

## Gardening in November

By Teresa Gaffner, Master Gardener

The leaves are falling and autumn garden chores are calling. There are many garden tasks to complete before the first hard freeze. And, as mentioned in previous Ask a Master Gardener posts, many chores consist of cleaning and clearing your yard of weeds, spent vegetable and annual plants, storing lawn tools for the winter, mulching trees and garden beds and a general cleanup of the 4 D's: dead, diseased, damaged, and dysfunctional. You can also still plant trees, shrubs, and bulbs, but you will want to get them in before the ground turns too hard after the first hard frost.

November is an optimal month to apply mulch in your garden for protection from winter weather. It is best to wait until after the first frost to apply your mulch as this helps keep soil temperature consistent. Mulch also helps conserve water and adds nutrients to the soil as it breaks down, blocks weeds, and insulates plants against 'waking' early and becoming susceptible to damage from freezing weather.

Here are a few things to consider when deciding to winter mulch your garden.

- Be sure your garden bed is cleaned of weeds and last year's mulch.
- Use organic mulching materials such as straw, peat moss, wood chips, leaves and sawdust.
- Avoid inorganic materials like gravel, plastic film, and landscaping fabric. Although they will help retain moisture and keep the soil temperatures consistent during the winter, they do not break down and add nutrients to the soil.
- Use no more than 3 to 4 inches of any mulch to a garden bed as it will restrict soil oxygen exchange with the plant's roots. They will start to grow upwards into the mulch seeking oxygen instead of growing and anchoring into the soil. It can also cause water retention at the roots which may lead to decay and disease.
- Avoid 'volcano' mulching. This is the method of piling mulch up on the trunks of trees in a cone shape. This causes damage to the tree trunk by, again, restricting oxygen flow and encouraging water retention issues. This method can cause additional problems with rodents and cracking bark.

The rule of thumb recommended by the University of Tennessee's (UT) Agricultural Extension Service for trees is "...Mulch should be applied in a ring at least 4 to 6 ft in diameter around the base of the tree. The depth of the ring should be no more than 2 to 4 inches..." Follow this same rule for any shrubs and if possible, spread the mulch out to the tree/shrub's drip line. A drip line is the area directly under the circumference of the tree's outer branches. It acts like a tree's umbrella and sheds water when the canopy is saturated. If you have ever sat under a tree on a day with clear skies and felt the occasional water drop-you have felt the tree's dripline in action.

If you decide to use compost as your choice of organic mulch, check with your city website and see if they offer a composting program with equipment you can rent or buy outright. Some cities make their own and sell it to residents at a reasonable rate. See the bottom of this article for a

link to the UT Institute of Agriculture publication for mulching trees and a primer on composting.

After the mulch is laid, the tools and all the garden pots are cleaned, many seasoned gardeners look forward to 'catalogue season'. There are many catalogues online for every gardening taste and need. Most companies will still send out fliers and magazines so you can sit and peruse at your leisure whatever intrigues you.

You might consider planning some color for next year's winter garden. You can have texture and interest all year long by planting some of the following recommendations from UT Gardens.

- Winter or January jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*) is hardy in zones 5 and 6. It will flower during the winter and only needs well drained soil to flourish, and it is suitable for slopes.
- "Midwinter Fire" dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*) or "Arctic Fire" dogwood (*Cornus stoloniflora*) have bright red branches in the winter months along with clusters of white flowers in the summer followed by autumn berries.
- Snowdrops, hellebore, winterberry, witch hazel, pieris japonica, winter aconite, primroses, pansies, crocuses, and camellias can also add color in your winter garden but require a little more work to set them up so they will thrive.

Check out availability at your local nursery and get advice on the correct planting locations and methods. Then, relax and enjoy your good work!

## **Resources**

### **Mulching Your Trees and Landscapes**

<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/SP617.pdf>

### **Home Composting: A Guide to Managing Yard Waste**

<http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/ho/ho75/ho75.pdf>

### **Finding Beauty in Winter Textures and Hues**

<https://henderson.ces.ncsu.edu/2021/01/finding-beauty-in-winter-textures-and-hues/>

**NEW Master Gardener Class!** The next University of Tennessee Master Gardener class at the Sullivan County Extension Office located at 140 Spurgeon Ln, Blountville, TN. starts on **January 30, 2024** and continues every Tuesday for 14 weeks.

**10AM – 12noon**

**Call the Extension Office for information and application form.**

**423-574-1919**

### **How do I ask a question?**

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at [www.netmga.net](http://www.netmga.net). Click the link at the top of the page, "ASK A MASTER GARDENER" to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.