

Should You Cut Back Perennials in the Fall?

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It's hard to believe that fall is here, with 2020 nearly behind us. With the gardening season coming to an end, it's time to start thinking about fall gardening chores. One question I often get is: Should I cut back my perennials in the fall? Or should I leave them until spring?

It's a difficult question to answer, since all of us grow many different types of plants in our landscape. It also depends on the type of gardener you are. For many, fall is a time to relax and take a break from gardening. For others, they prefer to "get 'er done" and have fewer chores in spring.

From the plant's standpoint, leaving the foliage may be to their benefit, especially at higher elevations where there can be continuous snow cover. Leaving your perennials standing in winter has a few perks:

1. Winter interest: As the winter months stretch and linger, having something to look at is beneficial. Many of our ornamental and native grasses have some color and structure that will be interesting to look at from your kitchen window. Plants like rabbit brush keep their seedheads all winter, which is an added bonus.
2. Food for birds, deer, elk (!) and other animals: Leaving perennials, especially those with seedheads, provide food for our feathered and furry friends (or foes) during the winter months. Classic examples are coneflower and black-eyed Susan. Some ornamental grasses and even annuals, like cosmos, also provide food.
3. Encouraging future beneficalials: Some insects, like butterflies, lay eggs on over-wintering plants. Removing materials may remove this habitat.
4. Catching extra moisture: This is one you've likely noticed—snow "catches" and sticks on plant material. During the spring thaw, the moisture will be more likely to get to plant roots. It could be argued that every plant in Colorado benefits from extra moisture, so leaving foliage can be a good way to aid in moisture.
5. Increasing winter hardiness: Just like mulch, plant foliage can help insulate and protect perennials, especially those that might be newly planted. The foliage can help prevent the freeze/thaw that happens during winter and help stabilize soil temperatures.

So keep your pruners in the garage this fall and consider not cutting back all of your plants; keep track of what keeps your interest during the winter and which plants seem to have improved health next year.

Larimer County Master Gardeners are available year-round to answer your gardening questions, indoors and out. Contact the CMGs at larimermg@gmail.com. Or call the CSU Extension Office in Larimer County at 970-498-6000.

Estes Valley Community Garden Board thanks Alison for sharing her gardening and landscape expertise with us. The CSU Extension website, extension.colostate.edu, is a treasure trove of garden and home resources. For information about the Estes Valley Community Garden, please visit our website at evcg.org.