



Winter
Home &
Garden

Preparing Perennials

Perennials are beautiful flowers that revisit your garden each year. With proper preparation, these blooms can return heartier and more attractive when the warm weather rolls back around.

Gardeners in warm-winter areas have much less maintenance to perform, as the risk of crippling frost and snow are not as threatening to their perennials. However, for those who live in the United States Department of Agriculture's Climate Hardiness Zones eight and lower, their plants require much more attention.

WARM-WEATHER MAINTENANCE

For climates that don't freeze and rarely see snow, it is necessary to cut stems down to 6-8 inches once they are finished growing for the season.

Make sure to wait until the foliage is no longer green before you cut it back. By cutting too early, you create a chance of the perennial expending too much energy to survive the winter.

You also should water your plants at least once a month to ensure they are healthy and alive.



PREP FOR COLD-WEATHER CLIMATES

A lot of perennials can survive harsh winters by being cut back, covered in a thick layer of mulch and periodically watered. However, certain plants are more fragile to frigid winter temperatures and may not come back after excessive frost and chilly winds.

The best practice for new

plants is to remove the bulb and store them until the next season. There are certain rules to follow to give your perennials the best chance of thriving once they're back in the ground.

- **Proper location:** You'll want to store bulbs in a cool, dry location. Closets are popular choices. If you have a basement that isn't exposed to high levels of moisture,

that can be a viable option, as well.

- **Blooming schedule:** For plants that are expected to bloom early in the spring, you may want to reserve a spot in your refrigerator. They'll need at least 6-8 weeks of cold temperature to bloom to their full potential. Summer bulbs can be planted once the ground thaws in the spring.

PROTECTING MATURE PERENNIALS

Established perennials will likely do fine during cold temperatures with a little extra care. Apply mulch to their base and cover them with something to keep them free from frost. Burlap sacks and even buckets make suitable security blankets to keep your perennials safe during the winter.



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Winter's elements can be devastating to the integrity of a wooden deck. Take steps to protect your backyard oasis before the ice and snow take a toll on its beauty. Protecting your deck is much more inexpensive than restoration after winter's effects set in.

If you're in the beginning stages of building a new deck, you might find it a worthy investment to choose a composite material. This decking is much more durable against moisture and fading from the sun over traditional wood.

THOROUGH CLEANING

Once you consider how much traffic is present on your deck, it becomes clear

why a deep cleaning is necessary. Decks commonly show signs of barbecue stains or compacted dirt developed from many fun times with friends and family. Eliminating these elements is the first step in defending your deck from winter weather.

Lightly disturbed wood can be easily cleaned by using a bleach-free cleaner created to

restore a deck to its original integrity. Bleach-free is key, as it won't create a yellowing effect during the application process.

With a little research, you can find a product to attach to a regular garden hose that is the perfect fit for your type of wood.

For tough jobs, you might consider using a pressure washer. Contact your local

equipment depot for rental options.

APPLY A FINISH

Once your deck is properly cleaned, you should apply a protective finish. It's crucial to use a product that is water repellent, as moisture from ice, snow or sleet can penetrate unprotected wood.

Without a suitable finish, you're risking cracks and even

warping as winter comes around.

There are many options to choose from when you're searching for a finish. Consider using one that features cool-touch technology, which keeps surfaces cooler by reflecting solar rays.

You might want to change the appearance of your deck. There are finishes available in a variety of different colors. With a simple roll-on method, you can apply a finish that will ultimately protect your deck. For the best results, be sure your wood is completely dry before tackling this task.

Preparing Your Pipes

Frozen pipes are one of the biggest risks of property damage when the temperature drops, according to the Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety.

Learn of the dangers that might happen if your pipes freeze and how to prevent this disaster from occurring.

Those who live in southern climates are more often at risk of experiencing frozen pipes as northern homes are more commonly built with cold weather in mind.

Typically, Americans in southern zones are less aware of freezing problems, as they may only occur a few times during the season. This leads to pipes which are exposed to the weather being left unprotected.

Regardless of where you live, you should be proactive in ensuring your pipes will hold up to the extreme cold that winter can bring. The IBHS reports that a frozen pipe can result in more than \$5,000 in water damage.

