

Gardens for year-round appeal and final garden chores

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Winters in Canada can be long, so create winter interest in gardens by leaving the seed heads on coneflowers, black eyed Susan, blazing star, Joe Pye weed, tickseed, sun flowers, sedums and ornamental grasses.

They add structure, motion and movement to your cold-weather garden. Keeping the landscape lights on all winter adds mystery to a snow filled back yard, while an urn filled with winter greens, natural stems and berries creates a focal point on the deck.

For most birds, the dried inflorescences of ornamental grasses furnish essential food, while the plants themselves provide great wildlife habitats. Add drama with fiery stems and emphasize intriguing bark and highlight unusual natural branch structure. The seeds and berries of viburnum, beautyberry, mountain ash, sumac, crab apple and serviceberry supplement the diet of our feathered friends and welcome migratory birds upon their return in the spring.

At this time of the year, messages like "putting your gardens to bed" are popping up all over social media, gardening magazines and educational seminars.

Granted, there are certain items on the checklist that absolutely have to be done, but for the most part, gardens really don't need to be put to bed permanently when the snow starts flying. Don't put so much pressure on yourself!

Chores like draining the garden hose, blowing out the pipes of the sprinkler system, storing the pressure washer inside so it does not freeze, emptying the rain barrels and storing them upside down, bringing in tender plants, are a must. Clay pots need to be emptied and washed with a mild bleach solution and stored for next year. If leaving them outside, they have to be off the ground and turned upside down.

Clean and put away garden tools and treat the wooden handles with linseed oil or tung oil. Spring is just around the corner, so continue to plant spring flowering bulbs until the ground freezes.

This would also be a good time to put stakes around the trees and bushes that need protection from road salt (like boxwoods), drying winds and a scalding winter sun. However, it is recommended to wait with wrapping the plants after the ground freezes. That way the little critters that were looking for a cozy home inside your wrapped bushes will have gone and found another home for the winter.

Rhododendrons should be loosely wrapped with burlap while burning bushes benefit from being protected from hungry critters with a wire mesh.

Horticulturists recommend to cut back peonies, phlox and other plants that are prone to mildew but urge us to leave hollow stems at about 12 inches high, so beneficial insects can lay their eggs or hibernate in them. Slugs might hide and overwinter under dead hosta leaves, so they should be removed.

After the first frost and when daytime temperatures are below freezing for a couple of consecutive days, protect roses from freeze and thaw cycles by piling fresh soil or compost over the part where they were grafted by using fresh soil, not soil that was scraped from around the plant.

Don't get carried away with the leaf blower, as it is important to leave the leaves on the garden beds. Insects hide in them, which then become food for backyard birds.

Leaves are packed with trace minerals that trees draw up from deep in the soil. When added to your garden, leaves feed earthworms and beneficial microbes. They lighten heavy soils and help sandy soils retain moisture and they make an attractive mulch in the flower garden.

Leaves are a fabulous source of carbon to balance the nitrogen in your compost pile. And they insulate tender plants from cold.

Leaving leaves on the lawn might harm the grass, unless they are finely mulched, which then turns them into an important source of nutrition.

With all this in mind, let's enjoy our gardens for year-round appeal, let them feed our souls and spirits.