

SPRING CLEANING

Spring officially started on March 20, and although Maryland weather is still hanging on to winter temperatures, the next few weeks is the ideal time to start preparing your yard for warm weather. To give your landscape the boost it needs to provide a long season of healthy and attractive plants, now is a good time to survey your yard for problems.

Trees - Inspect trees for dead wood as leaves sprout. Notice signs of decay such as fungus or mushrooms growing over root areas or on the base of the tree, cavities, and peeling bark. Check for branches overhanging sidewalks, overly dense branching, and conflicts with overhead wires. Identify trees with poor structure due to multiple lead branches, rubbing branches, or weak crotches. Look for early signs of insect infestation. Trees may require crown cleaning, removal of dead wood, or treatment for disease or insects. Dead trees or those with extensive decay should be removed for safety reasons. Structural problems can be remedied with pruning and cabling. Lightning protection can also be installed in large trees. Fertilization can be used to help trees that have been compromised by past disease or insect damage.

Beds - Shrubs should be checked for dead wood and signs of insects. Leaves and debris should be removed, and beds should be mulched. If old mulch is in poor condition, it should be removed. Beds should be mulched 2-3" in depth. Some plants will benefit from feeding at this time of year, to encourage healthy blooms for flowering shrubs. Pruning is very specific to type of shrub. For instance, pruning azaleas in early spring is the best time to encourage healthy foliage growth, but it will remove the blooms for that year. Pruning shrubs incorrectly for the particular plant can compromise shape, future growth patterns, and flowering.

Turf - Look for signs of insect damage, dead areas, poor color, or areas where weeds are predominant. Weeds and insect infestations on lawns are often viewed as problems, but they are more likely to be symptoms, with the real problem being an unhealthy lawn. A properly maintained and healthy lawn will often withstand invasive insects and out-compete weeds for sunlight, water and soil. Reduction of disease problems in established turf can often be accomplished by changes in cultural practices such as mowing, watering, fertilization, pruning, and core aeration. Check turf for compaction or thatch buildup. Aeration and topdressing can help this problem and give grass "breathing room". The use of pre and post-emergent herbicides can control weeds until healthy turf is established. Spring and fall fertilization, and application of lime can amend soil with poor nutrient content or improper Ph. However, soil should be tested before nutrients are applied to limit over-application. Grass should be cut to 3" high so it will shade out competing weeds. Grass clippings should be left on the lawn to return nutrients and lessen the need for fertilizers. Keeping turf healthy requires work and constant vigilance and care. Maryland's climate often swings from very dry to very wet, which can make it difficult to keep turf healthy.

An early start caring for your lawn and trees can prevent problems later in the season, and allow time later in the season to enjoy a beautiful and healthy yard.