

Winterizing Your Landscape

What hardiness zone are we in?

We are located in Zone 3, which starts near St. Cloud and covers the majority of the northern half of the state. There are a few small pockets of Zone 2 in far northern MN. Recently, our area was changed to Zone 4, but we feel that our winters provide too little snow cover for many Zone 4 plants. We recommend Zone 3 plants with only proven Zone 4 options.

Is there anything I can do during the summer to make my plants hardier?

Pick the right plant for the spot! Use good soil for planting. Water regularly, about one inch of water per week is the general rule of thumb. Treat fungus and insect problems as soon as they are noted to mitigate stress to your plants.

When should I cut back my perennials?

Perennials can be cut back after a killing frost in the fall. This usually occurs in late September or early October. It is important to clean off all plant debris after the frost to minimize fungus. Don't cut back Mums, Bergenia or groundcovers. Grasses and Russian Sage winter better if left uncut.

What kind of protection should I provide?

Most perennials simply need a good layer of straw applied late in the fall. The purpose of mulching is to prevent the crowns of the plants from alternate freezing and thawing that occurs very late in the fall and early spring. It is important that the ground be frozen before mulching, so wait until mid-November before covering the plants with 6-8 inches of straw.

Why should I use straw?

The advantage of straw over leaves is that it doesn't compact, doesn't hold moisture and insulates well. The disadvantage is that it is harder to clean up in the spring.

Can I use leaves?

You can if you shred your leaves by running over them repeatedly with a lawn mower or use a leaf shredder. Leaves are inexpensive and usually readily available. They offer good insulation and compost readily. The disadvantage is that they hold moisture, causing them to compact and not allow enough air to get through.

Are there perennials that I should not mulch?

Bearded Iris should not be mulched.

Should I continue to water in the fall?

Yes! The number one thing you can do for your perennials is to keep watering. Perennials are storing food and energy for the winter. Water also helps to insulate roots.

Can I divide or move my perennials in the fall?

Yes! Fall is always the best time to divide anything that is not “fall-blooming”. There is also more time to do these jobs in the fall. Fall-blooming plants should be divided or moved in the spring.

Should I do anything special for my Zone 4 plants?

With a little extra care, we can grow several marginally hardy plants in our area. The key to success seems to be getting a deep root system established (by watering deeply and preparing the soil with lots of organic matter) and mulching heavily the first winter or two.

When can I remove the straw in the spring?

Wait until after all the frost is out of the ground before removing the straw. If it gets very warm early, you may want to pull back the straw, but leave it at least 2-3 inches. Some gardeners leave straw in the beds, just pull it away from the crown of the plants. This adds organic matter and helps suppress weeds. Straw that has been removed can be composted.

When should I fertilize?

Mid to late April is the best time to fertilize perennials. Use a slow-release fertilizer like Osmocote. Reapply again around the 4th of July. Follow the directions on the packaging for application rates and frequency. Fertilize established trees in the spring as well. Your lawn should be fertilized 3 to 4 times a year, depending upon the fertilizer you are using.

How do I care for my newly planted trees?

For trunk protection, use white plastic tree guards from April 15th through November 15th. Wrap the trunk with paper tree wrap from the bottom branches to the ground from November 15th through April 15th.