

Winter Care of Perennials

All the following methods work well for us but most important is getting to know your garden and its own micro climate. Keep records of what is damaged over winter and what pruning and protection methods work for you.

Pruning / Cutting Back

Herbaceous Perennials:

The term herbaceous tells us that they grow their stems and leaves fresh each year so it is okay to cut them back to the ground each year. The question of timing remains.

For tenderish perennials it is sometimes worth leaving the top growth on until late winter as this provides a little protection to the crown (the part where new shoots and leaves appear from) of the plant. The old shoots trap some warmer air around the plant.

In windy areas it might be worth shortening the stems to avoid too much wind-rock which will disturb the roots. Plants that I leave top growth on include *Lobelia tupa*, *Lobelia laxifolia*, *Salvia patens*, *Maclayea* and *Lepechinia*.

Some plants its best to leave the top growth on to provide winter interest. I'm enjoying *Eryngium x.zabelii* Jewel (right) dusted with frost today - all *Eryngiums* have great winter interest so leave cutting them back. Other good subjects include: *Agastache*, *Morina*, *Phlomis tuberosa*, *Eupatorium*, *Francoa*, *Monarda*.

Other plants do look good but I cut them back to avoid inferior self-seeds - examples include *Rudbeckia* and *Echinacea*. On the other hand I leave the stems and heads on *Verbena bonariensis* to encourage self seeding. Also in a mild winter the stems remain alive and re-sprout from high up the plant resulting in early flowering.

Another reason to leave old stems in place until March is to provide a home for ladybirds - our *Lobelia tupa* stems are hollow and ideal hibernating places for them.

When cutting stems down consider the following. If the plants doesn't start into growth early I leave 2 or 3 inches of stem to mark the position of the crown (e.g. *Eupatorium*).

If stem is hollow I cut back to the soil level to discourage (but not prevent entirely) earwigs and wood lice burrowing down into the crown.

Ground huggers:

Why would we want to prune these? Well, firstly because they have spread further than we want them and this becomes apparent when we cut back the plants around them. For example I've just noticed that my *Pericaria affinis* Superba has really spread this year. However now is not a great time for me to cut it back because I want to use the pieces I remove to make new plants and these may not root if I do them now. So I'll wait until late February which for us is when the soil starts to warm up again. *Ajuga* on the other hand seems to root quite readily so I am levering up rooted runners and potting them up or moving to a new spot now. Some of the ground cover *Campanulas* (e.g. *punctata*) disappear below the ground over winter so leave these alone now and leave a few dead flower stems on to show their position. We lifted and divided our *Corydalis* in late September / early October. I never tried doing them this late but if you merely want to curtail the size of a clump you could do that now. *Centaurea* can be cut back hard to the ground and it is a good time to find any slugs and snails hiding in the leaves. *Euphorbias* are a bit trickier. Ones like *myrsinites* or *rigida* that remain evergreen are best left alone and any cutting back done in late winter to remove any damaged or rotting stems (beware the sap!). If you have any of the really invasive ones now might be a good time to try and get the roots out as many send out new underground shoots over winter. With *Geums*, just remove dead leaves and flower stems. I leave *Saxifrages* until spring and see if there is any rot after winter. For *Sedums* remove the dead flower stems - cut right back to the ground or just above the new plantlets clustered round the stems. *Veronica gentianoides* is one of those plants where old leaves turn mushy in winter so it is best to remove these. The trailing stems are covered with fresh root which suggests that they could be transplanted now but we have had little luck with transplants in pots in the open over winter.

Woody Perennials:

Some of the plants we grow as perennials are woody plants and may need pruning to improve structure, shape, flowering for next year. There are (as far as I am aware) no defined methods of pruning like there are for *Roses*, fruit trees and bushes, *Wisteria* or *Clematis*. In our garden several woody "perennials" spring to mind. The *Salvias* I leave be until late winter / early spring and then I cut them back to a neat framework, taking out dead stems (by dead I don't mean leafless - if the stem is still green inside it's alive), badly shaped or broken ones. Then I prune to give a good shape. I cut most of these woody *Salvias* back quite hard because they will make plenty of new growth during the season. I'd also leave *Helianthemums* until spring and cut them back with secateurs or shears then. I don't prune *Cistus* into old, bare wood as they rarely resprout. But now is a good time to take cuttings and this will serve to make the plant bush up in spring. Cut off 3-4 inch long sections with a sharp knife and pot up in gritty compost. *Hydrangea Annabelle* is a woody shrub. When cutting back cut just above a good bud if possible. You can leave it only lightly pruned - remove dead flowers and damaged or badly placed stems. For the largest flowers cut the stems back very hard - I used to cut back to about 1ft tall. Nowadays I leave her a bit taller

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resulting in smaller flowers but a better, self supporting plants. I cut back lightly leaving some of this years growth on the plant. Note: other Hydrangeas are treated differently but I have no experience of them. Coloured stem varieties of Cornus are not pruned until late winter as we want to enjoy them through the winter. The usual advice is to cut back very hard (say to 6in above the ground) at this time. This assumes you want to keep them as a low growing feature. I find vigorous ones like Midwinter Fire respond well to this. My preference however is for lighter pruning. I take out about a quarter to a third of the old, brown thick stems right at ground level using loppers. I then remove poor twiggy stems and those with any die-back (dead ends to the stems). I then cut back to form a pleasing shape but not necessarily too low to the ground. Midwinter Fire is best cut back fairly low. Cornus sibirica Alba with its bright red stems I cut back to about 1 - 2ft above ground. With the black stemmed Kesselringii I have been experimenting with leaving this largely unpruned in height but just thinned out of old stems (see 17th October 2009). I always cut back Anthemis tinctoria at this time of year as it stops the plants being too leggy next year.

Mulching / Blanketing

Some plants benefit from a bit insulation over winter. Shallow rooted plants like Phlox should be mulched with old compost, bark or leaves.

Slightly tender plants need a blanket. For example, we put small conifer boughs over our Lobelia tupa after Christmas to protect the new growth from air frosts.

Pests and Diseases over Winter:

Just because we are tucked up warm inside through the winter doesn't mean pests are dormant too. In fact mid winter is good time to wrap up and get out to seek and destroy those pests.

Slugs and Snails

These are busy all through the year. Slugs are the main problem as they like to eat the fresh shoots as they emerge. For some perennials like Hemerocallis and Phlox this is from January onwards. Slug pellets are of little use because wet weather allows slugs to shrug off the poison. It is best to rootle around the bases of plants and find the tiny slugs and snails and squash them. Cut back old foliage and stems (if appropriate) to give birds access to slugs on the new growth.

Caterpillars

Caterpillars and Cut Worms often hid in the rosettes of evergreen perennials so it is good idea to have a good look for damage and the usually green droppings.

Mice and Voles

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When the ground is frozen these can play havoc by eating the green leaves of just about any young plant. Damage is worse in pot plants and plants in cold frames etc. Place pot plants on trays on top of large (5 litre plus) smooth sided pots as these small rodents from climbing up them.

They also gnaw away bark causing damage to woody parts of the plants and trees. Cut away grass and old leaves from around the base of the plant to remove hiding places.

If poison and traps are not appropriate then always remove hiding places and make the rodents more worried about predators.

Aphid or Greenfly

These can be a problem in cold frames and greenhouses so watch for them and rub off colonies with your finger and thumb.