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Astilbe is one of many perennials that can take care of itself when it comes to winterizing. Remove the dead stalks or stems and don't worry about anything else until spring.

# Perennial maintenance

*A little work as winter nears will save a lot of effort in the spring to bolster regular bloomers*

**Q**uestion: Every year as the weather starts to change from late autumn to early winter, I start thinking about getting my perennials ready for winter. The problem is that I take an "all or nothing" approach. I have a tendency to cut everything back, and some years, I do absolutely nothing. Common sense tells me that my "all or nothing" approach isn't the best idea and that there are probably different rules for different plants. Will you help me figure this out?

**A**nsWER: Since herbaceous perennials come back year after year, it is wise to follow a few simple rules to protect your investment and save time in the long run.

The part of the plant above ground will die back with the first frost, and the part underground will live through the winter. Then when springtime temperatures warm up sufficiently, the part above ground springs to life.

Maintenance in the autumn will help your herbaceous perennials look healthy and beautiful in the spring.

Before I talk about the winterizing process, let me remind you about a few maintenance tasks that should be taking place year round. First, remove any spent flowers, dead foliage and fallen leaves whenever you see them. Make sure you remove the big leaves because they can create a perfect place for pests to lay their eggs and find a safe place to hide during the cold winter.

Perennials should be watered right up until a few days before the first anticipated frost. This one task is probably the most important of all. Don't let your soil dry out for extended periods of time in the fall.

Also, fall is not the time to fertilize. You do not want to encourage new growth. These rules apply to all herbaceous perennials across the board.

Now, there are many perennials in your flower beds that can



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take care of themselves and the home gardener can just leave them alone in the fall. This is by no means a complete list, but some of them are: Astilbe, Delphinium, Sweet William (*Dianthus barbatus*), Spurge (*Euphorbia*), Hellebores, Coralbells (*Heuchera sanguinea*), ornamental grasses, and Creeping Phlox (*Phlox subulata*).

Remove the dead stalks or stems and don't worry about anything else until spring. The foliage that you leave to overwinter will actually protect the crown of the plant from the cold temperatures. Once spring is on the horizon, you will need to prune these plants down completely before the new foliage sprouts up.

Many perennials will need to be cut to the ground after the first or second killing frost. Once these plants start to show the blackened leaves, that's your signal to get to work. You will need to resist the urge to cut before the leaves turn black because as the foliage dies naturally, the plant is able to take up the extra energy that it needs. The process of the foliage dying naturally allows the plant to transfer energy to the roots for winter so it can grow back strong and healthy in the spring.

Perennials in your flower bed that need this kind of attention are as follows: Geranium (*Cranesbill*), Daylily (*Hemerocallis*), Catmint (*Nepeta*), Peony (*Paeonia*), and Tall Phlox (*Phlox paniculata*). Beebalm (*Monarda*) is in this category, but it will have to be cut back early if heavily infested with powdery mildew.

The third category includes the perennials that will need to be cut down completely in

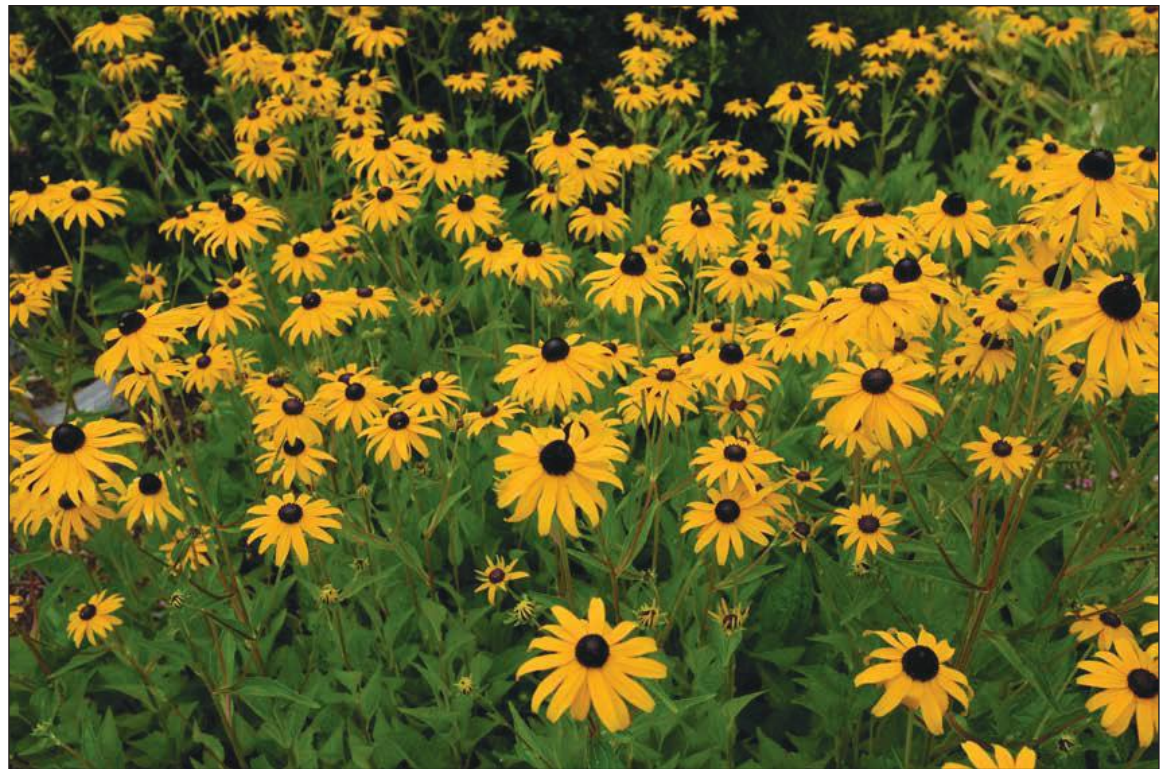


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Black-Eyed Susans will need to be cut down completely in the fall to the point where the plant is showing new foliage at the base of the plant.



**Coralbells (*Heuchera sanguinea*) is a perennial that needs little help from a gardener to winterize. In fact, you want to leave foliage behind to help protect the crown of the plant from cold temperatures.**

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the fall to the point where the plant is showing new foliage at the base of the plant. The perennials on this list are: Yarrow (*Achillea*), Hollyhocks (*Alcea rosea*), Bellflower

(*Campanula*), Coneflower (*Echinacea*), Shasta Daisy (*Leucanthemum*), and Black-Eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia*).

Once the first few winter frosts occur, use organic

mulch around the base of your plants. If you use leaves, make sure they are ground up fairly well. Large leaves will create perfect hiding places for pests. Bring the mulch up to the edge of the crown only. Be careful not to put mulch down before the first frost because you don't want the soil to warm up enough to cause new plant growth.

If you live in an especially cold area, after the ground freezes, it is at this time that you could cover the entire crown. The perennials in our yards are like old friends that require just a little care at the right time, but they keep coming back for a very welcome visit.

*Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu) or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.*