

GARDENING SPRING CLEANING

by Marlys Bell

I confess the unseasonably warm weather lured me outside for a quick look at the garden. My meanderings took me by the garden shed where I instinctively picked up gloves, shears and shovel and before consciously thinking about it, I started cleaning up the garden. Since I left almost all of the foliage, flowers and seedpods for birds, butterflies and winter interest, the garden looks a little unkempt. My husband keeps asking, “Are those dead or is that just the way they look in the winter?” Like me, he is eager to get the garden cleaned up and ready for spring.

Motivated by the “clean up” impulse, I whacked down the most obvious signs of winter, the brown disfigured leaves of the 6-foot tall cannas. Next I moved some plants to other locations. And then I stopped to remind myself that winter is undoubtedly not over, even at my 2000-foot elevation. I should have left those canna leaves to provide protection for the emerging tiny tips of new growth. The plants, like me, have been tricked by the warm weather and may be at greater risk if I react to their cues that spring has arrived. Deciding which clean up tasks should be done now and which need to wait requires some research (and patience!). The schedule and priorities for spring cleanup depend more on plant needs and Mother Nature’s timetables than mine.

Checking the condition of plants is a good place to start your clean up process. For example, subsequent observation revealed that several plants were heaved out of the ground by freezing temperatures, raccoons or gophers. The newly planted perennials were most at risk but erosion caused by heavy rains also exposed roots for more established plants. Based on a quick walk through the garden, I developed the following priorities for the next few weeks.

Tree and Shrub Pruning. Deciduous trees with dead, crossing or rubbing branches, suckers and other structural problems need to be pruned while they are still dormant—the sooner the better, but certainly before they start leafing out. Pruning the fruit trees can wait until later in the spring when they first start showing signs of new growth. The seedpods and spent blooms on trees such as crape myrtle and Vitex (chaste tree) should be removed to encourage more prolific flowering. The redbuds and flowering quince also need to be cut back to control their size but can wait until the spring flowers fade. Obviously, bushes that set their buds last fall like azalea, rhododendron and camellia should not be pruned until after they have bloomed.

As indicated in the January 28th rose pruning articles, including, “How-Tos of Pruning for the Backyard Gardener” by fellow Master Gardener, Carolee James, it is time for those living in the lower elevations to start pruning many varieties of roses now. Rosemary Sawyer, a Master Rosarian quoted in the January 28th article, “Taming the Shrub” also said once pruning is completed, the remaining leaves on rose bushes should be stripped off the stems, all debris and old mulch removed and replaced with new mulch to prevent disease.

Cutting Back. The first priority is to “cut back” any plant that may be harboring disease, such as my hypericum bushes that look like they have rust and fungus. Cutting them back drastically will encourage a fresh start. The peonies also need to be cut back now since I did not do it late last fall. Once it is clear that there will be no more killing

freezes, the deciduous bushes such as buddleia (butterfly bush), caryopteris (Bluebeard) and hydrangeas can be pruned or cut back to the extent necessary. I try to cut just above an outward facing bud.

The next plants that need to be cut back are the ornamental grasses. Most can be cut to about six inches to promote vigorous new growth. Depending upon the size of the clump, the most efficient tools may be shears, weed whackers with metal blade, or a chain saw. The native needle grasses (*Nasella* species) and other spring bloomers should not be cut back until they go dormant in the summer.

When the trees and bushes are done, I will focus on the perennials. Those that are showing signs of growth can be cut back, especially the tall and wispy ones such as perovskia (Russian sage), gaura, and Mexican sage. Cutting back to the new growth helps control size and makes them more compact. Smaller perennials such as asters, agastache, sedum 'autumn joy,' and nepeta should also be cut back to the new growth and the old foliage removed. Others such as euphorbia, phormium, and centranthus do not need to be cut back but any discolored or disfigured foliage can be selectively removed.

General Clean Up. Priority should be given to removing and disposing of any debris that might be harboring diseases, weeds, or undesirable bugs such as aphids or mealybugs. Any hardy blooming plants such as coral-bells, yarrow or euphorbia should have old blooms removed. If the plants are tender (not frost-hardy), such as cannas or marginally hardy salvias, leaving the old foliage provides some protection until there is no longer danger of a killing freeze. Most hardy salvias can be cut back to remove spent blooms and dry tips to improve appearance or to control size. Any frost damage—such as brown dried leaves or stem tips, or mushy texture—should be cut back to green foliage or emerging tips or nubs.

Transplanting. If plants have grown too big for their site, wait to transplant them until early spring when the soil is warm and dry enough to avoid clumping. Another possibility is to put plants into pots to develop their root systems in a sheltered spot. (If planted into the ground before root systems develop adequately, they will need frequent attention if it gets hot and dry before they get established.)

Final Steps. Once all of the clean up is done, it's time to add some compost or mulch and check irrigation systems as you get ready for a new growing season. The next time I find myself itching to do something in the garden, I now have a game plan and am clearer about what needs to be done soon and what can and should wait for warmer weather or for signals from plants that it is their time for attention. Those living in higher elevations can probably give themselves extra time to get their spring cleaning done but I hope to complete my gardening projects by March 20th, the first day of spring, so that I will be ready to say "good bye winter; welcome spring."

Marlys Bell is an avid UCCE Tuolumne County master gardener who is developing her property to be a demonstration garden for "living green."