



Weather Watch

Prepare your yard for cooler weather

A WELL-TENDED yard is not only lovely, it also can add up to 10 percent to the value of your home.

But no one wants to be a slave to green growing things — especially during cool-weather months. A few simple precautions will keep your yard, tools and outdoor living areas low-maintenance until spring.

If you are beginning to landscape, understanding the site is the first commandment, says Larry Shapira, professor of horticulture at Northern Virginia Community College.

Variables include the yard's sun and wind exposure, the type of soil you are dealing with, drainage and climate.

Not sure how to evaluate these? Consult a professional landscape contractor. You'll save time, effort — and, because of discounts to contractors — money.

SHAPIRA ADVISES against consulting the "next-door neighbor who knows everything" when it comes to yard planning and plant pruning. He says garden centers are a more appropriate source for advice on when to put down lime, how to prune roses and the best way to rid of Japanese beetles.

"The responsibility doesn't end when a person puts the plant in the ground," says Shapira, who adds that maintenance prolongs and ensures the life of the plant.

Check your local bookstore for gardening guides that apply to your region and the specific cooling weather requirements of your plants.

For the do-it-yourselfer, a weekend or two of work laying precast pavers — a relatively inexpensive project — can create a low-maintenance, visually aesthetic yard. Many shapes, sizes and colors, from huge red hexagons to

4-inch cobbles, are available.

Even though rain may temporarily free you from irrigation duty, check now to ensure your system's year-round efficiency.

Watch your sprinklers operate. Adjust them so they don't soak the driveway or sidewalks. Repair bad hose connections and leaky faucets.

Cover your spa and pool during low-use seasons. Uncovered pools or spas can lose more than an inch of water a week through evaporation. Nearly 1,000 gallons a month can evaporate from a 400-square-foot pool.

Soil basins around trees and shrubs direct water to plant roots and minimize runoff. On hillsides, use root irrigators or drip irrigation.

ELIMINATE WEEDS. They compete for water and nutrients.

Work ample amounts of organic

matter into the soil. This helps sandy soils hold more water and clay soils absorb it more easily. Water will penetrate into your lawn more efficiently if you install low-precipitation sprinkler heads or water in short cycles. Now is a good time to dethatch or aerate your lawn.

If you garden in pots, reduce the amount of care they need by grouping them together. This makes watering easier, they also shade each other.

Add soil polymers to the potting mix. These granules plump and retain water, holding it until the plant roots need it.

Move root-bound plants into larger containers. Glazed pots minimize evaporation. Protect your potted plants from frost by moving them indoors. To insulate those that will be

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