



CROW WING COUNTY MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM

Ask the Master Gardener

OCTOBER 2016 COLUMN

Dear Master Gardener:

I am new to gardening, how do I prepare my garden for winter?

The leaves tumbling down into our yard is nature's way of telling us it's time to get the garden ready for winter. When dying leaves drift onto the ground, they give the earth food that's vital for the buds of spring. Here are some suggestions for winter preparation:

- Pull up dying plants that have had insect or disease problems, you don't want pests or diseases wintering in your garden. Burn or bag any diseased plants — don't toss them onto your compost pile.
- Cut back your perennials leaving them four to six inches tall, but don't do this before the first killing frost. The energy in the upper plant flows to the root systems, where it's stored for the winter. Wait until the plant is dead, and then cut it back.
- Remove slimy leaves, pests love slime. Hostas and Solomon's Seal, for example, can both get pretty slimy.
- Dig out all of the weeds and give your gardens enough water to keep plants moist in the winter.
- Plant your spring-flowering bulbs; such as daffodils, tulips and crocuses. Remember that each bulb should be planted at a depth that is three times the height of the bulb.
- Leave pretty plants standing, they are beautiful in the winter sun, and they also provide vital winter food and sanctuary for butterflies to lay eggs and birds to nest.
- Spread one to six inches of compost or composted manure over your garden, which will enrich your soil with nutrients.
- Polish your gardening gear, the organized gardener can wind up the season by cleaning and sharpening all of their garden tools and putting them away for the winter.

Dear Master Gardener:

Can I divide my Karl Foerster feather reed grasses in the fall? Should I cut my grasses down now or wait until spring?

Calamagrostis ×acutiflora 'Karl Foerster' can successfully be divided in the fall, but most other grasses respond best to spring division. Cutting back grasses in the fall, especially younger plants, may result in winter injury and the beauty of the plants in the winter landscape is lost. In late winter or early spring, before new growth starts, cut back grasses to the ground to remove the previous year's growth. If the plants are not cut back, spring growth can be delayed and large plants will look unattractive throughout the year. 'Karl Foerster' begins to grow very early in spring and can be cut back in March or early April.

Dear Master Gardener:

Can I keep my fuschia and geraniums for next year by overwintering them?

Yes. It is possible to keep fuchsia plants from one year to the next, but they will not continue to bloom and grow over winter as they did during the summer. Fuchsias respond very strongly to annual changes in seasonal light levels. After October it is practically impossible to keep them blooming because the low sun and shorter days tend to send them into semi-dormancy. To over-winter fuchsias, gradually reduce watering in October and November. Don't let the soil become bone dry in winter, but water occasionally. During this rest period, temperatures of 45° to 55°F are ideal. The higher the temperatures above this range, the more likely the plants will produce spindly growth out of season. Plants overwintered at 70°F will have poor, feeble growth, and will be especially susceptible to spider mites and white fly infestations. Keep the plants in a cool, light room, pruning them back in mid-March. Fuchsias bloom on new wood, so it is important to encourage vigorous new growth in spring and summer for better flowering. If they grew a lot during the past summer, you may wish to transplant them to larger containers at this time. After pruning, the plants can be moved to slightly warmer temperatures (65°F days/55°F nights). Resume fertilizing with a product meant for blooming plants, but mixed at half-strength. When all danger of frost is past, the fuchsias can be moved outside again for the summer. Place them in a semi-shaded spot that gives protection from the afternoon sun and heat.

One way to over-winter geraniums is to take cuttings and root them in early fall. Geranium stem cuttings, often called "slips," should be about four inches long. Take the slips from the tips of the healthiest stems. Remove the leaves on the bottom two inches of the cuttings. Place the cuttings in coarse sand, perlite, vermiculite or a well-drained potting soil two inches deep and water thoroughly. The cuttings will root faster if you dip the ends in rooting hormone powder. Place them in a north or east window or underneath artificial lights until rooted. This generally takes three to four weeks. After the cuttings have rooted, plant them in individual pots and put them in a well-lighted spot. Keep the soil evenly moist and fertilize lightly every four to six weeks once new growth appears.

Another option is to pot your best geraniums and bring them indoors for winter. Cut the plant back to about one-third its original height. Carefully dig up the plant, and pot it into a six-inch or larger container. Water thoroughly and put it near a sunny window.

An old method of over-wintering geraniums is to dig up the plants, shake excess soil from their roots, then hang them from your basement rafters. Most basements are too warm and dry now, but some people still have success with this method. If you try this, take the plants down occasionally and place the roots in water for several hours. Then, hang them back up. Do this several times over the winter to prevent them from drying out completely. Pot your geraniums in early spring, and put them in a sunny window until the danger of frost has passed

October Garden Tips

- Ignore evergreen trees and shrubs that lose their innermost needles in fall. They're not diseased; it is normal for the inner growth to turn yellow or rust then drop to the ground creating natural mulch. These are the oldest needles; new ones will develop tips next spring.
- Cover tender roses any time after the 15th, even if they are still blooming. Hybrid tea roses can be killed when the temperature drops below 20 degrees.
- Spot spray for broadleaf weeds. Temperatures must be in the 50's or higher, with no rain for a day or two. Repeat the application in 10-14 days, choosing days with little or no wind.
- Wrap tender young trees to protect them from sunscald and animals.
- Continue to mow the grass as needed, gradually reducing height to 2 ½ inches until the grass goes dormant. Long grass left through the winter will fold over under the weight of snow, forming humid pockets that favor the growth of snow mold.

- Save the date! The U of M Extension Master Gardeners in Crow Wing County will be holding the spring Garden Expo on April 1, 2017 at the Brainerd High School.

University of Minnesota Extension Master Gardeners are trained and certified volunteers for the University of Minnesota Extension Service. All information given in this column is based on university research. To ask a question, call the Master Gardener Help Line at 218-454-GROW (4769) and leave a recorded message. A Master Gardener will return your call.

