

Careful With Those Loppers!

We welcome March, which, despite its reputation as windy and wayward, is quite properly spring in Tidewater Virginia. With March come questions about pruning. What can we do in our gardens now that hardy plants are breaking dormancy?

Possibly even harder on plants than consistent cold is the intermittent nearly warm and bitter cold that characterizes this season. Often we are left with dead plant parts. It is fine to cut out any dead wood and equally fine to shape it up. A simple test to check the status of a twig is to scrape the surface with a fingernail and if it shows green, it is alive. Even if a plant shows damage it may struggle back to life if you trim it extensively and make sure you water it during March's unpredictable hot and dry spells. We tend to overfeed an ailing plant but if you insist on adding fertilizer, use a fraction of what you think is essential, such as a dilute solution of 10-10-10.

If a sunny day propels you outside to tidy up by adding mulch, remember to keep it a few inches away from the main stem as you don't want to create a cozy nest for gnawing mice. If your Rhododendron and Azaleas show damage from the deer that mistake them for chocolate cake, they may be cut back to healthy growth. Some gardeners have found that spraying plants with a seaweed solution helps them recover more quickly. If you are discouraged by the continued loss of shrubs to deer you may wish to plant those varieties that are not a magnet for them.

A caveat: when hungry enough deer will eat anything that is available. In general they avoid Boxwood, Abelia, Spirea, Mahonia (Oregon grape holly), Calycanthus (Carolina allspice), Aesculus, Buddleia, Callicarpa, Kerria, Leucothoe, Philadelphus (mock orange), Viburnum and Witch Hazels.

Butterfly bushes are most attractive in summer when their flowers are decorated with dancing butterflies. Most species of them are ungainly and prone to sprawl. Mid-March is a good time to cut them back to 12 to 18 inches above the soil. If you want a taller shrub, you can just cut back the limbs reaching beyond their allotted space.

Zealous gardeners put their gardens to bed late fall by cutting everything back that is within reach of their tools. Some plants resent this: they should not be cut back until new growth begins in the spring. This group includes Lantana, Artemisia, Caryopteris, Perovski, Lavender, Santolina, and Iberis (candy-tuft). Ornamental grasses may begin to look tattered as winter leaves. Many of them retain their grace, capturing morning mists in their arching stems but others sag. If you are cutting back last year's growth it is best to poke about the base of the plant and see if new stems are emerging so you won't cut them off by mistake. On the other hand, if this chore is left too late it is really tedious to separate the sheep from the goats, as the clump is such a tight bundle of old and new.

An environmental note:

Numbers matter: two plus two equal four, neat, no argument. But some of us prefer to ignore the facts that science uncovers. The late scholar, Isaac Asimov once said, "The saddest aspect of life right now is that science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom." Our Chesapeake Bay is worth more than \$1 trillion, supports \$2 billion and 41,000 jobs from commercial fishing, \$1.6 billion and 13,000 jobs in saltwater angling, \$70 million in crabs and \$680 million in tourism. Those numbers surely add up to a reason to protect this mighty resource even if it does cost us a dollar or two.

Eat local seafood! Truly, we need to be careful where seafood comes from. Because of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico the oysters there contain concentrations of the heavy metals found in crude oil. Not appetizing! A related Gulf problem has been the death of dolphins: more than 700 have been found dead in Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi beaches. Important 'bad events' rapidly vanish from the "news" as they are displaced by the latest horror or Hollywood marital mayhem and almost as quickly fade from our memories. However, sometimes we need to be reminded of past mistakes to avoid repeating them.

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