

Spring Garden Clean-up

March is a great time to go outdoors and inspect your garden spaces. It's also a great time to remove debris from your perennials, cut back your ornamental grasses, and to take a soil test.

By removing old, dead leaves from your perennials, you can eliminate or reduce many diseases in the garden. Iris leaf spot is a fungus disease that attacks the leaves and occasionally the flower stalks and buds of iris. Infection is favored by wet periods during the spring, and the emerging leaves eventually show small (1/8 to 1/4 inch diameter) spots. The borders of these spots are reddish, and surrounding tissue first appears water-soaked, and then yellows. Spots enlarge after flowering and may coalesce. Though the disease will not kill the plant directly, repeated attacks can reduce plant vigor so that the iris may die from other stresses. Spores are passed to nearby plants by wind or splashing water.

Ornamental grasses benefit from removal of dead foliage by greening up earlier. A number of tools can be used including hand clippers, weed whips (if the foliage is of a small enough diameter), weed whips with a circular blade, or even a chain saw. It is often helpful to tie foliage together before cutting so it doesn't interfere and is easier to dispose of. Burning is another option — but only if it is safe and legal to do so.

One of the most important steps is to have your soil tested in your gardens. The most basic soil test checks pH and the levels of phosphorus and potassium. Most of the lawn and garden soil tests that come out of our soil-testing lab show more than adequate levels of both phosphorus and potassium. If those nutrients are not needed, applying them is a waste of money and can be a source of pollution. In extreme cases, excess

phosphorus can interfere with the uptake of micronutrients. So, if you haven't taken a soil test in several years, take one this spring.

Begin by taking a representative sample from several locations in the garden or lawn about 6-8 inches deep. Mix the samples together in a clean container and select about one cup of soil. Take the soil to your county extension office to have tests done at the K-State soil-testing laboratory.

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