

Cotswold Cottage Gardening Autumn Clean-Up

One of the great pleasures of gardening is that it alerts the gardener to the cycle of the seasons. Although the nights are drawing in, and most of our plants are shutting down for the winter, now is a good time to get your garden into good shape.

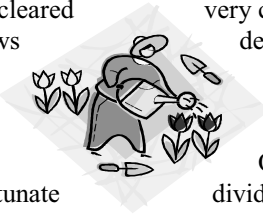
Bed and Breakfast For Slugs

I am not greatly enamoured of the current fashion for leaving borders uncleared until spring. Of course, it allows magazines to enhance their winter issues with atmospheric photographs of frost silvering seed heads and skeletal shapes - but the unfortunate reality is that most plants do not decline gracefully into classic outlines. Instead they tend to collapse into soggy heaps of decomposing brown foliage which do little to enhance the clear outlines of bare shrubs, and any hard landscaping which you may have planned for winter viewing. This decaying undergrowth is a three star Bed and Breakfast for slugs and snails; and it is not the most attractive backdrop to any small bulbs with which you plan to enhance your spring borders: snowdrops, dwarf iris and crocus.

Get out the Secateurs!

No, I say, get out there now with the secateurs, a hand fork and your wheelbarrow and clear it all out, just as you would the vegetable garden. Dig up the annuals; most of them will require no more than a gentle tug and cut hardy perennials down to the ground. With some types, such as sedums and many of

daisy family, you will see the resting foliage buds on the surface; leave these to make next year's growth. Some, like peonies and delphiniums, will disappear entirely for their winter's rest. It is a good idea to mark them, on a plan or with a label or a small cane, so that you don't over-enthusiastically plant on top of them (or dig them up). Clearing in autumn ensures that if we have a wet or very cold spring, you are not desperately trying to clear the garden before replanting.



On a Clear Day

On a clear day, you can lift and divide or move anything you have earmarked, without fumbling through shrouds of dead plants. After a good rainfall, you can mulch around your plants onto clean ground, which will help to cut down the spring weed problem; and dress the plants with a general purpose fertiliser under the mulch, boosting the soil for next year. It is possible to sow hardy annuals directly into the ground in the autumn, although this tends to be more successful in warmer areas of the country. But if you have already cleared the borders, you can access any gaps for spring sowing with ease.

So give your garden a good tidy in autumn; then you can spend the winter inside in the warmth with the seed and plant catalogues, basking in the contemplation of a job well done, knowing that you are ready to spring into action next year.

Elaine Hunt