

Should You Cut Back Perennials in the Fall?

Alison O'Connor, horticulture agent
Colorado State University Extension in Larimer County
astoven@larimer.org; 970-498-6000

Published in *Estes Park News*, July 28, 2017, page 29.
Posted at evcg.org with permission.

It's hard to believe that fall is around the corner and another wonderful summer will be behind us. Fortunately, there are still many warm days to enjoy and cool nights that make Colorado a great place to live. But with summer 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 stretch out your back 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 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 beneficials. Some insects, like butterflies, lay eggs on overwintering plant materials. Removing materials may remove this habitat.
4. Catching extra moisture. This is one you've likely noticed—where snow "catches" on plant material. In the spring during thaws, the moisture will be more likely to get to plant material. It could be argued that every plant in Colorado benefits from extra moisture, so leaving foliage can be a good way to aid in irrigation.
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 maintain 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.

Are you interested in becoming a Master Gardener in Larimer County through Colorado State University Extension? Colorado Master Gardeners volunteer to help extend research-based gardening information to the public in a variety of venues. Training includes 60 hours of classroom time. If you are interested in receiving more information about the Master Gardener program, please contact Alison O'Connor at astoven@larimer.org or 970-498-6000.