

Beautiful Landscapes Begin with Fall and Winter Maintenance

Whether you're ready or not, winter is only a whisper away. The deep chills and mounds of snow that we are sure to experience can turn the spring thaw into a miserable surprise for those who care about their landscaping.

The trick to simple spring cleaning is to start as soon as the night air dips to the point of needing a sweater.

"Get everything as clean and as pristine as you can well before the first snowfall," says Rich Kuri of R.J.K. Gardens in Saint James, N.Y. "It will make your life a lot easier come spring."

Start with the leaves. Your lawn does not like decomposed foliage, so get it off the grass before winter. If you don't, you'll have trouble. "Leaves and acorns are acidic and the lawn is more of a neutral pH," Kuri says. "If left behind, they will become compacted under the snow and suffocate the grass underneath, resulting in lots of big dead patches."

Rid your gardens of leaves, too. "That's where the insects hibernate, so it's best to clean the leaves out," Kuri says. "A lot of people think the leaves are good for the bed, but you'll end up

with a bug problem in the spring."

Another lawn maintenance issue is fertilization, and local laws affect the timing. Kuri points out that in Suffolk County, ordinances forbid fertilizing your grass after October 31. "There's no fertilization of lawns in November, December, January, February, or March — for five months," he says. "So do it now." Also, beginning in 2012 phosphate-based fertilizers will no longer be permitted, so preparing your lawn with an alternative now is a good idea.

Finally, tend to your water features. You can remove pumps if you want, but Kuri says it's not necessary. Most are hardy enough to survive Long Island winters, and leaving them in will allow you to run the water on mild winter days. You also don't need to flush the pipes, because most are self-draining — they empty back into the pond once the pump is off.

If your pond has fish, you can leave them be as long as the water is deep enough (Kuri recommends at least 24 inches) to not freeze completely. The fish will stay at the bottom and hibernate until the next thaw. Also, Kuri

warns not to feed fish when air temperature falls below 60 degrees. When cold, a fish's digestive system slows too much to process the food.

If you want to ensure that your water plants survive the winter, bring them to an indoor tank. Then remove any foliage from the pond. "When leaves decompose in water they let off gases, which get trapped under the ice and can kill your fish," Kuri says.

Once clean, stretch a pond net over the surface to prevent more leaves from falling or blowing in. "Make it very tight," Kuri says. "The leaves will then collect on the surface, and you can easily take them off in the spring."

All these steps will lead you through winter already prepared for a great-looking yard when the nice weather returns. "Cut your perennials, clean out your gardens, and do all the maintenance work in the fall," Kuri says. "This way in the spring your yard is already clean and you can focus on detailing work. You can do the edging and sprucing up rather than worry about cleaning out messy beds." ❖



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