

October 17, 2022

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

"Autumn is a second spring when every leaf is a flower."

— Albert Camus

The hubby and I spent this past weekend camping at Pattison State Park to enjoy the last of the fall color and explore some of the neighboring waterfalls at Amnicon Falls State Park and other nearby locations. We woke up to a light snow on Friday morning and it was a reminder that with winter just around the corner, I need to do some garden bed cleanup. It's always a struggle for me as by this time of year, I'm really done with outdoor gardening. However, I know that if I don't take care of a few things this fall, I'm going to regret it come next spring.

Just like the song "Should I Stay or Should I Go", decide what plants are going to be more trouble now or later if left standing in the garden until next spring. After a killing frost, there are a variety of large leaved perennials, such as hostas, and various annuals that should be cut down, removed, and sent to the compost pile. It's good to do it now as it will most likely be too wet next spring. Other plants that should be cut done are bee balm, peonies, bearded iris, and garden phlox to avoid overwintering of diseases. Always cut back any infected or diseased foliage. However, don't put the plant material on the compost pile as they will just spread the diseases such as powdery mildew. Instead, bag it up with your regular garbage or place it on a pile that won't be used for future compost. Other plants to cut back in the fall are ones that flower in the early spring or summer.

Once you've cleared the obvious plants, carefully consider what you cut back next. Technically, there are very few plants that must be cut back each fall. Fallen leaves and old plant material help insulate the plant during the winter freezes and thaws. As it breaks down, it becomes compost for the plant as well. Certain plants, such as mums, anise hyssop, and red-hot poker, have a much better survival rate if you wait until spring to cut them back. They need their foliage to protect the root crowns over the winter. Consider leaving plants such as coneflowers, black-eyed Susan, grasses, and other plants as their seed heads provide food for visiting birds and provide winter interest. Many times, what you leave behind will also provide a habitat for beneficial insects to overwinter safely. You can prune back these plants if you don't want them to reseed. Certain perennials, including evergreen perennials, should not be cut back. Plants on this list include epimediums, hellebores, heucheras, moss phlox, hardy geraniums, hen and chicks, and candytuft.

Do a final weeding before the ground freezes. The more weeds you remove, especially those with seeds, the fewer weeds you'll have to deal with next spring. You can add compost, but don't fertilize as it will encourage new growth that will get killed off when it gets colder. If you have some newly planted perennials, you can mulch around them to provide additional protection but wait until the ground is frozen. Remember the more work you do this fall, the less you'll have to do next spring.

This week's article is written by Jeannie Manis, a Wisconsin Certified Sauk County Master Gardener Volunteer. If you have any gardening questions, please contact the Extension Sauk County by emailing to tripp@wisc.edu or calling the University of Wisconsin Madison Division of Extension Sauk County office at 608-355-3250.