INSPECTING PIPES

Make sure your pipes are in good condition before the freezing weather arrives. If they have already experienced a blockage due to ice, you might



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notice swelling. These trouble spots have a greater chance of bursting if a freeze occurs again.

You can hire a local plumber to inspect your pipes and ensure a trouble-free winter.

Make sure to ask where your home's main shut-off is in case trouble arises. Cutting off your water supply during a pipe burst will lower the amount of damage you face.

PREPARING FOR WINTER

Your professional plumber will point out at-risk areas and take proper measures to enhance their integrity. It can be as easy as applying heat tape or insulation on pipes that are exposed to the elements. This is especially important for unfinished basements and under structures such as a wooden deck.

Make sure to remove and

drain all outdoor hoses. Close the interior valves that supply water to outdoor faucets and open the outside valve to allow it to completely drain.

MORE HELPFUL TIPS

Even with proper maintenance, there are more strategies to utilize when freezing weather is present. The following tips come from the American Red Cross and can

save you big bucks and headaches.

- Open kitchen and bathroom cabinet doors to allow warmer air to circulate around the pipes;

- Allow water to drip from faucets to keep pipes from freezing; and

- If you plan to leave for a long period of time, set the thermostat to at least 55 degrees.

While You're Away

If you are one of the many Americans seeking warmer weather at your vacation home, it's important to make sure your primary residence is safe while you're gone.

Factors such as burglary, water damage and electrical issues are serious risks. Take the steps to ensure your vacant home is protected.

Before leaving, it's good practice to alert your local emergency facilities that the property will be vacant for a set amount of time. Provide them with your contact information so they can quickly alert you if something goes wrong.

Consider contacting your local security alarm company to find out about their services. Most companies provide 24/7 service to ensure your home is safe from intruders. They will alert the police and contact you as soon as trouble arises.

MAKE YOUR HOME LOOK OCCUPIED

Burglars frequently target homes that are clearly vacant. Ask a friend or family member to periodically monitor your home and remove any fliers or advertising that might be left by businesses.

If you live in an area that experiences frequent snowfall, hire someone to remove the snow from your driveway or vehicles you leave behind.

Contact your newspaper to suspend your subscription until you're back. Also, con-

sider forwarding your mail or renting a post office box for the duration of your vacation.

