are over, even our tomato vines have lost their zest. The air has a chill that suddenly reminds us that our gardening season is coming to a close. We try hard to embrace the beauty that is fall in Washington, leaves changing color, pumpkins sprouting on door steps, and the wonderful fall fruit and vegetables that are available at local farmers markets throughout the city. Yet avid gardeners are hard pressed to truly welcome a season that is preparing our gardens for a long winter break. Over the next few months I will attempt to share with you some garden tasks that have helped me to learn to love a time that forces me to slow down and prepare for my gardens season of rest.

Soil building

Fall is a perfect time to begin attending to soil preparation. Soil is not dirt. It is a complex mix of weathered rock fragments, newly formed clay minerals, de-

caying remains of plants and animals, air, water, soil animals and microorganisms. Soil provides mechanical support, nutrients, and water to growing plants.

One of the most important things that can be done to your soil this fall is adding organic matter. Organic matter is simply dead and decaying plants and animals. Organic matter is important for gardening success for two major reasons: it improves the physical structure of the soil, and it slowly releases major and minor nutrients to plants. Adding manures, compost and other organic materials can greatly improve your soil's phys-



ical structure and raise the nutrient level. This is also reduces our dependency on synthetic fertilizers, (a good thing). Keep in mind that this is a process; a desirable soil quality does not come with a single addition of organic material. It will require a continuous soil building regimen. We should work towards a goal of 20% to 30 % organic matter in our soil

One of the best products that I have found to assist in building organic matter is called Cockadoodle DOO. The company, Pure Barnyard, is relatively young (founded in 1998). However, they have developed a complete line of organic

fertilizers for lawn and garden, and an organic weed control program. One of the best things about Pure Barnyard's products is that they really work. Cockadoodle DOO is made of aged chicken manure. It can be used in your garden, lawn, window boxes, and house plants. It is safe around kids and pets, and more importantly it is slowly released into the soil, so no noxious chemicals will leach into the ground water in the form of environmental contaminants. I have found that the results of using this product for the last three years have been very impressive. I have garden areas where I can see a dramatic improvement in the soil, and plants. However, remember soil building is a process, not an event. If you want a garden with healthy, vigorous, plants now is the time to begin working organic matter into the soil. Apply an organic product to your soil this November, continue this every three months, and your plants will thank you for it.

Pruning

Fall is the perfect time to prune your herbaceous plants (plants whose foliage dies back to the ground each year). In fact prun-

ing them now helps to keep your beds neat, aids air circulation, and enables you to apply topdressing of organic compost. However, if you have subshrubs, (Lavender is perhaps one of the most popular subshrubs in Washington gardens), do not prune them this fall or winter. In fall and winter subshrubs often do not achieve a true dormant state, and are more susceptible to frost and freeze damage. If they are pruned now this will stimulate the plants to waste energy in the form of new growth. This weakens the plant and in the following spring the plant loses vigor or dies. Depending on the type of subshrub, the time to prune, in most cases, is in the spring. You should also hold off on pruning your woody plants until late winter. This will minimize plant stress and encourage new growth.

When it comes to general pruning it is important to know your plant. Take the time to learn its life cycle. When does it begin to grow in the spring? When does it produce flowers? When is it dormant? When in doubt ask a landscape professional or garden center. Just remember if you make a mistake like trimming your azaleas in the fall, (this will cut off next years blooms), you always have next year to try again.

Bulbs

November may be the best time to buy spring flowering bulbs from garden centers. By now they have been discounted and you still have time to plant them and get blooms in the spring. Bulbs need a predetermined length of "cool" time once planted to begin growth and then flower. This time varies with each variety, and planting later will only delay the bloom in spring. I have planted daffodils as late as January and they have bloomed, much later than their cousins that were planted on time, yet just as beautifully. One important thing when purchasing bulbs is to always feel each bulb to ensure that it is healthy and alive. Purchasing individuals instead of pre bagged packs will allow you to check each bulb. The bulb should feel firm, not dry and hard, with no soft spots. Stay away from lilies this late in the season since they do not enjoy being out of the soil for long periods of time.

Next months feature will be a review of garden books, and the proper way to purchase, maintain, and plant a live holiday tree. ■

This is the first of three articles on fall and winter garden care. Derek Thomas, Principal landscape designer at Thomas Landscapes and Maintenance can be contacted at 301.642.5182 or at www.thomaslandscapes.com. If you want more information on Pure Barnyard and Cockadoodle Doo organic fertilizers the web site is www.CockadoodleDOO.com

ginkgogardens.com

I can't wait to go shopping!

Ginkgo Gardens, here we come!

Where gardening fun never ends!

Special Sales each week in November throughout the store. Also, register for the Holiday Sweepstakes. You could win a Fraser Fir Christmas tree, a mixed evergreen wreath with cones and berries and bow, or one of five poinsettias—you choose the color.

Ginkgo Gardens

Holiday shopping begins and ends at Ginkgo Gardens.

911 11th Street, SE • Washington, DC 20003 • 202.543.5172 • Fall Hours: 8 - 7 Monday-Friday • 8 - 6 Saturday • 10 - 5 Sunday

A NEW MONTHLY COLUMN

BUILDING Wealth

A Capital Community News Financial Report

CCN launches a feature section on personal financial management, offering access to sources from Capitol Hill to Wall Street and providing unique perspectives on the policy and trends that affect us the most.

Look for it in the Real Estate & Finance section.



We need your help!

CFC # 7193

Fort Dupont is the only full-size indoor ice arena in Washington, DC. It operates year round. As a nonprofit organization we appreciate, and are in constant need of, charitable contributions to support our community service programs. Donations may be made in person, by mail, or online at www.fdia.org.

**Kathy Cox • Executive Director
Friends of Fort Dupont Ice Arena, Inc.**

Please designate CFC 7193 to help.

Call 202-584-5007 or visit www.fdia.org for more information.

THOMAS LANDSCAPES & MAINTENANCE

Start having the yard of your dreams.

- Free initial consultation
- Personalized service
- Over twenty years experience
- Comprehensive design and implementation
- Patios, roof top gardens, townhomes, single family homes
- Lawns, trees & shrubs, formal & informal gardens

PRICE GUARANTEE
"We will beat the competition by 10%"

**Call for appointment
301-642-5182**

www.thomaslandscapes.com