

Spring cleanup time

April showers bring May flowers, the saying goes. They also mean it's time to start the garden cleanup, and get going on all those spring chores we've been just itching to get at. Some people regard the spring cleanup with about as much enthusiasm as they do preparing their income tax. But others can't wait to get their hands back into the soil, after dreaming, plotting and planning their great garden expectations all winter.

We all know how capricious spring can be here. Remember last spring, when we had a severe cold snap in April? That was tough on tender young growth if their protective covering of mulch had already been removed by a gardener who just couldn't wait to get started. Waiting until late April to start an earnest cleanup isn't going to put you far behind on the garden schedule. So if you haven't really got started yet, don't feel bad. In fact it's a good idea to wait until the ground has dried up a fair bit before doing too much in your yard – and with the “showers” we've been getting lately the ground is still pretty soft.

Don't try to do everything all at once. Pick a task, such as cutting back perennials or raking back the mulch, and work through it all around your yard. Or pick a particular bed and clean it up in its entirety before moving on to another. Some parts of our yards dry up and are ready to be worked on sooner than other areas.

Take a leaf rake to the garden to carefully remove detritus from your beds, including the dead mush of leaves from last year's perennials. Pull out the dead annuals that you left in the ground, matted grass and leaves, broken twigs and other organic debris. If you put down a protective winter mulch to cover perennials and bulbs, remove it carefully to avoid disturbing newly emerging shoots.

You can add all this plant material to your compost heap (providing you didn't have disease such as rose blackspot in your garden), you'll be glad of it later in the season. Just remember that for good compost an equal ratio of greens (fresh plant material) to browns (dead material) is required, so you may want to hold some of this material to mix with grass clippings and weeds a little later in the season.

Often the first harbingers of green in the garden are perennial weeds, such as couchgrass, coltsfoot, dandelion and ground ivy. If you didn't have a chance to remove them last fall, get at them right away, before they get spreading in earnest. Sometimes, of course, it's hard to tell if that burst of green is a weed or a plant you paid for, so when in doubt let it grow until you can recognize it as friend or foe.