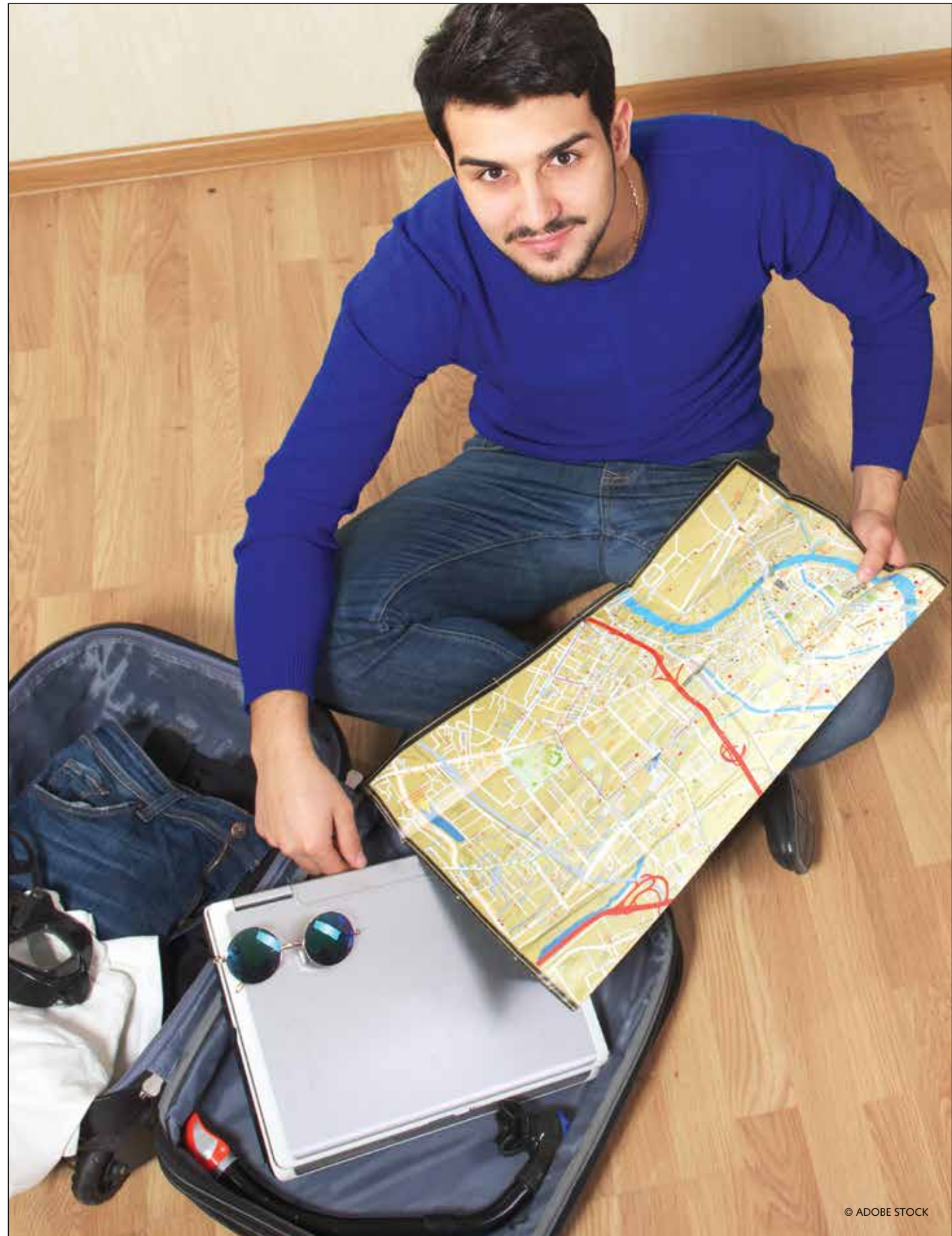
PRE-VACATION MAINTENANCE

Performing regular maintenance to your home is important before you leave your home for the winter. Knowing that your appliances and structure are in good working order will add to the relaxation you deserve.

Unless you drain your water pipes, it's important to keep your home's heating system on to prevent any instances of freezing. Contact your local heating and air professional to change filters and inspect the functionality of your furnace.

Your electrical system should be inspected by a licensed electrician. The constant strain from your heat source can take a toll on your breaker panel. If it is already compromised, the risks of fire or failure become heightened.

Consider installing smoke detectors linked to a fire alarm system. Your local fire department will be notified if these alarms are engaged. Test each one before you leave to make sure they are working efficiently.



Winter Energy Audit

An energy audit is the first step to assessing how much energy your home consumes.

The results from your audit also can help you plan the measures you should take to make your home more efficient.

This winter, save yourself big bucks on your electricity bill and help the environment by conserving energy.

Reports from the United States Department of Energy state you can save 5 to 30 percent on your energy bill by making upgrades recommended by a home energy audit.

Depending on the climate you live in, savings can be substantial if your furnace is constantly running this winter.

PREPARING FOR AN AUDIT

The DOE recommends you create a list of areas in your home where you notice condensation or drafts. You also should have copies of your annual energy bills so an auditor can analyze spikes in usage or other trends.

The behavior of your family also will be analyzed. According to the DOE, these are common questions that will be asked.

- Is anyone home during working hours?
- What is the average thermostat setting for different seasons?
- How many people live in the home?
- Is every room in use?

Try to be as accurate as possible when answering these questions.

Your responses could uncover simple solutions to lower your energy use that may not be discovered during an audit.

FINDING AN AUDITOR

It's easy to find a professional auditor in your area to perform an inspection.

Check with your state or local government's energy office for referrals to companies or organizations with good records in auditing.

It's also possible that your electric or gas company has a program in place to perform home energy audits. Call your local office to set up an appointment or get a referral on other notable references.

It is a good idea to research a few different companies and ask them for referrals. Talking to other people who have already received their service will give you a good idea of the level of quality they'll perform.

TYPES OF TESTING

Aside from analyzing your property and learning of your family's behaviors, auditors rely on certain tests to ensure an efficient assessment.

Thermographic inspection: Administered to measure surface temperatures, using infrared video. This approach offers an in-depth method of identifying where temperature variations exist in your home.

