Winter Perennial Preparation

We all know that I am obviously not a Southern native, but I do try to keep up with all of the happenings in Robeson County. I was told by a reputable source that last winter was mighty cold in comparison to previous winters. I was also informed that the powers that be are predicting this winter to be just as chilly if not worse than the last. So, I think it is time we give a little extra care to our poor perennials that have served us well throughout the year and will hopefully come back again in spring.

Perennials are considered dormant in the winter because they are not actively growing. This does not mean that these plants are dead. Perennials are alive and well in the dormant season, you just cannot tell. Dormancy is determined by the weather, in particular by the cold.

In particularly cold areas that get regular snowfall, the ground temperature will stay around 32°F. Snow acts as an insulator and actually helps to protect the perennial plants from harsh freezing temperatures. So, sometimes snow is a good thing! But, for us here in Robeson County, we do not typically have much snowfall. Without snow to act as an insulator, if we receive exceptionally cold temperatures, we could see a significant decline in the number of perennials that return in the spring.

A perfect example of this happened this past year at the Robeson Regional Agricultural Fairgrounds. The Extension Master Gardener Volunteers planted two different varieties of lantana; one variety was your typical orange and yellow, while the other was a beautiful red. If you made it out to the fair this year, you may have noticed that only the orange and yellow survived. Last winter was too harsh for the red variety, and although it was growing well in the fall, it did not come back last spring.

Now is the time to help prevent this garden travesty from happening in your yard! A little mulch can go a long way toward preventing the death of perennials due to harsh temperatures. Make sure all debris is cleaned out from the landscape bed including leaves and weeds. Cover with a 2-3 inch layer of mulch ensuring you keep at least a few inches from the base of any woody plants. Most any mulch will work. Not only will this protect your plants, but also it will help inhibit weed growth and give your garden a fresh face for the winter months.

Robeson County sits on a very precarious line; some plants that are typically considered annuals in this zone, can be perennials with a little extra TLC. One example of this would be the gerber daisy. Most often sold as an annual, it can come back year after year with proper care. For the sake of us all,
I hope that last winter turns out to be a fluke, and this year will be mild as a kitten. But, if we happen to get some cold temperatures and possibly some snowflakes, I want you all to have your perennials prepared!

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns feel free to contact me, Kerrie Roach, horticultural Extension agent, at North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center, by E-mail at Kerrie_Roach@ncsu.edu or call me at 910-671-3276. To learn more about Extension visit North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center’s website at Robeson.ces.ncsu.edu.