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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Time to Put the Yard and Garden to Bed for the Winter

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Fall is here in Ferry County. We've had our first frost. So now it's time to harvest the remaining crops and plan to put the garden to bed for the winter. Putting your garden to bed properly this fall will make a world of difference when it's time to wake it up come spring. Here are some tasks to put on your list of to do's:

Tilling up the Vegetable Garden: The first step is to remove crop debris and residue and add those to your compost pile. Or, at least shred the debris up and get it close against the soil to speed up the decomposition process. This will also help to minimize insect and disease pressure next year. Compost is soil microbe food before and during the growing season, spreading some on your garden beds now will help the soil through the winter, and alleviate some of the workload in spring by providing well-fed soil. Adding straw or hay on top won't hurt, for sure, as it all protects the soil in the winter.

Raking Leaves: If you have deciduous trees, the leaves can certainly pile up. As we start to get more dew and moisture, these leaves can mat down and smother the grass and other plants. Get those leaves raked up and consider using them for making compost or tilling them into your vegetable garden soil where they will decompose over the winter and help improve the soil.

Flowers: Divide spring and early summer flowering perennials that have become crowded, cutting back to the ground the dead tops of perennial flowers, weeding and cleaning away plant refuse in garden and landscape beds, aerating your lawn if the soil is compacted, giving all your trees, shrubs and perennials a good deep watering before the water is shut off for the season. Fertilize.

DIG TENDER BULBS: Many of the tender bulbs, corms, rhizomes, and tubers that we plant in our gardens, including cannas, calla lilies, gladiolas, and dahlias, are tropical plants from warmer climates (Zones 7 to 10) where they can stay in the ground over the winter. In cooler climates (Zones 4 and lower) like ours, they should be dug each fall and stored for the winter in a cool, dry protected location where they will not freeze. To store them, wait about two weeks after frost kills their tops and then carefully lift the tubers, rhizomes or corms from the soil; shake off as much of the soil as possible; rinse them with clean water; and let them dry in a protected dry spot. Put in cardboard boxes or paper bags using dry sawdust, wood shavings, or peat moss for packing.

Now is also a good time to order or purchase spring flower bulbs for planting next month after the weather cools. Keep in mind that bigger (more expensive) bulbs produce bigger flowers. If your bulbs are packaged in a plastic or closed paper bag take them out and place them in an open well ventilated tray located in a cool (50 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit) spot.

Wait to plant the bulbs until the soil temperature drops below 60 degrees Fahrenheit. This temperature allows for root growth without stimulating leaf growth. Don't forget the bulbs need water, so water them in right after planting and whenever needed during mild fall and winter weather to keep the soil slightly moist.

MOW THE GRASS: After the stress of a very hot summer, your lawn needs all the help it can get. You should keep mowing if the lawn is growing. Do not leave it extra long, as this can lead to matted grass and favorable conditions for snow mold. Mow at the recommended height of about

2.5 inches until you no longer need to mow. With cooler weather and more water available, dormant grass should be starting to show signs of life. Once it rains, grass that is dormant greens back up within two weeks.

Fertilize: If you only fertilize as part of your lawn maintenance once a year, autumn is the best time to do it. In fact, your lawn would appreciate a light application of fertilizer in early fall and again in late fall. WSU recommends using a top-quality lawn fertilizer that contains some slow-release or controlled-release nitrogen, such as IBDU, sulfur-coated urea, or urea formaldehyde. These fertilizers release nitrogen over an extended period of time and allow for more even growth during the growing season. Fertilizers with soluble nitrogen, such as ammonium sulfate or urea, with nitrogen in a quickly available form are best for late fall fertilization. These types can be a little more expensive. You can feel confident using complete fertilizers with ratios ranging from 24-4-16 (6-1-4) to 24-3-6 (8-1-2) or anything close to that range. Apply the initial treatment in early September. Apply the second feeding in late October or early November. The N-P-K nutrients feed the roots to keep the **grass** strong during the winter. A late fall fertilization, applied after the grass stops growing, promotes root growth and the storage of food reserves needed for spring growth. This late fall application also keeps the grass looking greener through the winter and you should not need to fertilize again until April or May.

Fall is a good time to re-seed or re-sod those brown areas, as long as irrigation water is available. Because it takes some types of grass seed, like that of Kentucky bluegrass, up to two weeks to germinate, seeding must be done early enough to allow time for the seed to germinate and grow mature enough before hard frosts occur and before irrigation water is turned off. So lawns must be seeded in early September. Re-sodding can be done later in the fall, as long as water is available and the soil is not frozen.

Water is critical to the success of both re-seeding and re-sodding. The soil must be kept moist to enable germination and provide moisture for root growth. If water is not available, you will be wasting time and money. You need to water frequently enough to keep the soil moist but not too wet. Excess moisture can lead to disease problems. Once the grass germinates and plants develop several leaves, you should water more deeply and less frequently.

If you want to be happy for a lifetime, be a gardener.

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