



**If you're feeling energetic this fall, here's a rewarding project that will deliver brilliant results next spring. About all you need is a spade and a fork.**

BY RICHARD RIX

In an earlier column I suggested that fall was a time to take things easy, that the garden could be allowed to wither and fade on its own and be none the worse for it come spring. This is true with regard to routine matters, but some projects are best tackled in fall, if only because fall is when the need is most noticeable. And most of this work can be done right up until there's a hard, freezing frost – often, these days, to the end of November.

Reconditioning the soil of a perennial flowerbed is one such project. The purpose is to add nutrients, improve texture to aid root penetration, help retain moisture, and make the soil more attractive to earthworms and micro-organisms – your natural horticultural allies.

Good reasons for tackling this project in the fall are that you know where everything is and the soil is likely to be at its most workable, which is moist and

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crumbly and not water-logged and clumping, as it tends to be in early spring. (If the soil is too dry, soak it and leave it for a few days.) As well, in fall you have more time than in spring, when you are going to be busy doing other things like planting.

When renovating a flowerbed, trenching works best. Simply put, it means digging a series of trenches across the flowerbed and dumping the soil from the current trench into the previous one. Use a good quality spade or fork for the job. As for the size of the trenches, make them about 60 cm wide by 30 cm deep (or two feet by one).

Where do you put the soil from the first trench you dig? Pile it onto the adjacent lawn or pathway or load it on the wheelbarrow and move it out of the way. (You will need to keep the wheelbarrow empty for other purposes.)

Plants that you encounter as you dig should be carefully lifted, in their entirety, and moved to a shady location. A dull, damp day is ideal for this kind of work. Try to keep some soil in place around the



Trenching is the best way to renovate a flowerbed

roots, but to leave big clumps of earth around them is not a good idea. The point of the exercise, after all, is to rejuvenate the soil for the plants' sake. If the weather is dry, or if you have to leave the plants out of the bed overnight, cover them with wet burlap or soaked newspapers. Obviously this is not a job to do during a freeze.

There are a few plants that won't take kindly to being moved, such as peonies and kniphofia (red hot poker). Unless they need dividing, leave them in place and scrape the soil from around their base until you see the end of the roots. You may need to treat well-established climbers and large shrubs like this too. You can axe and remove any invasive tree roots you encounter.

When you have dug the first trench, begin to dig another one adjacent to it, and, as you move along the width of the trench, dump the contents into the first one. The very act of turning the soil over – of breaking it up and aerating it – will work wonders. You will, however, get even better results by amending the soil as you go. This is achieved by adding peat moss and

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compost (or composted manure if compost is not available) and mixing it with the soil. Approximately two-thirds soil with a one-third equal mix of peat moss and compost is a good backfill. Just keep going until you have dug your last trench, which you fill with the soil from the first.

Since you are adding “stuff” all along, you may think that you will generate surplus soil with the digging of each trench. If, however, you raise the bed a few centimetres as you go, you will have very little soil left over, and raised beds are to be recommended, for they warm up faster in springtime, to speed root growth.

By the way, since you are going to be standing “in the trenches” during this job, if the base feels compacted, you can fork and lift it too, though there’s no need to turn it over.

This is a good time to divide those plants which you have temporarily removed, either to thin them out or to increase your

stock. Often this can be done by driving a spade through the root base and dividing it; or, with vigorous plants such as asters and Michaelmas daisies, by detaching some of the newer, outer shoots and replanting them only, discarding the older central mass.

Since what you have now created is a new bed just before winter, you will need to lay down protection by way of a light mulch of leaves or straw, perhaps held in place with a thin layer of compost. Then, when spring comes and the first shoots push through, you may remove the protection and watch the fruits of your labour gradually appear.

And of course, the best reason of all for doing this job in the fall is this: how that bed will bounce back in the springtime will give you something to look forward to all winter long. ❁

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