**Cutting Down Perennials in the Fall**

**Segment for Week of 1 November 2021**

This is Steve Rulison bringing you information on shore friendly living and gardening from the Eastern Shore Master Gardeners and Virginia Cooperative Extension. It’s fall and most of the perennials in the garden are finished blooming and it's time to throw in the towel for the growing season. Some perennials, however, should be left standing and this begs the question 'to cut or not to cut?'

Perennial plants regrow every spring, while annual plants live for only one growing season, then die off. Perennials generally have a shorter blooming period compared to annuals, so it's common for gardeners to use a combination of both plants in their yard. As for pruning, it is going to be easy to make a pruning decision with annual plants. After the first frost when the annuals have blackened and look ugly, pull them out and throw them in the compost bin. Likewise, clean up plant debris from the vegetable garden. When asked what to do with perennials, as with many gardening questions, the answer is 'it depends.' Here are some hints on when to cut and when to wait.

The perennial plants to leave standing are:

1. Perennials that add interest to the winter landscape.

During a snowy winter, some plants provide stunning interest in the form of height and structure. Ornamental grasses are most dramatic in the winter landscape with their tall plumes. Consider leaving switch grass, zebra grass, and feather reed grass standing until spring then cut them back before the new shoots appear.

1. Perennials that provide food for birds.

Many birds rely on the seed heads of dried perennials for food. It is common to see goldfinches in a stand of purple coneflower enjoying the seed treats. The seeds of black-eyed Susan and sunflower are other favorites. In addition, overwintering birds find protection in plant stubs and ground covers.

1. Perennials that help beneficial insects in winter.

Beneficial insects may hide in or near native plants for the winter either as pupae, caterpillars or eggs. The plants provide shelter from their predators such as birds or spiders providing a good reason not to rake plant debris from around your perennials.

Don't be in a hurry to rush outside and cut plants back. Unless the plant is diseased or infected, wait until several hard frosts have killed back the tops. In the spring, the plant sends up energy from its roots to produce beautiful foliage and blooms. Allow the roots time to reclaim that energy from the dying plant, keeping it strong for re-emergence in the spring. For many perennials, leaving plant tops over winter is fine and may be preferable.

For answers to your other Gardening questions or recommendations on how to control fall armyworm in your turf or pasture grasses, call your local Accomack or Northampton County Extension Office. Here on the Shore call either 678-7946 or 787-1361

<https://extension.psu.edu/cutting-down-perennials-in-the-fall?fbclid=IwAR37HDxowO14LUVTjlyYZs9HOPCZwyx7DdQZkYQxFv2jyjbF4pO6R4r3HGs>