



Winter Gardening Activities

Winter is an important time of year in the garden and in many cases is the best time of year to complete certain activities, such as fertilizing, pruning, mulching, edging, and of course planning for the year to come.

FERTILIZATION

The season for fertilizing winter hardy plants begins in the fall 4-6 weeks after the first killing frost and runs through early to mid-spring (until active spring growth begins). Approximately December 1st through March 15th. Fertilization is intended to supplement naturally occurring nutrients in the soil, enhancing healthy growth and productive flowering and fruiting. If you have plants that are in decline or have compromised health due to injury, insects, disease or unknown causes please consult a professional before fertilization. We have several Horticulturists on staff that can assist you.

Granular fertilizers have a wide range of appropriate applications and are typically more economical and easier to apply. Many of the granular fertilizers we carry not only provide long lasting nutrients but are also beneficial for microbial activity, which helps create a healthier soil environment.

Liquid or soluble fertilizers are widely available but more complicated to use. They require accurate measuring and mixing before application. They are best used during the active growing season on crops such as annuals, vegetables and tropicals or houseplants. They are not generally recommended for use on trees, shrubs, vines, groundcovers or perennials.

Trees and shrubs planted within the last year will benefit from a light winter fertilization applying only half of the usual recommended dosage. Choose a granular fertilizer with a low nitrogen percentage (6 or lower). Trees and shrubs in the ground for 1-10 years benefit from an annual fertilization at the recommended rate with a balanced granular 6-6-6 fertilizer, or higher NPK ratio (not to exceed 20-20-20).

Mature trees (in the ground 10+ years) benefit from a balanced fertilization every 3-5 years tailored to their current health and site conditions. Certified arborists have the most effective tools to fertilize mature trees. Please consult a Team Member for a certified arborist in our area.

Mature shrubs (in the ground 10+ years) benefit from a balanced fertilization every 3-4 years tailored to their current health, desired growth and site conditions.

Perennials can be fertilized anytime from early February to the end of March. Use a granular fertilizer and apply it evenly throughout the perennial planting area. An alternate and more aggressive fertilization plan would be to apply ½ the recommended amount of fertilizer in February then again in March and again in early June.

Ornamental grasses do not generally require fertilization and typically perform their best without them.

Fertilization of groundcovers and vines is site, variety, and overall health specific. Consult one of our team members for more information.

PRUNING

Of the four seasons, winter is the best time to prune most plants. The winter pruning season begins only after several hard freezes, generally occurring in mid to late November. These hard freezes will take the plants into full dormancy. Full dormancy prevents any sensitive/tender new tissue or foliar growth from initiating and risking damage from cold temperatures. Waiting to prune until winter also allows you to see the structure of many plants, making pruning easier. Pruning is both an art and a technical procedure. Improper pruning can be harmful to the plant in multiple ways and can lead to decline, weakened or excessive growth, and numerous other problems.

Pruning on most deciduous plants, including trees and shrubs, should be completed during the winter season. Maples, birches, and yellowwoods are best pruned in early to mid-winter before sap flow begins. It is also important to take caution when pruning plants that are grown for desirable fruit or flowers like blueberries, crapemyrtles, forsythia, hydrangeas, raspberries, roses, and more. Some plants set flower buds on old or last year's growth and some on new growth so if you prune at the wrong time you may be removing the plant's flowers for the year before you ever see them. The following plants should be pruned in late winter or early spring before new growth begins: Roses, Annabelle and Panicle Hydrangeas, Crapemyrtles, Butterfly Bush, and Abelias. The following is a list of blooming plants that should not be pruned in winter, prune instead right after flowering is complete: Azaleas, Lilacs, Forsythias, Oakleaf and Macrophylla Hydrangeas, Quince, and Viburnums.

When it comes to pruning plants to a controlled shape such as a hedge, cone, or topiary the best time to prune or shear is early summer after the new spring growth has hardened off. This prevents them from starting to grow again, thus requiring additional pruning to maintain shape.

Light pruning of most broadleaved evergreens can be done in the winter. Pine, Spruce, and Firs (needled evergreens) generally require little if any pruning when placed in the landscape correctly. If pruning is needed, please consult a team member as a very specific time and pruning method is required.

Most non-evergreen perennials should be cut back annually in late fall or early winter. Some perennials are evergreen and don't require cutting back or it can be done in the spring just before new growth or flowers emerge. Some perennials have seeds such as coneflowers and black-eyed susans which are an important food source for birds during the winter and should be cut back once the seeds are consumed. Perennials are a very diverse category with lots of variations for maintenance so please as a team member for clarity if needed.

Most ornamental grasses can be cut back anytime from late November through mid-March. The exact time you cut these back is mostly determined by your personal taste. The dried grass blades and seed heads can be considered ornamental when kept through the winter. The seed heads of ornamental grasses provide an important food source for many birds throughout the winter. Some Carex (sedge) varieties and small native grasses can be slow to reemerge after cutting back, so waiting until late winter into early March is best or not cutting these back at all will give you the best results.

Groundcovers should be treated on a species-by-species case. One of the most common, Liriope often remains evergreen most of the winter and can be cut back in late winter, before new growth begins. Ivy, Vinca, and Pachysandra are not typically cut back at all outside of maintaining boundaries.

Vines are similar to groundcovers. Each vine has specific pruning needs with some never needing to be cut back. Please consult a Team Member for instructions on if, when, and how to prune your hardy vine.

EDGING & MULCHING

Defining bed lines and adding an insulating layer of mulch will help the sometimes barren, winter garden look tidy and fresh until the new growth emerges in spring. Edging and mulching can be done any time of year and may need to be done several times each year. Performing these tasks in the winter and again if needed in the summer leaves the busy seasons of spring and fall to other important tasks, such as planting.

It is important to maintain a clean cut bed edge to reduce lawn grasses and weeds from encroaching into the landscape beds. It is also visually pleasing to have clean defined lines leading the eye around the garden. Avoid cutting the edge too deep as this can cause and encourage erosion not to mention a trip hazard. The edge should be just deep enough to mark and maintain the transition point from the lawn to mulched areas. For more information on tools and edging techniques please see a team member.

When it comes to mulching, our design philosophy at The Plant Kingdom is that the plants should be the focus of the landscape and recommend using natural and neutral-colored mulches. It is important to pick a type and brand of mulch and stick with it for continuity in your landscape. All of the shredded mulches we carry are direct bi-products of the lumber industry and pine straw is a harvested product of pines grown for lumber. These mulches are readily available due to a lively lumber market and are considered environmentally friendly.

For most landscape spaces maintain a mulch depth of 2-3" for optimal weed suppression and moisture retention. Mulching to a depth of 4" or more is not only more expensive but can be detrimental to your plants health. Never use fresh wood chips or bulk mulch that have not been properly composed. The natural chemical reactions assisting the necessary decomposition process will cause an environment that is not conducive to positive plant growth and can kill annuals and herbaceous perennials.

PLANNING

Start early and begin to plan small or large projects before the busy spring season arrives. Winter is an excellent time to be working in the garden and you can avoid the long lines or delays in service that occur each April and May. Ask a team member about our consulting services. Want a specific plant? Ask about our Special Request Service.

For more plant and garden information ask a team member or visit us online at plantkingdom.net/plants.