

Put garden in spring cleaning

BY MARTY FIGLEY
SPECIAL WRITER

Well, it has finally arrived! Spring, that is. With our cold winter weather sometimes it seemed as though the air could never get warm again. But here we are, aching to run out into our gardens and prepare them for the coming season.

Take a stroll through your property and make note of what needs to be done. Rake up the matted tree leaves that were left on the ground because they will smother the grass as it wants to grow. While you're about it, remove twigs, stones and other debris that accumulated during the winter. Right away your property will look neater.

While the grass is still dormant, edge the garden beds to define their outline.

If the grass is tall enough it can be mowed and fertilized. A pre-emergent product to prevent crabgrass and other unwanted weeds can also be applied. However, don't use a pre-emergent if there are bare areas in the lawn that you want to reseed. When you do reseed keep the seeds moist until the young grass is established.

Slowly remove the mulch from the

plants as the weather warms — don't be too hasty.

Shrubs that bloom on new wood, such as potentilla, oakleaf hydrangea and clematis, can be pruned now, if they weren't in the fall. Late winter or early spring is best, so prune promptly or you may sacrifice some blooms. Wait until spring-flowering plants such as azalea, lilac, viburnum, mock orange and forsythia finish blooming before pruning. They bloom on old wood and need the rest of the year to form new growth for the next season.

General pruning directions are to remove all the dead wood, those branches that cross and may rub together, and selective branches to keep the plants in shape. If you have to constantly prune to keep a plant in bounds, it is probably located in the wrong place. A good book will help teach proper pruning times and methods. I especially like "Pruning & Train-



ing Plants," David Joyce and Chris Brickell (Simon & Schuster), and "A Practical Guide: Pruning," Peter McHoy (Abbeville Press).

As you are shaping up the shrubs be on the look-out for weeds and as soon as you see one, remove it! If you do, it won't have time to go to seed and produce more weeds.

The shrub, flower and vegetable beds need to be cleaned out, especially if you left some leaves in them during the winter. A child's rake or one such as the Adjust-a-rake with tines that can be made

wide or narrow will make this chore go fast. If you didn't remove the dead annuals (flowers and vegetables) they need to be taken away now. There seems to be two schools of thought about cutting down all the flower stalks of perennials. Some people like the silhouettes such as grasses and tall sturdy plants make in the wintertime, while others like to cut and remove all the perennial stems and foliage. Anyway, it's time to trim them and carefully

clear out the browned and dead parts. Don't disturb the new growth or roots.

When new spring growth is around three to six inches tall, many perennials can be divided. I like to divide my tarragon when it is just about three inches, because the roots get so tangled, and you may prefer to divide when the plants are very short. We must always keep in mind that a cold snap might arrive and be prepared to protect our plants. Most people wait until around Memorial Day to set out new plants so you might want to wait a while to divide.

Before actually digging into the soil, check to see if it is ready to be worked. If a shovelful crumbles when you let the soil drop off your shovel or spade, it is dry enough to be worked. If it remains in a solid lump, give it some time to dry out a little.

This is a good time to have the soil tested to find out the pH level. Your County Extension agent will give directions. In Oakland County call (810) 858-0902; in Wayne County, (313) 494-3011. These are the "hotline" numbers that you should save. They are staffed by competent people who can answer all manner of gardening questions.

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