

This year, March came in as a lamb and it seems almost everyone is outside making the most of it. The smell of fresh mulch fills the air and garden centers are hustling to keep the shelves stocked to meet the demands of those who are thrilled to once again be working in their gardens.

As you return to your gardens this spring, you will find there is plenty to keep you busy until planting time comes around in late April and early May. One of the tasks demanding the most immediate attention is the care of ornamental grasses.

Late February through mid March is the best time to prune back any ornamental grasses that were left to provide interest throughout the winter months. Ornamental grasses look their best when they are trimmed each spring. Removing last season's growth tidies the plant while making room for this season's fresh growth.

To trim ornamental grasses use a lawn mower set at its highest setting, hand pruners or a line trimmer/weed-eater. Grasses should not be cut to the ground rather four to six inches of stubble should be left. If you do the trimming with hand pruners, be sure to wear gloves, as the old stems are quite hard and sharp and may cause splinters. Also be prepared for quite a workout, as the thick clumps are often extremely difficult to make your way through.

If you are unable to get your ornamental grasses trimmed before new growth begins, you can still prune away some of last year's growth. Be a bit more diligent about where you cut, and do not trim as low instead leave the foliage seven to eight inches above ground level.

Should you fail to prune your ornamental grasses, you may find that new growth is delayed. Plants begin to re-grow in the spring as their crowns warm. Old foliage left on a plant can delay this warm-up of the crown and the subsequent new growth by as much as three weeks.

In addition to being an excellent time to prune ornamental grasses, this is also when you should evaluate their health. Last year you may have noticed that your ornamental grasses were dying out in the center. This is what happens as the plants age and the old, woody growth smothers out the new growth. If your grasses are dying in the center, they should be divided, and there is no better time to divide ornamental grasses than in late winter/early spring before they break dormancy.

To divide an ornamental grass, begin by digging the entire plant from the ground. Once you have removed the clump, you can begin dividing it. Cut the clump in half using a sharp spade or large knife. In some cases an axe may even be necessary because of how dense the clump has become. As you make the division, remove any dead or diseased material. These can be set aside for

composting later. Continue to divide clumps until they are the desired size. You can divide grasses down to individual blades if desired, as a single blade of grass with a good root system will produce a full size, beautiful ornamental grass in just a few years.

In just a brief period of time, with a few sharp tools and a good pair of gardening gloves you can provide your ornamental grasses with almost all the care they will need to add a year's worth of beauty to your garden. And remember, in addition to having extremely low maintenance requirements, they are also quite drought tolerant and a "must have" in any water-wise garden.