

The Conceptual Gardener

Written by Will Balk, Jr.

Tuesday, 21 January 2020 14:50



There is much still to clean up in the garden and grounds around the old farmhouse. A frost a short while ago turned some of the winter-dormant plants to mushy mounds or bare sticks, for they had all been growing as if fall and winter cold would never come.

It came and went, and a January spring came and went as well and came again; but now, preparations for winter survival begin, albeit late. That sudden shock of cold spurred all sorts of shutting down amongst the living things. Such shocks, such signals, are the necessary impetus for plants to store their sugars and energy in a place safe from winter's harm.

I'm still cautious even after the leaves have yielded all their chlorophyll and become brown and crumbly. I have been surprised almost every winter to discover what a layer of a plant's old leaves, fallen with frost's insistence to the plant's base, has managed to insulate from the cold. The tough old American native Turk's Cap shrub, *Malvaviscus arboreus*, always drops its leaves a bit at a time until it is completely bare-stemmed by December. Here, those bare stems always freeze, brown and dead; but, at any point during the winter, sweeping away a few of the fallen leaves reveals vibrant stems at ground level, green and perhaps with a tiny bit of new growth. The temperature beneath a few dry leaves is sufficient to keep these stems growing through killing freezes only an inch or so above ground. Removing old leaves and dry branches just exposes the plants to damaging weather so, these days, I leave more and more such material in place, removing only diseased leaves and stems.

Another native, the oakleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*), has this year given a wondrous display of

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