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In the Garden with Shobha Vanchiswar

October 13, 2009

You asked: Reader queries (and answers) on fall chores

To clean up the leaves from flower beds or not?

Jean asks: *I'm cleaning up my flower beds for winter, and am wondering if I should rake up all the leaves around the perennials or leave some as mulch. I've heard both sides of this and am thinking it might be better to rake so as not to leave shelter for bugs or fungi to hide. Also maybe to discourage weed seeds for next year?*

Jean, I too prefer to clean up the leaves from flower beds. The leaves tend to form thick mats, which not only make for good breeding grounds for microbes but also resting places for the likes of small rodents. Needless to say this is totally undesirable. The matted leaves also inhibit new growth in the spring. The bulbs in my perennial beds have in the past emerged twisted from their struggle and young leaves of other plants come up albino-like from being smothered for too long. If leaves are to be used as mulch, I recommend that they be chopped up first.

Any good mulch will hinder weed seeds from emerging. I like to lay down layers of newspaper on top of which I place cedar chips. This has worked very

well for me. Naturally over time the mulch decays down and needs replacing. In that small window of time between old mulch and new, there are invariably some weeds that pop up. As much as I hate them, I have to admire them for their sheer tenacity!

OK to prune back roses now?

Stan asks: *I like cutting back my plants in the fall. Is it okay to prune back the roses now? Should the rose hips be removed?*

Stan, most perennials can be cut back at this time. Saves time when the pace gets busy in the spring. I also don't like the gloppy masses they turn into by the end of winter.

Roses, however, are not to be truly pruned back in the fall. If trimmed back and there is a spell of warm weather, the plant tends to put out new growth, which is invariably weak and will be killed off once the temperatures return to below zero degrees. This naturally stresses the whole plant.

Instead, only cut back at this time those rose limbs that are too long and vulnerable to breaking off under the weight of snow or ice. The rose hips left on limbs are not only pretty but provide food for birds and squirrels in the cold months. The roses can be properly pruned in late winter. I do this in late February or early March.

When do you surround your shrubs with burlap?

Tracy asks: *You mentioned surrounding some shrubs with burlap. When exactly do you do this?*

Tracy, I surround my roses with burlap fences. I wait till it is properly cold; otherwise the plants will get cozy and not know that winter has arrived. They will not go into dormancy at the appropriate time. Once winter arrives, the burlap goes up. I place some dry leaves inside to add a bit of insulation. The leaves are very loosely placed so as not to encourage mice looking for new homes. This task usually gets done in early December. Boxwoods and other shrubs can be protected in such a manner as well.

I derive great pleasure from knowing that we are all gardening together and share the same concerns and goals. Keep those questions coming!