

Labor Day has come and gone, thus marking the start of the fall planting season. If the heat and mosquitoes kept you locked indoors, your garden is probably in need of some tending. Fall is not only a great time to do some upkeep in the garden in preparation for next spring, it is also one of the best times of year for planting.

Spring-flowering bulbs such as daffodils, tulips, and crocuses, lawns, perennials, trees and shrubs all benefit from being planted in the fall (save a few species exceptions). Fall planting gives many plants a head-start, allowing them to set roots and become established before winter's dormancy, so that when spring arrives they are ready to flourish.

As you venture back into the garden this fall, do not forget that there are many hidden obstacles underground. Gardeners seldom consider underground utilities when they begin their planting. This lack of consideration can be dangerous and could lead to injuries, interruption of service, civil penalties or other problems.

One might not think that it is necessary to have utilities marked before digging for plant material, but utilities often run rather close to the surface and can easily be damaged with shallow digging. Having your property's utilities marked is a free service that is available to you by calling "Miss Utility."

To have utilities identified, call the notification center at 1-800-552-7001, and provide them with your name, the location of the proposed work, the name, address and phone number of the person who will be digging, and the type and extent of proposed work. The notification center will then contact all of the utilities that may be affected. These utilities will then go to your property to mark their lines. Marks are good for 15 working days from the call to the notification center. To assist utilities that will be marking your property, use white paint or flags to identify the area in which you intend to dig.

Once you have called the notification center, you should wait 48 hours, then call the ticket information exchange system at 1-800-552-3120 to check on the status of the utility lines. You will be told if all markings have been made and if you are cleared to begin digging.

Your alternative is to wait 72 hours and then go ahead and commence digging. If you happen to notice clear evidence of an unmarked utility line call the notification center back to report this, and the utility operator will mark those lines within three hours.

As you dig, be sure to respect the marks and only hand dig within two feet of either side of the marks. Should you note a red mark, this indicates an electric power distribution and transmission line. Yellow marks gas, oil and petroleum lines. Orange identifies telecommunication systems including cable television. Blue indicates water and slurry systems. Green marks sewer systems.

Occasionally even when all reasonable actions have been taken damages or disturbances to an underground utility line may occur. Should this happen, immediately notify the utility.

In addition to unseen underground utilities, you should consider any easements that may impact your property before you begin digging. Easements, or rights-of-way, are legal privileges one holds to another's land. Utilities hold easements so that services can be delivered, and maintained, or so that access to services can be obtained.

It is important to recognize easements because any obstruction may compromise service lines, or restrict and inhibit necessary repairs and improvements. Obstructions whether a plant, retaining wall, patio or deck may be removed at the owner's expense if necessary. Easements are not only "on-the-ground," rather extend upward so that overhanging structures and plant material might also encroach upon easements, and therefore may be pruned or damaged in order to provide access to the easement.

To identify easements impacting your property, check for references on your deed. This will indicate both utility and road easements. There is most often a subdivision plat with utility easements referenced. Additionally, local and neighborhood covenants should be thoroughly read and understood, as these may place further easements on your property that must also be respected.

Once you are aware of your underground utilities and any easements impacting your property, you are clear to begin your fall planting. Just remember, in all your excitement, to avoid hiding or covering meters, hydrants and manholes as this could be a danger to public safety and prevent necessary servicing from happening in a timely manner.