

NEWS RELEASE
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Cleaning Up the Garden

I was taught early on by K-State Professor LR Quinlan to leave dead organic matter to decompose in place. As a young 4-H member, he made an everlasting impression on me to let the dead plant material decay on the ground. This is nature's way of completing the growing cycle from spring to winter.

This approach always works. There may be times though when we do not want the remains to be in view. Big tree branches, dead standing plants, and dried foliage from ornamental grasses are few situations that leaving them until they are turned back to the soil is not going to work out. Collecting these materials for compost makes the most sense.

Leaving the remains in place is easiest. My annual plants of flowers and vegetables are left to breakdown where they grew. Coarse materials are chopped up with the trimmer or lawn mower. This hastens the breaking down of the organic matter and is preferred visually.

Doing nothing is best in some situations. For example, foliage left on marginally hardy plants such as tender ferns helps ensure overwintering of plant crowns. This is often true for chrysanthemums, as well. Also, seed heads on some perennial plants can provide seed for birds. I leave my coneflowers standing for this reason.

Damaging insects and diseases can live in the plant remains. To reduce pests, some areas may need to have the materials gathered and removed. Chopping the materials and composting is a workable solution. Another option is to take those materials to the transfer station at 1881 Henton Road for composting.

Returning the organic matter back into the garden is important. Leaves and other materials that collect on hard surfaces like concrete will likely move into the storm sewer. That keeps a needed resource for our soil from becoming a potential pollutant.

Enjoy these fall days and do what you can to prepare for spring.

If you would like additional information on a horticulture topic, please contact Gregg Eyestone at the Riley County office of K-State Research and Extension. Gregg may be contacted by calling 537-6350 or stopping by 110 Courthouse Plaza in Manhattan or e-mail: geyeston@ksu.edu

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