

It's Cleanup Season!

March is notoriously unpredictable. Shrubs can be snow glazed at the beginning of the month, and a couple of weeks later, temperatures can warm up enough for flower and leaf buds to show signs of life.

Still, early spring cleanup tasks are essential. Remove burlap from trees and shrubs as the weather warms. Prune away winter-killed branches to make room for new growth. Cut back perennials and pull up old annuals. March is a good time to take stock of your yard and see if it's time to thin out crowded beds and do some transplanting to fill in bare spots.

Trees and Shrubs. Prune away dead and damaged branches where tree or shrub branches have been damaged by the cold, snow, and wind. Shaping hedges with hand pruners, rather than electric shears, prevents a thick outer layer of growth that prohibits sunlight and air from reaching the shrub's center. Prune summer-flowering shrubs before buds swell, but wait to prune spring bloomers, like until after they flower. Trim overgrown evergreens back to a branch whose direction you want to encourage.

Perennials and Grasses. Cut back and divide perennials as needed. Prune flowering perennials to a height of 4–5” and ornamental grasses to 2–3” to allow new growth. Where soil has thawed, dig up perennials to thin crowded beds; divide them, leaving at least three stems per clump, and transplant them to fill in sparse areas. On climbers, keep younger green canes and remove older woody ones; neaten them up by bending the canes horizontally and tipping the buds downward.

Beds and Borders. Clean up around plants. Rake out fallen leaves and dead foliage and pull up spent annuals. Once the threat of frost has passed, remove existing mulch to prepare for a new layer once spring planting is done. Now is a good time to spread a pelletized fertilizer tailored to existing plantings on the soil's surface so that spring rains can carry it to the roots. Add a 5-10-10 fertilizer around bulbs as soon as they flower to maximize bloom time and feed next season's growth. Use pins to fasten drip irrigation lines that have come loose and a square-head shovel to give beds a clean edge and keep turf grass from growing into them.

Paths and Patios. Neaten up hardscape surfaces. Rake escaped gravel back into walkways and patios, and order more gravel to spread in large depressions, which often form near a driveway's apron. Refill joints between flagstones by sweeping in new sand or stone dust; water with a hose to set it, then repeat. If the freeze-thaw cycle has heaved pavers out of place, remove them and replenish the base material as needed before setting pavers back in.

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