

HOME & GARDEN

Think about spring while you winterize



Recorder/George Newton

Raymond Colbeth of 278 Federal St. covers his rhododendrons in preparation for winter.

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Putting the garden to bed in the fall is similar to cleaning the house in the spring. Both are cleaning up operations, putting things in order after a busy season and in preparation for the season to come. I'm late with my chores this year, but the weather has been kind, and I have been able to continue working out in the garden.

This past weekend the weather was sunny and extraordinarily mild. While I had the company and help of my friend Helen, who was visiting from Canada, I set out to prepare the flower border for winter — and so really for spring.

First we pulled out the dead stems and foliage of the annuals like the gazanias, marigolds, cosmos, statice and even the snapdragons. The snapdragons were not blooming, of course, but they were healthy, and the foliage was still quite lush. They are really a perennial and would come up in the garden again, but they would not come back true to color, so I replace them each year with seedlings so that my color scheme will remain intact.

Then Helen and I cut back the chrysanthemums, leaving 4- or 6-inch stems that will catch a few autumn leaves that can act as a protective mulch. When the mums begin growing in the spring, they will have increased greatly in size, and I will dig them up and divide them, placing them in a "holding" garden until it is time to move them back into the border when they are well-budded late in the summer.

The low-growing wormwood and the clump of marjoram were cut back as well as the artemesia — what little was left after being gathered for arrangements. The anthemis, phlox and Harrington's Pink asters were also cut back leaving very little stem above the surface of the soil. I also cut down the peony foliage, using a razor blade to cut the stems cleanly at soil level. As we worked, we did some weeding, which makes me feel I did a little more than give the garden a lick and a promise.

Earlier this fall I moved new young lupines, poppies, delphinium and columbine into the garden, and they seem to have settled in nicely. Come spring I should have what those understated British gardeners call "a nice display."

As we worked, Helen told me that she had been very busy putting her garden to bed before she left Soupstone Farm to travel. At this point she is concentrating on vegetable gardens.

Her main garden makes me envious. When her crops are harvested, she tills the wide rows and then spreads a layer of half-rotted horse manure. (She is the

fortunate neighbor of people who have horses but no garden. She is particularly careful to give an extra helping of manure to those rows that were given over to the cabbage family because they are such heavy feeders, and to those rows where she knew she would plant heavy feeders next year. In the spring the beds will be tilled again, digging in all that excellent fertilizer.

One row she doesn't till is the carrot row. That gets covered with large hay bales that will keep the ground from freezing and enable her to harvest crisp fresh carrots early in the spring.

Helen is one of the gardening masters in my life. I always learn so much when we visit, even when we are pulling weeds as fast as we talk. She is extremely organized — there are not many people who already know what their garden map will look like next spring accurately enough so that they can spread fertilizer accordingly. I merely have mapmaking on my list of things to do in February. Actually, Helen is always thinking ahead. While I haven't gotten past worrying about this winter's snowfall, Helen has already prepared for next year's cold summer.

It seems that when Mexico's volcano, El Chin Shon, erupted, it put so much volcanic ash into the air that meteorologists are predicting it will occlude the sun, making for a very cool summer. Therefore, Helen has already created four boxed, raised beds that can have cold-frame lids attached to them. In this way she expects she can keep her tomatoes, peppers and eggplant under glass all summer if she needs to.

Helen is an inspiration to me, and I do emulate her, but I let my vegetable garden do its own thing. I have ways to go. Countless chores remain to be done. Start with the harvest. The cabbages are waiting to be harvested until my friend Alice is ready to make sauerkraut. I don't harvest the carrots or beets until the last minute, just before I expect the ground to freeze. Then I bring them in, pack them in damp sawdust and keep them down in my dirt cellar, which provides perfect root cellar conditions.

With all this done, I will be able to spread my chicken manure and bedding on the garden where it can age, waiting to be tilled in the spring.

Actually, just as my spring housecleaning would never get the Good Housekeeping seal of approval, my fall putting-the-garden-to-bed would not win a commendation from Horticulture, but I do what I can, and I convince myself that something is always better than nothing. I must admit that like a well-swept floor, a properly neatened garden is a pleasure to contemplate and certainly worth striving for.

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