



Autumn Tips for Tahoe

Best tip for autumn: Plant spring bulbs! Daffodils, jonquils, and narcissus (basically the same plant family, different names) are poisonous to squirrels and will survive our crazy “Spring” weather. Irises and alliums also seem unappetizing to critters. Plant tulips and crocuses if you’re prepared to see them dug up, or if you’re fortunate, eaten after you’ve had a glimpse of flowers. If it doesn’t happen this spring, word will spread in the furry-tailed community that 5-star dining is available at your house.

--**Dig up tender summer bulbs** such as dahlias, glads, and cannas from outdoor planters. Dust off soil and let them dry out for a few days, then store covered with vermiculite or peat moss in a cool place.

--**Harvest bunches of herbs** such as sage, thyme, and oregano. Use fresh or dry them in tied bunches. Tahoe’s lack of humidity will dry them quickly.

--**Fall is the time to plant** trees, shrubs and perennials until you can plant no longer because of snow or frozen ground. You need to water at planting and until the weather makes plants dormant. Dormancy means that the plant can concentrate on its roots without worrying about reproducing itself by making pollinator-attractive flowers and then producing seeds. Over winter, if a warm spell melts the snow for more than a few days, watering may be necessary, especially for new plants. The idea is to keep the roots in a moist environment so they can grow and establish themselves under the soil, and our Tahoe snow blanket usually accomplishes this. But new plants may need attention, depending on our freeze/thaw temps this winter.

--**Mulch flower beds** and new plantings with (non-diseased) leaves, chips, or pine needles to protect against severe weather. Divide irises and daylilies into sections that have some roots, and replant. Many neighbors who understand that this division is invigorating for their plants and will result in more flowers will appreciate the help in dividing and be happy to share parts of thriving, beautiful plants.

--**Collect seeds** from your autumn perennials and annuals--rudbeckia (various Black-eyed Susan), sunflowers, gaillardia (Indian Blanket Flower), echinacea (Purple Coneflower,), many penstemon varieties and hardy asters. (Too late for lupine or California poppy seeds.) These late summer flowers will spread themselves to some extent, but you can enjoy saving some of the seeds for spring or just till them lightly into the soil this fall. If the seeds “take” they will grow roots over winter and bloom earlier than those planted in spring.

--**Stake and tie fragile trees** susceptible to snow damage. In my experience, most resilient native plants like aspen, Mountain Ash, and serviceberry don't need this protection. If they lose many branches in winter snowstorms, they are probably planted in the wrong place, maybe too vulnerable to highway snow load or hillside wind, but they will probably survive and make baby trees from underground runner roots. However, if you have a special, fragile tree or some beautiful (and expensive) Japanese maples, you can try staking them within two posts encircled with tape. Better to plant them far from any snow-load roofs, etc. or keep them in pots that you can protect from winter damage.

--**Don't prune** lilacs, crabapples, flowering plum or other spring blooming shrubs and trees. They have already started forming buds and you will cut off the new blossoms.

--**Autumn is a great time to weed**, if you can still dig into the ground. Get the unwanted clover and grasses out before they have an entire winter to develop root networks (yes, this is what they do under the snow. We encourage this activity with perennials but not with weeds.)

--**Perennials in containers can be left outdoors** with a pine needle mulch but don't just forget about them since they will dry out more quickly than those planted in the ground. Water occasionally if we have no precipitation.

--**Go easy on the “Fall Cleanup.”** Perennials and bulbs don't appreciate having their natural protection such as pine needles, fallen leaves, and dry stems completely removed in our freezing/thawing winters. Keep in mind that the plants are not “dead” in the winter—their roots are still alive and need food (composting plant material and helpful bacteria), water (natural and added mulch preserves moisture during dry winter weather), and warmth. Raking the soil above their roots may make the winter garden look neat and clean, but bare ground adds little nutrition or protection to your garden.