

Star-Telegram

The Garden Guru: Get outside and prepare your yard for spring

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By NEIL SPERRY

I was out working in my garden one of those beautiful days early this week, and I suddenly realized that just two or three weeks from now, bulbs will be blooming and trees and shrubs will be leafing. This happens to me each winter. I get holed up doing "indoor things" when it's cold, and then I realize that I just can't wait any longer for my outdoor responsibilities. Here's my list. My bet is that some of these tasks might fit well on your list, too.

Dormant-season transplanting. I have a couple of shrubs I want to move from one spot to another, and winter is the only time to accomplish that task. They're dormant now, so there isn't any fresh growth to wilt from the roots that I'll lose as the plants are lifted and relocated. I'm pretty careful when I dig plants. I keep the soil firmly in place around their roots, and I always carry them by their soil balls, never by their trunks. I'll get them reset at the same depths they were growing before, and I'll water them thoroughly to settle their new soil. I'll also thin the top growth by 30 percent, again to compensate for roots that I've left behind. I'm not sure if I'll use a root-stimulator fertilizer. Sometimes I do, but more often I don't.

Along a similar line, I have two young Japanese maple trees that we planted 14 months ago. Something went wrong over the summer, and those trees tilt toward each other at 10-degree angles. I know better than to try to pull and stake them back into vertical. The only permanent way to get them plumb is to dig and reset them. Sure, it means they're starting their new root growth almost anew, but better than to have to look at crooked trees every day. Once they're reset, I'll stake them to be sure that this doesn't happen again. I didn't think they were tall enough to justify it last year. Bad decision.

Late-winter pruning tasks. This is last call for trimming deciduous plants. You can see dead and damaged branches better when the plants are bare, so that makes the job a lot easier.

Remember, as you're pruning summer-flowering shrubs now, never to "top" crape myrtles. There is no defense for this disfiguring practice. Probably the most plausible excuse would be because your plant has grown too tall, in which case, you really ought to move it somewhere else in your landscape. If you have a crape myrtle that has been topped before, the quickest way to a nice-looking plant would be to cut it to the ground and retrain the vigorous new shoots that come up.

I'm not into formal pruning in my own landscape. I prefer to buy plants that grow to the shape and size that I need, then pretty much leave them to grow to their genetic potential. However, that doesn't mean that I never prune or train them, and one annual task at my house is to use gasoline-powered hedge trimmers to shape the dwarf hollies and boxwoods. We remove a small amount of their top growth (probably 15 to 20 percent) each February, to give them rounded forms. Then, as the new growth comes out, it's soft-textured and very natural-looking. Other than to remove an occasional errant branch, they don't get pruned again until the same time the following year. I wait until February so I don't have to look at that formal pruning any longer than necessary.

Similarly, our nandinas are pruned late every winter. Most of what I've used is the old "Compacta" form that grows to 42 inches tall. Like the old, taller standard nandinas, it tends to get leggy. Nandinas are pruned differently from any other shrub that we grow. Each cane is cut individually with long-handled lopping shears, to within 1 or 2 inches of the soil. The canes send up new shoots that fill in from below. I probably cut two-thirds of my canes back each February. The shorter stems maintain the look of the bed until the new growth springs out in early March.

Rework and replant color beds. Recent rainfall has given me renewed enthusiasm for getting cool-season color planted. For old beds that I'm tuning back up, I'll add an inch each of sphagnum peat moss, compost and pine-bark mulch. An inch of expanded shale is still there, so I won't have to replenish it for a couple years. If I had new beds to prepare, I'd add 4 to 5 inches of organic matter and an inch of expanded shale, then would rototill to a depth of 12 inches.

Early-season vegetables. Onions and snap peas should be planted immediately. Mid-February, I'll set out broccoli and cabbage transplants and seed-potato pieces. Leafy and root vegetables will come late in the month.

Those, then, are the prime tasks in the landscape and garden. There are dozens of smaller ones, but these are the most time-sensitive.

Neil Sperry publishes Gardens magazine and hosts Texas Gardening noon-1 p.m. Saturdays and 9 a.m.-noon Sundays on WBAP AM/FM. Reach him during those hours at 800-288-9227 or 214-787-1820.

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