



Bundle Up! Late Winter Is a Great Time to Garden Pro-Tips

Susan Papanikolas

How Does your Garden Grow

Late winter* is a great time to get out into the garden to set the stage for the growth that's coming. You can save yourself a lot of work by doing some simple garden tasks now. This Pro-Tips sheet summarizes some of the information presented in our Northwest Flower and Garden Festival seminar to help you get out into your garden to get it ready for spring.

Cold hands bring gorgeous gardens!!

The conditions are right at this time of year to accomplish a lot in the garden:

- Most plants are dormant
 - You don't have to be careful of tender new growth
 - You have room to move about a little more easily
 - If you have to do something stressful to the plant, it handles it better when it's dormant
- Spring Growth is coming soon, so it's a good time to cut things back
 - This helps direct where new growth occurs
 - And the new foliage will soon replace what you cut off, hiding cut ends, filling in empty spaces, and providing photosynthesis to the plant

*Late winter in the Seattle area is late February/early March - when the forsythia is blooming, when it's time to prune roses, when most plants have not started growing. Late winter might arrive earlier in warmer climates, and later in colder climates.

Cut it Back and Clean it Up

This is a great time to clear the decks and get rid of old tattered foliage, winter damage, last year's leaves, stems and seed heads, and winter debris to clear the decks for fresh spring growth

Deciduous Perennials

If you left these up over winter, now's the time to cut them back. Cut all the way to the base of the plant. **This is especially important for deciduous grasses because once the new growth comes in, the old foliage mixes with the new foliage and it's very difficult to tidy.**

Evergreen Perennials

- Some evergreen perennials look OK at the end of the winter, but that foliage will decline after spring growth starts. You can cut them back now so it's a quick and easy job. And you can better appreciate the unfurling new growth. This is particularly effective and time saving for plants with fine stems or plants whose new growth intermingles with the old growth.
 - Examples: Disporum, Epimedium, many evergreen ferns
(hardyfern.org has great info on fern pruning)
- Many evergreen grasses and sedges and New Zealand flax don't need to be cut back completely, and you can comb out or snip off damaged foliage. If most of the foliage is winter damaged, and it looks weird to leave the small healthy remaining foliage in place (or it's very tedious to work around the little bit of healthy remaining foliage), you can usually cut the entire plant to the ground.
- If the foliage looks pretty good, you can leave it up. Watch it to see how it does in spring to decide if you want to cut it back next winter - does last year's foliage decline and you wish you had cut it off earlier? Or are you and the plant happier if you leave it be?



Howdoesyourgardengrowseattle.com

General Cleanup

Clear away dried leaves from where they've gotten snared in your shrubs, deadhead hydrangeas, and generally tidy up - this is very effective and rewarding at this time of year and helps clear the way so you can see your spring growth emerging more clearly.

Woody Plant Pruning

This is a great time for a lot of types of pruning on woody plants. They are dormant, you can see the framework of deciduous trees and shrubs, and you can direct where you want new growth to occur.

- Not everything needs to be pruned – lots of trees and shrubs don't need a lot of pruning
- Think about bloom time – early bloomers (Camellias, early blooming clematis, rhododendrons) already formed their flower buds – so you'll lose flowers with heavy pruning now

Maintenance pruning - great time of year for maintenance pruning

- Remove dead or damaged branches
- Remove crossing or rubbing branches
- Remove branches that are in the wrong place - in a path or headed toward a power line
- Try to avoid pruning to reduce size, this often backfires
- Try to remove branches at their origin or cut back to a major side branch rather than shortening a branch.

Hedges

- **Best time of year for pruning hedges** - new growth will soon soften the cuts, and you can direct new growth where you want it - rather

Coppicing and Rejuvenation Pruning

- If you have to prune a plant back severely, this is the time of year to do it
- Examples:
 - Coppicing red twig dogwoods (cutting all the way to the base to stimulate brightly colored new stems)
 - Pruning out up to $\frac{1}{3}$ of the branches of a cane growing shrub like elderberry or forsythia (bring forsythia branches indoors for a vase)
 - Rejuvenation and emergency measures to try to save an overgrown shrub



Howdoesyourgardengrowseattle.com

Roses - time to prune (and fertilize) roses

Vigorous Woody Vines like wisteria, grapes, and honeysuckle can be pruned hard now to keep them on their supportive structures and prevent a build up of twiggy growth under the pretty green (don't prune early blooming clematis now or you'll lose the flowers – prune those after flowering)

It's a complex topic. Some excellent resources:

- Cass Turnbull's *Guide to Pruning*
- Plant Amnesty - plantamnesty.org

Moving and Dividing Plants

- Plants are dormant, the weather is cool, the soil is moist - great time to move or divide plants if needed.

Weed Control

- There are often abundant little weed seedlings at this time of year. They're small and easy to ignore or think you'll get to them later - kill them now!
- Pull, scuff, or scrape them now. It's quick and easy, you don't have to be very careful and you'll prevent them from setting seed

Mulching

- I love to mulch with something made from decomposed organic matter, especially when it's dark in color
 - Retains moisture, reduces weeds, increases organic matter, looks pretty
- Don't pile up around the base of woody plants or smother perennials
- Go lightly over groundcovers
- If you have an established garden that has been mulched many times over the years, you can mulch lightly or skip a year or two – don't want to have too much build up
- Do this NOW, before spring growth starts because it's so much quicker and easier when the plants are dormant



Important Takeaways

It's worth it to bundle up and brave the cold to take care of many garden tasks in late winter.

- So satisfying to clear away old foliage and debris to highlight spring growth
- Plants are dormant now and new growth is coming
- Tidying, Weed Control, Mulching so much easier now than after the plants start growing
- Consider where new growth comes from and when a plant blooms to decide if you should cut it back now
- Prune your hedges and cut back your deciduous grasses and evergreen ferns now (you'll thank me later)



Subscribe

www.youtube.com/@HowDoesYourGardenGrow



Follow

[@gardengrowseattle](https://www.instagram.com/gardengrowseattle)



Connect

www.howdoesyourgardengrowseattle.com