Fall Garden Cleanup

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As winter approaches, many vegetables and other garden plants have become unsightly but are lingering in the garden. A general tidying up not only improves the garden's appearance, but also aids in the prevention of insects and diseases. This is because most disease causing organisms such as fungi, bacteria and viruses, as well as insect pests, spend the winter on plant debris and weeds. Discarding spent plant material can make a significant difference in the occurrence and severity of pest problems next year.

After vegetables are harvested, remove the entire plant. This will help with foliar diseases such as early blight of tomato and will remove nematodes and nematode eggs if roots are infested. If there is still plant material in the garden, follow up with tilling or turning the soil over. Most microorganisms that cause foliar diseases are destroyed quickly once crop refuse is in contact with the soil and starts to rot.

After annual flowers are killed by frost, remove them from the garden and till to a depth of eight inches to bury any remaining infested plant material. Remove weeds from the garden area, because they, too, can harbor diseases and insects.

Herbaceous perennials, such as hosta and iris, are beginning to succumb to the short days and cool nights. After the tops have died back, cut them back close to the ground. One pest this will help with is the iris borer, which lays eggs in the fall on various plant material, including iris leaves.

Fall and winter are good times to inspect shrubs and trees as well. Keep in mind that many of the organisms that cause leaf spots and twig and branch dieback overwinter on fallen leaves and stem tissue. Rake and remove fallen leaves. If the plant showed symptoms of a foliar disease, it may be advisable also to remove some of the mulch and replace it with new. Prune out branches that have died and check other branches for areas of dead tissue known as cankers. These should be pruned six to 12 inches below the visibly affected area, and pruners should be dipped in a 10 percent bleach solution (1 part bleach to 9 parts water) between cuts.

The question of composting diseased or insect infested plant material is frequently asked. Composting will kill most insects and disease causing organisms if the compost pile reaches at least 120 F for two to three weeks. This is attained more easily in a pile that is at least one cubic yard (three feet high and wide), is kept moist, and is supplied with material high in nitrogen such as vegetable scraps, manure, or grass clippings. Temperature can be checked with a meat or candy thermometer.

If the plant material is not to be composted, bag and dispose of it or burn it. However it is accomplished, discarding spent and infested plant material contributes to the overall health of the garden and lessens the need for pesticides.