

Gardeners Hit List – November
By Teresa Gaffner, Master Gardener

Before we get into the “hit list”, we had a timely question from a local gardener on “Ask a Master Gardener” at netmg.net: *Should I prune perennial hibiscus plants to ground level now? The leaves are brown. Can I assume the roots are alive and new foliage will appear in spring? Thanks*

Master Gardener John answered: *The University of Tennessee recommends that you prune your Hibiscus in the winter or early spring before new growth begins to appear. The University of Illinois recommends cutting the plant back to 3-4” above ground in the fall. Either would be acceptable.*

You are correct that the roots are still alive and new foliage will appear in the spring unless we have a very cold winter. The foliage was probably damaged (and subsequently died back) by early freezes we had a couple of weeks ago. Your hibiscus needs warm soil to get going, so be patient with them next spring.

Here are some websites that will help you care for your perennial hibiscus:

<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/PB1619.pdf>

<https://hgic.clemson.edu/factsheet/hibiscus/>

<https://extension.illinois.edu/blogs/hort-home-landscape/2017-08-04-plant-week-perennial-hibiscus>

Now, on to the “hit list”. You may think the only garden chore available in November is collecting the leaves that fell onto your yard in October. The size and number of deciduous trees in the Tri-Cities area guarantee that most lawns and streets are ankle deep in autumn leaves. There are still many other garden tasks to complete before the first freeze and as mentioned in previous Ask a Master Gardener posts, many of them consist of cleaning and clearing your yard of 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, blocks weeds, and insulates plants against ‘waking’ early and becoming susceptible to damage from freezing weather. Organic mulches also add nutrients to the soil as they break down Here are a few things to consider when deciding to winter mulch your garden.

- It is best to wait until the first frost and the ground is frozen.
- Before you apply this season’s mulch, be sure your garden bed is cleaned of weeds and last year’s mulch.
- Common organic mulching materials are straw, peat moss, wood chips, leaves, and sawdust. Inorganic materials such as gravel, plastic film, and landscaping fabric will help retain moisture and keep the soil temperatures consistent during the winter, however, they do not break down or add nutrients to the soil.
- Don’t add more than 3 to 4 inches of any mulch to a garden bed as it will restrict soil oxygen exchange with the plants’ 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, constricting 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 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 trees' outer branches. It acts like a tree's umbrella and sheds water when the canopy is saturated. If you have ever sat near 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 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'. Planning a garden is an essential part of success and can be a fun way to fill the time until you can get your hands dirty again.

- There are an infinite number of 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. Order a cross sampling of catalogues to see which plants intrigue you the most.
- You can take it a step further and consider a garden journal. Garden journals can be as complex or as simple as you like. Information such as plant varieties, yields, expenses, pests, garden plots, sun/shade records, successes, and failures, will help prepare you for the next growing season by making experienced and informed decisions. A garden journal can give you a real sense of accomplishment and just how much work has gone into growing your plants and food crops. A great garden journal article and template from North Carolina University is included with the list of links at the end of this article.
- If the idea of a citizen scientist approach to gardening appeals to you, consider joining the University of Tennessee Agricultural Institute Home Garden Trials. Their mission statement is about helping the Tennessee gardener know which variety will grow best in their home garden. You can sign up for various trials, plant your assigned seeds and record all pertinent data that is then submitted to UTAI and included in their evaluations.
- If you are more of a hands-on person and would rather look at an established plant laboratory and various types of gardens in winter, consider a day trip to Knoxville, TN and visit the UT Gardens, The State Botanical Gardens of Tennessee, for an all-season inspiration. They call themselves a 'living laboratory' as they test 4,000 plant varieties every year solely to see how they grow in the state of Tennessee. Log on to their website for information on Plant of the Month", bi-annual plant sales and seasonal programs

Completing these end-of-season chores will help you get ready for next years' gardens. Now the fun of planning for spring begins!

Want more from your gardens? The 2023 Sullivan County Master Gardener program will be available starting on January 31 ending on May 2, 2023. This is a great opportunity for beginning or experienced gardeners to learn about all aspects of gardening in our area. Check out our website at netmga.net for more information on Master Gardeners or call the Ron Ramsey Agricultural Center at **423-574-1919** for details on classes to become a Master Gardener.

Resources

Garden Journaling

<https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/extension-gardener-handbook/appendix-a-garden-journaling>

<https://extensiongardener.ces.ncsu.edu/2020/01/journal-2020-winter-piedmont-news/>

State Botanical Gardens Knoxville

<https://utgardens.tennessee.edu/>

UT Home Garden Variety Trials 2021

<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/W657.pdf>

<https://mastergardener.tennessee.edu/home-garden-vegetable-trial/>

Mulching

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

Composting link recommended by UT HORT

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

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. 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.

The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.