

LET THE SEASON BEGIN!

Diana Alfuth, Horticulture Educator, Pierce County UW-Extension

As the last of the snow melts away, and we're able to be outside with only a light jacket or sweatshirt, the growing season is about to begin. While we may be anxious to get busy in our yards and gardens, we should take note of things we can, and should not, be doing at this time of year.

Lawns – Stay off! Although the snow may be gone, we should leave the lawns alone for a while yet. Try to stay off the lawn until all the frost is out and the soil has dried up some. If you step on your grass and leave an indentation, it's still too wet. Walking on wet soil compresses the air pockets out and compacts the soil. Plants, including lawn grass plants, don't do as well in compacted soils because the roots need oxygen.

And please don't rake the grass at this vulnerable time. The rake will damage the grass plant crowns and open the door for more problems, such as weeds. In fact, do you even need to rake your lawn in spring? Most people don't.

There is no need to remove the brown grass blades from last year's grass. They will quickly decompose once we get consistently warm weather. The only reason to rake in spring is if there were a lot of leaves on the grass that weren't removed in fall and are in danger of smothering the grass. You may also need to rake gravel or other debris from nearby driveways or roads that got plowed onto the grass during winter. Before you do any raking, be sure the soil has firmed up and the grass has started growing a bit.

Pruning – There's still time to do some pruning if you didn't get to it over winter. Most trees and shrubs can be pruned right up until the buds start breaking, and it's easier to see the plant's structure and do the pruning when there are no leaves in the way. Maples and birch may "bleed" if pruned at this time of year, so only prune as necessary. While the bleeding may create a sticky mess, it really does not harm the trees. While not recommended for most pruning, this is one time when you could choose to use a pruning wound treatment.

Cleanup – Many of us leave ornamental grasses and other flower heads throughout the winter to feed the birds and provide some winter interest. Now's the time to clean up all the plant debris from last year's plants so that the garden beds are ready for the new year's growth. Add this plant debris to your compost pile to create valuable compost to add to your garden later.

Gardens – Just as you should stay off your lawn until the soil has begun to dry, you should not dig or rototill your gardens when the soil is too wet. If you grab a handful of soil and squeeze it, the clump of soil should easily break apart when you poke at it. If it stays in a wet clump, leave your soil alone! Tilling or digging in wet soil destroys its structure and will contribute to poor plant health and water infiltration later.

So, be patient with your soil, and enjoy the spring. Don't be in a hurry to do too much in your garden and landscape—there will be plenty of time for all that hard work later!