



Q Should I cut back my perennials and ornamental grasses now or wait until spring? And how much of the plant do you remove?

- Jefferson County

A Choosing when to cut back perennials can be a personal preference. There is no scientific reason to do it now versus later. I prefer to cut my perennials back in the fall because then it's just done, and you don't have to deal with a soggy mess in the spring. There are several plants that are nice to leave for winter interest such as tall sedums and other perennials with nice, large seed heads, as well as all ornamental grasses. Aside from winter interest, they also provide seasonal food for birds and other wildlife. The rule of thumb for trimming back both perennials and ornamental grasses is to cut the plant back to 2-4" above the ground. I prefer to err on the side of leaving them a bit longer (4-6"). You may have to do a light clean up again in the spring, but cutting the plant back any shorter (or to ground level) may result in crown damage and the plant may not survive, especially if there is no mulch or snow cover for winter cold protection.



Q Can I put the fall leaves from my yard in the compost pile? - Yellowstone County

A Leaves are great for composting as they are high in carbon and can contain many trace elements that are depleted in some garden soils. Nitrogen is needed to feed the bacteria that compost the organic matter in leaves. Grass cuttings are one source of nitrogen that can be added to the mixture to meet this requirement. Be careful not to include clippings that have been sprayed with certain herbicides because they will contaminate compost and cause problems later when the compost is applied. Another thing to be aware of is that leaves may take a long time to break down. For faster compost, leaves should be shredded before they are added to the compost pile. The only leaves that should never go into the compost pile are those of black walnut, which produce natural herbicides that will prevent seeds from germinating. For more information on home composting, find MSU Extension's free MontGuide *Home Composting* (MT199203AG) at <http://www.msuextension.org/store>

Q When and how should I plant spring-flowering bulbs? - Sweet Grass County

A Spring-flowering bulbs such as tulips and daffodils should be planted in the fall, usually in September or October. Planting in the fall allows the bulbs to establish their root system before winter so the plants will be ready to grow as soon as temperatures warm in spring, giving them a head start.

The second reason to plant spring-flowering bulbs in the fall is that the plants have a chilling requirement (i.e., a certain amount of time in the cold for them to initiate flowers). Without the cold, the bulbs will produce plants, but not flowers.

When planting spring-flowering bulbs in the fall, be sure to add complete fertilizer and organic matter into the planting bed if the soil needs it, which is best determined by having the soil tested. Bulbs can be planted with a tulip-bulb planter for individual bulb planting or in masses by digging out a larger shallow pit for several bulbs to be planted together. The depth at which to plant bulbs depends on the species. See the bulb planting guidelines table on page 9 for recommendations. The general rule of thumb is to plant the bulbs two to three times as deep as they are tall; plant slightly deeper in sandy soils, and a bit shallower in clay soils.

Soak the soil after planting to the appropriate depth. If you live in an area with less snow cover, mulch the ground after soil freezes to keep the soil from thawing and refreezing again, which can cause damage to bulbs. As soon as spring emerges, remove the mulch and enjoy the spring flowers.



Do you have Master Gardener questions? Send them to: extensionmagazine@montana.edu.