

ORNAMENTAL GRASSES

Ornamental grasses can really catch your eye in the fall. The way the morning and evening light glitters through the seedheads is just gorgeous. Versatile is the word of choice for this category of plants. They can take tough sites, full sun and little nutrients or water (once established). Many are very tall and can screen unsightly features in the landscape, while others are short and make excellent border accent plants. There are really only 3 simple things to remember about growing ornamental grasses in your landscape: planting time, trimming time and division time. Planting time is most of the year except for winter. Plant once the danger of frost has passed in the spring, up until the end of September. If you plant them any later than that, it's really too late. They don't have adequate time to establish a strong root system and are in real danger of dying when cold weather hits. Better to wait until your investment can grow enough during the growing season to survive the winter. Ornamental grasses look their best right now, and they will also continue to look great for the next 4 or 5 months. This is their time to shine—winter interest is a main feature of ornamental grasses. Therefore don't cut them back until February or March as winter is ending and spring is beginning. Grasses need to be trimmed to 6-8 inches in the spring in order to let the fresh new growth get through the old biomass. Trimming ornamental grasses requires gloves, long sleeves and serious tools. If your grasses are really big, like Pampas Grass, you might even want a chainsaw and chaps. If smaller, you can probably get away with pruners or hedge trimmers. Compost all that good biomass for organic matter later in the year. Every 3 to 4 years it's a good idea to divide most ornamental grasses. By then, the center may start to die out and the plants begin to look somewhat unattractive as a clump. Dig those plants out and redistribute them or give them away.

Pruning Shrubs

I always get calls this time of year from gardeners wanting to cut back shrubs. Though light pruning and removal of dead wood are fine this time of year, severe pruning should be left until spring. One thing I like to do is cut my roses back to about 3 ft tall. They will get a much heavier pruning in the spring, but for now cutting them back just a bit will help prevent a snow load from breaking the plants down. Keep in mind that even light pruning of spring-blooming shrubs such as lilac and forsythia will reduce flowers for next year. We normally recommend that spring-bloomers be pruned after flowering. Shrubs differ in how severely they can be cut back. Junipers do not break bud from within the plant and therefore should be trimmed lightly if you wish to keep the full shape. Overgrown junipers should be removed. On the other hand, there are certain shrubs that can be pruned back severely during the spring. Rejuvenation is the most severe type of pruning and may be used on multi-stem shrubs that have become too large with too many old branches to justify saving the younger canes. All stems are cut back to 3- to 5-inch stubs. This works well for spirea, forsythia, pyracantha, ninebark, Russian almond, mock orange, shrub roses, and flowering quince. Just remember that spring is the correct time to do this, not now.

Winterizing Strawberry Plants

Winter can be a difficult time for strawberries in Kansas. Plants need time to become adjusted to cold weather and will gradually become more cold resistant as fall progresses. Strawberry plants are able to withstand colder temperatures in the middle of the winter better than in the fall before they have gone through much cold weather. For example, if temperatures suddenly plummet below 20 degrees F before the plants harden to the cold, they can be severely damaged. A drop to 15 degrees F may kill them. Hardened plants can withstand such temperatures with ease. This lack of hardening off may be a concern this year because of the unseasonably warm fall. If a sudden drop in temperature to below 20 degrees F is forecast, it may be wise to mulch the plants as you would for the winter. After the cold snap is over, uncover the plants so they may continue to harden off. Normally, strawberries should be mulched for the winter around Thanksgiving. However, if temperatures stay abnormally warm, give plants another couple of weeks to become cold hardy before mulching. Mulching plants helps protect strawberries not only from low temperatures but also from heaving damage. Heaving damage occurs when the alternate freezing and thawing common in Kansas winters heave plants out of the ground where the roots are exposed and the

plants die from lack of water. Wheat straw makes good mulch and is widely available. The straw should be spread over the plants to a depth of 3 inches. Shake the slabs of straw apart so there are no large compressed chunks. This straw mulch not only helps protect the plants over winter but can also help avoid damage from late spring frosts by delaying blooming a few days in the spring. Mulch should be removed gradually in the spring as plants begin new growth. Remove enough so leaves can be seen. Leaving some mulch in place keeps the berries off the ground and conserves moisture. Also, mulch left in the aisles helps protect pickers from muddy conditions.

Ashes in the Garden

You may have heard that using wood ashes on your garden can help make the soil more fertile. Though ashes do contain significant amounts of potash, they contain little phosphate and no nitrogen. Most Kansas soils are naturally high in potash and do not need more. Also, wood ashes will raise the pH of our soils, often a drawback in Kansas where soils tend toward high pH anyway. Therefore, wood ashes add little benefit, and may harm, many Kansas soils. In most cases it is best to get rid of them.

Garden Soil Preparation — It's Not Too Late

Autumn is an excellent time to add organic materials and till garden soils. Winter can still be a good time to take care of this chore as long as the soil isn't frozen. It is far wiser to till now than to wait until spring when cold, wet conditions can limit your ability to work soils easily. Working soil when it is wet destroys soil structure and results in hard clods that are very slow to break down. On the other hand, dry soil may need to be watered so it can be more easily tilled.

Be sure to wait several days after watering to let soil moisture levels moderate. You want the soil moist, not wet or dry, when tilling. There is a limit to how much organic material such as leaves can be added in one application. Normally, a layer 2 inches deep is adequate with 5 to 6 inches being the maximum that can be added at one time. Shredding the material before application encourages faster and more complete decomposition due to increased surface area. Remember, soil preparation is an important key to a successful garden.