

UNL Extension: Acreage Insights

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Common Autumn Questions

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Once autumn arrives, some questions are asked about what can and cannot be done with landscape plants at this time of year. Following are some of the more common questions and the answers.

Can trees be pruned now? Pruning of woody plants (trees, shrubs and roses) is best avoided from mid August up until leaf drop. Pruning at this time can interfere with plants hardening off for winter. There is also more decay organisms present during fall. Wait until spring to prune evergreens.

How soon can the tops of perennials be cut back? This question refers to herbaceous plants (peony, Hosta, daylily, asparagus and ornamental grasses) whose stems and foliage die each fall. As long as leaves are healthy, wait until frost kills the foliage before removing it. With shorter days and cooler temperatures, plants move carbohydrates from leaves into roots for storage. Cutting plants back too soon interferes with this and can lower plant vigor.

With woody and herbaceous plants, there are situations when pruning may need to be done. If a branch is dead, breaks in the wind or is rubbing against a house, go ahead and remove it otherwise wait until woody plants are dormant to prune. If the tops of perennials have been killed by disease or another stress, it is okay to cut the tops for sanitation. And it is fine to trim out dead leaves to tidy a plants appearance.

Can plants be transplanted in fall? Fall is a good time to plant or transplant many plants. Herbaceous perennials and evergreens are best planted or transplanted in September to allow roots to establish before the soil freezes. Woody plants grown in containers can be planted from now until soil freeze. If a deciduous tree or shrub is to be transplanted, wait until after leaf drop. If a plant is on the borderline of cold hardiness, such as a Hybrid Tea rose, it is best to wait until spring.

Is there anything to be done now to prevent diseases next year? Sanitation (removing dead leaves and stems from gardens) and making notes about which plants had severe disease is about all that can be done now. Fungicides applied at this time of year will not kill a fungus and eliminate it from a plant or site. Noting which plants have unacceptable damage, especially the variety name, helps gardeners avoid planting the same variety next year. Be sure to note which varieties were most resistant to plant again next year.

When should houseplants summered outdoors be brought indoors? Most houseplants are tropical and some can be damaged or stunted by temperatures just below 50 degrees Fahrenheit.

With night temperatures already reaching into the 50s, it is time to gradually reintroduce houseplants back indoors. Be sure to check plants closely for insects to avoid bringing unwanted guests indoors.

How soon should tender bulbs (Dahlia, cannas and Gladioli) be dug for winter? These bulbs are referred to as summer bulbs as opposed to spring flowering bulbs (tulips, daffodils and crocus). They are not hardy and must be stored indoors to survive winter. In most cases, it is okay to wait until a light frost to dig, dry and store summer bulbs, but do dig them before a hard freeze. Tuberous begonias are best dug before frost. Caladiums must be dug before frost.