

How Much Fall Clean-up Should You Do?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Last week I talked about whether or not you HAD to rake the leaves off your yard. Leaf raking is just one portion of a larger set of annual tasks that homeowners greet with varying levels of excitement or disdain. A few yard and garden cleanup items really should be done this fall. But in all honesty, a lot of them can wait until late winter or early spring and the plants in your yard as well as various critters will be better off for it.

Kansas has wind; I know that isn't a surprise to anyone. While we may not need to rake up the leaves in the yard if those same leaves end up settling in next to the house we do want to remove them. Keeping debris away from the house is the first step in reducing the number of insects and rodents that try to enter your house. A three or four foot "clean zone" is likely adequate.

Ornamental grasses used to just refer to what was commonly known as pampas grass but now days includes everything from little tufts of blue fescue that are less than a foot tall to the old fashioned pampas grass that can be eight feet tall. The one thing that they all have in common is that after they are frozen back for the fall and they start drying down, they become highly flammable. Not only are those grass clumps highly flammable, they burn really hot! If they are by your driveway or well away from any building then don't worry about them until next spring. But if they are next to or near to your house or other buildings, I would trim them back to about 5 or 6 inches tall this fall to reduce the fire risk. When you do this wear long sleeves and gloves as those leaves can be rather sticky and the dust quite irritating.

I do like to clean off vegetable garden sites in the fall. Clear off the frozen tomato vines and put them in the trash or burn pile. These vines are loaded with disease spores that likely won't be killed by a compost pile and certainly not in the soil. If not removed they will serve as a source of re-infestation next year. All the other plant remnants can be put in the compost pile or tilled into the soil. So far this autumn has been nice and dry so the soil should work up nicely. Get it tilled this fall and you'll be ready to go with your early garden next spring. In fact, a garden well tilled in the fall can often allow you to plant peas early in the spring by just placing the seed on the soil surface and pushing it down a couple inches with your finger.

Peony tops can be left in place until spring if you want, but I like to get them trimmed off now. Note I said trimmed off, NOT mowed. Peony leaves often get riddled with peony leaf spot in the summer. This disease overwinters on dead foliage and re-infects leaves next spring. Cutting the old tops off at ground level by hand and placing in a burn pile or trash removes those spores from the area. If you mow them you just scatter all the disease spore laden leaf material everywhere and leave ragged stems in the process.

The plants in most other perennial beds, like mums and daylilies, can be left until late winter or early spring. The vegetation above ground helps to trap leaves and other organic matter and hold it in place over winter to serve a nice mulch blanket. If you feel obligated to cut these plants off don't cut them off at ground level. Leave 3 to 4 inches of stem and leaves to help protect the crowns of these plants.

Yes, a lot of gardeners often have this compulsion to clean up the yard and garden as immaculately as possible. But with the few exceptions I've listed you're often better off to leave those chores until late winter or early spring, when you are desperately looking for something to do outside anyway!