

Preparing for winter

GWF437
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Gardening shifts down a gear in autumn, but there is still lots to do. We tell you which plants can be propagated or pruned, and which you should protect

Pruning

Most routine pruning is best carried out in spring or summer, but there is a range of useful jobs you can tackle in autumn.

Climbers

Overgrown climbers can be pruned once the leaves have fallen and you can see what you are doing. If plants are very tangled, as happens with vigorous honeysuckles or clematis, then cutting the whole lot back is often the most practical option. You can then repair or paint the supports if necessary. It's also a good time to cut away any growth threatening windows and gutters - cut back at least one year's growth or you'll find you have to do it again in summer.

Apple and pear trees

Remove any dead or broken branches, or those badly infected with canker or scab. Also remove spindly branches or those which are badly placed - too low, projecting over paths, rubbing on other branches etc. then, thin out the branches to allow in light - try to retain branches with the most fat fruit buds.

Raspberries

Summer-fruiting varieties: cut down canes which have fruited to ground level, and tie in new canes. With autumn-fruiting varieties, cut down all the canes once fruiting is over.

Gooseberries

Cut low branches back to an upward-pointing bud to make future picking easier. Thin out branches, especially in the centre to encourage bigger fruit and improve air circulation, which reduces mildew problems.

Tall shrubs

These can suffer wind damage in winter which breaks boughs and loosens roots. Lavateras are prone to this, and should be cut back by at least half in autumn. *Buddleja davidii* and tall shrub roses also benefit from this treatment. Pruning can be finished in spring.

Hedges

If you have an informal mixed hedge it still needs trimming; this will control the overall size, keep the growth dense and help retain a good shape. Keep it broader at the base, so it remains clothed down to the ground. You only need to do this once a year, and autumn, after growth stops, is as good a time as any. With berrying hedges, however, you may want to wait until the display is over.

Protecting

Even in relatively mild areas, young plants and those on the borderline of hardiness can be vulnerable to cold and wet in winter, but a little extra protection will usually see them through. October is a good time to check what needs extra help and obtain the necessary materials.

Plants to wrap up in situ

Young evergreens, semi-tender shrubs such as bay, cordylines, lemon verbena - *Lippia citriodora* and myrtles, and semi-tender climbers such as Chilean glory flower - *Eccremocarpus*, fremontodendron, passion flower and potato vine - *Solanum crispum*, should at least survive if you protect the roots. However, if you protect the stems as well, the plant will get a better start next year, and will flower earlier. Two layers of horticultural fleece is an easy and effective insulation material for evergreens. For leafless plants, you can construct an enclosure from two layers of netting, sacking or wire mesh then stuff this with straw, dry leaves or evergreen prunings. Fix a sheet of heavy duty polythene over the top to keep the rain off. For climbers, use wire to attach a similar sandwich across the lower few feet of the plant.

Insulating roots

Many semi-tender plants, including diascias, hebes, fuchsias and penstemons, will die down to the ground in a cold winter, but will reshoot if their roots are protected from frost. The best way to do this is with a 15cm mulch of bark, evergreen prunings or dry leaves. Stop them blowing away with a short fence of netting. If the plant has woody stems, make a small ring of

netting to keep the mulch from direct contact with the stem which encourages rotting. An insulating blanket like this is also worthwhile for surface rooting plants such as acers and rhododendrons.

Protecting containers

Plants in containers can be damaged if the compost freezes, even if they are otherwise hardy. Compost also expands as it freezes, which can crack containers, especially if they curve in at the top. Small pots can be moved, or plunged to their rims in the garden. Large pots can be wrapped in duvets made from bin liners stuffed with insulating material, or a double layer of bubble polythene, secured with wire or string.

Wind protection

Newly planted evergreens, including conifers and hedging, may lose more water by evaporation than their roots can absorb, so a wind barrier to increase humidity can be very helpful. Use windbreak netting or hessian supported on firmly fixed canes or stakes. Don't use plastic as this can make the air too moist and encourage fungal diseases.

Rain protection

Many alpine plants, and those with silvery or hairy leaves, need well-drained soil and also resent water settling on their leaves. Heavy winter rain can cause them to rot off so protect them with a layer of grit under the leaves and cover with a sheet of glass or plastic supported on bricks, or an open-ended cloche.

Propagation

Propagating your own plants is very satisfying, can save you money, provide very acceptable gifts and an inexpensive source of popular fundraisers. Many border perennials and herbs also grow

better as young plants, so benefit from regular renewal.

Taking cuttings

Many shrubs, climbers and herbs are easily propagated through stem cuttings at this time of year. With deciduous plants, wait until the leaves fall. Cut a section of young but woody stem, around pencil thickness and 20-30cm long. With most plants, it does not matter exactly where you make the cut, but some plants (see below) root better as basal cuttings - cut through the base of a young shoot where it joins the main stem to produce a cutting 10-15cm long. Remove any soft growth at the top of the stem and, with evergreens, take off the leaves from the lower half of the cutting. Make a narrow trench in a sunny, sheltered spot in the garden. Line the bottom of the trench with a layer of sharp sand to improve drainage. Most cuttings root quicker if treated with rooting hormone. Insert the cuttings to two-thirds of their depth and 7-15cm apart. Backfill the trench and firm well. Alternatively, you can root cuttings in a coldframe, or in a large pot half filled with damp sand kept indoors over the winter, then moved outside once the weather improves. Many cuttings will root by spring but, if not, leave them in position until the next autumn.

Propagation round-up

These plants root well from stem cuttings planted in open ground:

Shrubs

Take basal cuttings for aucuba, buddleja, cornus, escallonia, forsythia, garrya. Griselinia: trim cuttings just below a leaf joint. Kerria, leycesteria. Ligustrum: trim just below a leaf joint. Olearia and philadelphus: take cuttings with a heel of old wood

attached, ribes, rosa, symphoricarpos and weigela.

Fruit Blackcurrant, gooseberry, redcurrant

Best in a cold frame:

Shrubs Deciduous berberis, buxus take 7-15cm cuttings, deciduous ceanothus, choisya, cistus, cotoneaster, euonymus, myrtus and senecio take basal cuttings for all. Deciduous viburnum take 13cm cuttings and trim just below a leaf joint.

Climbers Hedera, lonicera and jasminum take 15cm cuttings

Herbs Bay, rosemary and sage; take basal cuttings

Dividing perennials

Many border perennials, and some herbs, are easily increased by division in autumn or spring. As the plant starts to die down, cut back the stems and lift the whole plant. Tease apart the roots, discarding old sections of stem. With tuberous roots, cut into sections making sure each has two buds and plenty of roots.

Improve the soil with some bulky organic material and replant the divided portions. Some perennials (in bold) benefit from division every three years.

Plants to divide in the winter:

Border perennials

Achillea, **ajuga**, *Anemone x hybrida*, astantia, **bergenia**, bampanula, *Carex morowii*, **centaurea**, **hardy chrysanthemum**, **coreopsis**, **doronicum**, **echinacea**, erigeron, euphorbia (except *E. chariacias*), hardy geraniums, **helianthus**, hemerocallis, heuchera, lamium, lychnis, **monarda**, phlox, polemonium, polygonatum, potentilla, prunella, **rudbeckia**, **salvia**, **sidalcea**, **sisyrinchium**, **solidago** and tiarella

Herbs Chives, hyssop, lemon balm, marjoram, mint.