

Cutting Back Perennials

Perennials are plants that come back every year, which have soft (not woody) stems, such as daylilies, black-eyed-Susans, coneflowers and hosta. Cutting back perennials in the fall is often a matter of personal preference. Here are some good general guidelines.

There are some good reasons to keep the foliage of some plants throughout the winter. Many perennials have attractive foliage and/or seed heads that offer food resources and shelter for birds. Examples of these include coneflowers, ornamental grasses and sedums. With some marginally hardy perennials, leaving the stems can also aid in over-wintering, and the foliage can help insulate the crowns. Mums seem to benefit from this practice.

Some perennials should never be cut back in the fall. These include lavender, caryopteris, and clematis. You can prune lavender and caryopteris plants in early-March to shape the plants, but pruning back now could kill them.

You may want to leave other plants because they could prove to be mostly evergreen. Some examples include coral bells (heuchera) and many ferns.

Generally people remove spent foliage for purely aesthetic reasons. However, if your plants have been bothered by foliage diseases, you should definitely remove the foliage. Typical plants that have fungus problems include peonies and phlox. Removing the old foliage and plant debris reduces the amount of inoculum present to re-infect next year's foliage.

To cut back perennials, simply prune off the foliage 2-3" from the ground. You can compost any foliage that is not diseased.