

Post-Christmas Gardening

Summer Revival

Having just enjoyed the most spectacular holiday weather in years, it would seem churlish to lament its effect on the garden. After all, that jaded, post-holiday look is easily remedied. We'll have to wait a while for perfect autumn planting weather. In the meantime, watering, feeding and grooming are the big three for February.

Revamping the lawn

Feeding and watering will put the green back into a parched summer lawn. Deep infrequent watering maintains a healthy root system and discourages weeds. However, if the ground has become so hard baked that the water runs off, it's best to apply smaller amounts of water every three or four days to allow soakage. On compact soil you can improve water absorption by making a grid of holes with the garden fork.

Thatch, that springy layer of dead grass clippings at the base of a lawn, can help conserve moisture over summer but it can also cause problems if it becomes too thick, preventing moisture from reaching the roots. 'Dethatching' with a rake once a year can make a huge difference especially if you don't mow with a catcher. The lawn mower blades should be set higher in these drier months. Higher mowing encourages deeper root growth. Scalping too low invites water stress and weeds.

A well-fed lawn is greener and less weedy than a hungry one. High nitrogen lawn fertilizers give instant results, but should be watered in well and they can be bad for the environment if over-used. Organic or slow release fertilisers break down slowly rather than wastefully leaching out through the soil.

Watch out for summer pests such as the small white grass grub which may be found feeding on roots under brown patches of grass. Apply Diazinon prills (or Soil Insect Killer) washing them in with plenty of water. Keep children and pets off the area for a week. Read the label carefully.

Summer may be a good time to revise how much lawn you really need. Give lawns the sunniest, flattest, most accessible areas with the best drainage. Reallocate what's left to low maintenance paving, pathways, and mulched garden beds. If you are planning new areas of lawn, now is a good time to start spraying and preparing the soil and leveling the ground for sowing seed or laying instant turf when autumn rains arrive.

Watering

New gardens need a good soaking every four or five days. Established trees and shrubs can get away with a good soaking every couple of weeks. Shallow rooted annuals and vegetables, and plants growing in containers, need watering at least every second day while the weather

is at its most scorching.

Water in the evening or early morning so that it goes where it's needed. Water loss by evaporation peaks in the hottest part of the day. Morning watering is great for nutrient absorption, as plants tend to be most active at sunrise, but if you are running late for work, watering is best left till the end of the day as it does the garden no good to water in a hurry. Frequent shallow watering promotes surface root growth, making plants more susceptible to drying out when a drought hits. It is much better to water less often and take the time to soak the soil thoroughly. Deep watering trains the roots to grow down into the cooler, moister layers of soil, so they will cope with less watering as they mature. Protect bare soil from excess evaporation with a layer of organic mulch, 5 to 10cm thick.

Feeding

Plants which are flowering, fruiting or actively growing, such as roses, subtropical plants, vegetables and flowering annuals respond positively to a good feed at this time of year. Also, well fed, vigorously growing plants are more likely to shake off those warm weather pests and diseases. Apply controlled release fertiliser pellets and supplement with liquid fertiliser once a week. Winter fruiting plants such as feijoas, figs, and citrus also benefit from a feed in mid to late summer. Controlled release pellets are safest as they will not burn plants or cause bud drop.

Deadheading and trimming

Removing spent blooms encourages more flowers and prevent disease. Cut just above a bud. Repeat flowering roses should be constantly deadheaded to promote new blooms and discourage disease. Delay trimming those plants whose berries and seeds are a feature in late summer.

Tidy up lanky growth on shrubs, climbers and perennials. Remove the tatty leaves from palms, grasses, and flaxes. Smarten up hedges and shrubs with a light trim. Cold tender shrubs should be pruned well before autumn to avoid the risk of frost damaging young growth.

If you are in the mood for a good slashing, eliminating poor performers will give the garden an instant face lift and make room for others to thrive. For the most part, however, late summer is not the time for heavy hand. There is insufficient moisture to support a vigorous growth spurt.

Plant fresh salad greens

Seeds such as lettuce, beet and rocket will germinate quickly if you sow directly into moist well drained soil, and keep them well watered. In hot dry weather salad greens benefit from afternoon shade. Trim herbs like mint and thyme for a fresh flush of growth.

Ripe for picking

The more you pick, the longer your tomatoes, beans, and zucchinis will keep fruiting. Aubergines and capsicums may need staking as they become weighted down with fruit. Cut down on hot weather diseases, especially bothersome on tomatoes, by removing infected or overcrowded lower leaves as plants grow. To reduce the humidity diseases thrive on, provide adequate space between plants and keep them clear of weeds. Avoid watering the foliage, but remember a well watered, well fed plant is far less susceptible to pest and disease problems

than a thirsty malnourished one. Mulch with compost to keep moisture in and weeds out.

A splash of colour

Inexpensive and instant, potted annuals provide a quick colour fix, as do shrubs already in flower, such as hibiscus and hydrangeas. It may not be the ideal season for planting, but provided you are prepared to water, warm temperatures support quick growth. Potted colour ideal for pots at this time of year include petunias, pelargoniums, salvia, zinnias and marigolds. Summer is a perfect time to lift, divide and replant succulents. Create a colourful bowl of succulent cuttings, finished off with pebbles.

Perennials for late summer and autumn flowering include Coreopsis, Solidago, Rudbeckia, Helianthus, cannas and Helenium. Break up the hot colours with splashed of blue salvias and asters.