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Garden Plant Preparation for Winter Dormancy Begins Now

The beginning of fall signals transitions in the garden, and while plants are going dormant, there are still tasks to complete before the garden shuts down completely for the winter. Aside from lawncare tips mentioned over the last three weeks, shrubs, trees, and herbaceous perennials also need work to keep plants healthy from year to year. Herbaceous perennials can either die back to the ground or persist through the winter. Perennials that die back will shrivel as temperatures cool and the weather dries out, which often creates debris in the garden bed. These leaves and stems should be cut back to the ground to encourage sprouting the following spring. Plants that can be cut back include hostas, irises, lilies, black-eyed susans, and all bulbs. The debris can then be composted, along with any fallen leaves.

It is important to make sure that you are not including any diseased leaves in your compost. Often, disease pathogens will congregate in compost, and if the pathogens are not selective in which plants they infect, you could see disease outbreaks when using your compost as a mulch the following year. Discard diseased leaves through lawn waste disposal or through burning.

Shrubs and trees will both need pruning in the fall. For trees, fall is the secondary pruning season to spring. Fall tree pruning will often be light and only to remove any structural defects that might be exacerbated by the extra weight of snow or ice. Shrub pruning is much more intensive, and timing of shrub pruning is key to the long-term health of the plant. Pruning during dormancy will put much less stress on the plant the following season, so if the shrub is deciduous, pruning later into the fall is recommended.

Evergreen shrubs like juniper and arborvitae do not go dormant and can be pruned at any time. When pruning deciduous shrubs, keeping them to a manageable size is the first priority for determining how much of the plant to remove. As always, do not prune out more than a third of

the plant in any given year. If shrubs have gotten out of control, they will need to be pruned down over successive years until they are at your desired size.

Some ornamentals benefit from the cooler temperatures that fall brings, and a few even become supplemental food sources. Plants such as chokeberry, serviceberry, medlars, and persimmon, are often planted for qualities other than their fruit, as many consider these fruits to be unpalatable. However, these fruits will sweeten considerably during frosts. Astringent fruits (e.g. persimmon or chokeberry) benefit most from this reaction, and can be used in edible landscaping when fresh winter fruits are desired.

For a list of plants suited to edible landscaping or a list of fall tasks to complete in the garden, please contact Jesse Gilmore, KSU Horticulture Agent at (620) 724-8233 or at jr637@ksu.edu.

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