

Fall Gardening Tips

by Patty Hilpert

Fall is an important time in the garden. Here are a few tips from what we are doing at Station Park which you might find helpful in your own yard:

1. Choose compost and organic fertilizers

Fertilizing in the fall gets the nutrients into the soil so that they will be ready to help spring growth after the long winter. We are growing our plants and lawn free of chemical fertilizers. Compost and organic fertilizers build up the beneficial bacteria and micronutrients in the soil, making the soil rich and healthy. This healthy soil is less compacted, drains better, and holds moisture better. It not only feeds plants well and increases yields in a vegetable garden, but makes plants less likely to succumb to disease.

2. How to ‘Side Dress’ with compost

To side dress, you pull back any mulch that is under a plant and spread compost around the base of the plant (anywhere from ¼ inch thick to 3 inches thick) and out to the “drip line,” the edge of where the plant’s branches spread out. Then return the mulch to its original position. If you don’t know what compost looks like, come and look at our three-section bin at the back of the Park. Two bins are filled with leaves and garden debris, but the one on the right has rich, soft earth. The garden debris has broken down and there are lots of worms in it. That’s compost.

3. Fish emulsion is also a good fertilizer

If you don’t have compost, fish emulsion is a great, highly concentrated fertilizer. It can be purchased as a dry meal or as a liquid which you dilute and apply to the plant according to the directions. It is fine to fertilize with fish emulsion right through the mulch as the added nutrients help bring good micro biotic growth to the mulch itself and make it part of the contributing eco-system of the plant. Good organic fish emulsion products are available in local garden centers. (Note: raccoons also like fish emulsion!)

4. A Good Time for New Plantings

Fall is a good time of year to put in new plants. We encourage you to consider adding more native plants to your yard. There are so many that are beautiful and easy to grow here. Garden in the Woods, the home of the New England Wildflower Society in Framingham, has plants for sale and info on their website on native plants (www.newfs.org).

When planting, be sure to make “a ten-dollar hole for a five-dollar plant.” Give the roots plenty of room. Don’t forget to mix in compost or organic fertilizer with the dirt you use to fill in the hole. Then make a “saucer,” a ring of dirt around the plant to catch water. Lastly, add mulch.

5. Perennial gardening is about transplanting and moving!

Almost all perennials get overgrown and need to be dug up, divided into sections and replanted or given to a gardening neighbor. Iris, for example, will grow out from the center eventually making a ring that is empty of stems in the middle. When you see that, you know it is time to dig. Hostas can get very thick with a jumble of stems. Again, it's a good time to start digging.

If some plant or shrub in your garden isn't doing well, move it! Yes, you can dig plants up and move them around. Every plant has its own best spot. Your struggling flower or shrub may need more sun, or more shade; richer soil or a wetter area. Transplanting to a new place may help.

When digging up a plant, don't make the rookie mistake of driving in the shovel too close to the stem of the plant. Start back, away from the stem, and work with the plant. Once you've started to dig, you can reach into the dirt with your hand and try to tease out some of the larger roots rather than chopping them all off with the spade. The more you can ease the plant out of the ground, the fewer traumas you are inflicting upon it.

Published in The Lincoln Journal on October 24, 2013.

The most experienced gardeners at the Lincoln Garden Club have written these sustainable gardening tips. They have read books, taken classes, made mistakes, and enjoyed successes over their years of gardening in Lincoln. Their articles are designed to demystify the process of developing sustainable gardening practices. Look for these articles in The Lincoln Journal, on the Garden Club website (www.LincolnGardenClub.org), and in the Sustainable Landscaping section of the Greening Lincoln website (www.GreeningLincoln.org.)