

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
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Contact: WSU/Skagit County Extension: 428-4270

Early spring garden chores always seem to restore the gardener's need for order, to set the stage for adding some new plants and admiring established plants that have weathered another year. There are three basic chores that any gardener can start with to begin the season: cutting back or pruning, weeding and mulching. Lacking in glamour, these three chores are worth the time and effort.

Start by taking a good look at all your shrubs. With clean, sharp shears or a small pruning saw, remove any dead wood, any scarred or broken branches. If you have modern hybrid roses growing in your garden, you need to go a step further. Shorten all the canes to eight to twenty-four inches tall first, cutting at an angle facing away from the center of the shrub and then thin the plant to between three and five of the most vigorous canes. For shrub roses and old garden roses, cut out all the deadwood and weak canes and cut old, non-productive canes to the ground. Most garden shrubs can be cut back the same way as shrub roses. They will respond with increased health and growth. For perennials, cut away any dead stalks to the ground and remove debris from around new growth. Ornamental grasses should be sheared to a height of four to ten inches and although they look odd, new growth will emerge in a few weeks. Ferns need to have all their old fronds cut back to the base of the plant. New fronds, some tightly curled, will be coming out of the base so cut with care. When the old fronds are removed, new growth will soon take their place.

While working around your plants you have discovered where your weeds are growing. Pulling by hand, using a truckle hoe or a hand held hoe would take care of the ones with shallow roots. For long and tap roots, dig below the root with a dandelion tool and lift the entire root out of the ground. While weeding, do not turn over all the soil with a fork or spade. Weed seeds live for years in the soil and when it is turned, they come to the top and sprout. Just take out the weeds that have already sprouted. Remove all the debris. Do not compost the rose canes, the woody stalks and the ferns, as they will not decompose in the compost pile. The next step is to mulch.

Applying four inches of mulch or compost will smother weeds and discourage weeds from sprouting. So, take the time to find a supply of good compost if you do not make your own. Many suppliers will deliver if you want them to. Generously apply a four-inch layer of mulch or compost under shrubs, around perennials and where you plan to add new plants. There is no need to mix the compost into the soil, just top-dress your beds. The compost will nourish your garden while it keeps weeds under control.

Accomplishing these tasks will set the stage for the rest of the gardening year and result in healthier plants that are more attractive.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.

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