Blower door test: By using a powerful fan, air is pulled out of the house. An auditor might use a smoke pencil — a device that produces a small amount of smoke and is placed near areas of air flow — to detect any air leaks.



Winter Sowing

Why wait until spring to get a little color back into your life?

Winter sowing is a simple, affordable way to give your annual and perennial blooms and edibles a head start and enjoy them for weeks longer. Best of all, this method requires no grow lights or specialized equipment. It's completely DIY.

HOW IT WORKS

Winter sowing involves using containers as mini-greenhouses before the weather is warm enough for conventional growing. As early as January, you can make your growing containers out of old milk or water jugs or bottles using only a few basic supplies. Cut the containers in half width-wise, leaving about one-quarter of the width intact to serve as a hinge. Plant seeds in a light, airy soil, such as peat-moss or perlite, or a potting mix of similar texture. Wet and thoroughly drain the soil before use.

Be sure the containers have plenty of holes in the bottom for drainage and in the top for moisture to enter. (Leave the tops off.) Duct tape the containers closed at the center and place them outside, preferably with southern exposure. As winter's thawing and freezing cycles occur, the seeds will follow suit. As spring arrives, they will sprout.

SUITABLE PLANTS

Perennials and annuals that are hardy in your growing zone are ideal candidates for winter

sowing. Less hardy annuals also can be winter sown, but wait until nearer to spring to plant them. Seeds that are best suited for winter sowing will vary by region, but in general, 104homestead.com recommends using seeds that include the following terms on their packaging: "hardy," "can withstand frost," "sow outdoors in late autumn or early winter," "sow outdoors in early spring when nights are still cool," "needs pre-chilling" or "requires stratification."

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- Check the containers from time to time to be sure condensation is forming inside. If not, gently add a small amount of water around the edge of the container and poke more holes in the top to allow more moisture in.
- Label containers for easy identification when your sprouts start to appear.
- Keep the containers out of reach of pets and wild animals.
- Make holes in the containers using a craft knife or electric drill.
- When the weather warms up and your plants are growing well, poke more holes in the tops of the containers. Eventually you should remove the lids to provide full sun exposure. Don't leave the tops on too long into the growing season as excessive heat can ruin them.



Generator Maintenance

Experiencing a winter storm that has knocked out the power is more than inconvenient; it can be life threatening.

Exposure to freezing temperatures without a source of heat puts everyone in your household at risk. Make sure your generator is ready to go before the temperatures become dangerous.

People who live in climates that experience heavy snowfall are often at risk of power outages during winter storms. This occurs because the heavy weight of snow and ice impact the efficiency of power lines. Even warmer areas that experience the odd freeze can find themselves in danger of power outages.

Due to the hazardous road conditions, it can take days or even weeks before crews can safely alleviate electrical problems.

HOW A GENERATOR WORKS

When the power goes out, the last thing on your mind is how your generator operates; you just want it to work. Understanding the process of creating electricity can help you gain a better familiarity with your generator and possibly diagnose its shortcomings.

To easily understand how a generator works, imagine a pump pushing water through a pipe. A generator uses a magnet to push electrons to a power source. It doesn't magically create electricity; instead it relies on mechanical energy to force the movement of electrical charges.

Just like your vehicle, a generator uses an engine, alternator, fuel system, battery and even

cooling and exhaust systems to operate efficiently. Some issues, such as a clogged fuel filter or weak charging system, can be easily discovered, while others may require the help of a professional.

Generators are complex machines, but with proper maintenance, they can be trusted to activate your heater when the power goes out.

MAINTENANCE

Every engine needs regular maintenance to run properly, and your generator is no different. Be sure to get it ready before the winter weather comes.

- Keep up on oil and filter changes. Follow the manufacturer's guidelines on how often you should perform an oil and filter change. Healthy oil will enhance the generator's efficiency.

- Inspect fuel lines. Fuel systems can easily be clogged by impurities that get stuck in the line and filter. Check their integrity during your seasonal maintenance.

- Gas levels matter. If you allow your generator to run out of gas, there's a risk of irreversible damage.

- Use suitable cords: Most people don't like to hear their generator rumbling right outside their living rooms. They're loud machines. Space them no more than 100 yards away from your home with at least a 12-gauge extension cord.

