
PROFESSIONAL GARDENING

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Definition

A Professional Gardener is a person who develops a professional career of using plants and color to design, install, and maintain gardens in the landscape. Professional gardening is multifaceted, plant-focused profession. Some gardeners focus on one or two specialties, but professional gardening can include landscape garden design, installation, renovation, maintenance, container garden planting and maintenance, shrub and small tree pruning, snow removal, and holiday lighting. To be successful in this niche, a gardener must be knowledgeable in several areas, including:

1. Plant Materials.
2. Design.
3. Soils.
4. Fertilizers.
5. Pesticides.
6. Green Goods and Hard Goods.
7. Installation.
8. Maintenance.
9. Customer Service.
10. Good Business Practices.

It is necessary to be knowledgeable of a wide palette of plant materials to be competitive and to present a quality design and finished product. A Professional Gardener is expected to be well versed in all of the plants available for landscape gardens. This knowledge can be obtained through a four-year college program or a two-year technical school program that offers degrees in botany, entomology, horticulture, and/or landscape design. Additional knowledge can also be obtained through self-education and experience including:

1. Field trips to arboreta, private gardens and nurseries.
2. Memberships in local or national garden clubs and plant societies.
3. Professional publications.
4. Industry-specific periodicals.
5. Professional and similar educational sessions.

6. Development of trial gardens.
7. Consultations with local growers and nurseries.
8. Exploration of research information on the internet.

Experience in the field and years of working with different plant materials are excellent assets in this profession. By working with many plant species and varieties, and by providing maintenance services, Professional Gardeners can become a valuable resource for evaluating existing and new plants.

Refer to the chapters on Laws, Regulations, Ethics and Professionalism and on Pesticide Management for legal requirements for this profession.

Plant Materials and Design

The number of annual and perennial species and varieties available today is vast and diverse, and familiarity with them is crucial to success in this profession. While the focus for Professional Gardeners is on herbaceous materials, many companies also plant shrubs and trees. Professional garden designers select and recommend plant materials that will be sustainable in the appropriate environment, and that are in accordance with the client's preferences. Commercial accounts traditionally do not provide explicit input on plant selection, but most residential clients will have specific emotions attached to specific plant material requests. Such old-fashioned plants as roses, clematis, peonies, bleeding hearts and hollyhocks are among those that frequently remind customers of gardens they grew up with. Wise designers help uncover and work with these feelings for their clients.

A strong foundation in the principals of design is essential for the Professional Gardener. Natural creativity and a background or education in landscape design is recommended to deliver quality garden designs for commercial and residential accounts. Refer to the chapter on Landscape Design to further support this chapter.

To complement a basic landscape design, Professional Gardeners often provide the final brush strokes of color on the site. Experience with, and exposure to a wide variety of perennials and annuals is critical to provide this finishing touch. Traditionally, Landscape Architects and Landscape Designers are trained in defining spaces, traffic flow, grading of the site, hardscapes and other features. Many Landscape Architects will draw a “space” for flower gardens and leave the flower garden design to be addressed by the client or another contractor. It is then the responsibility of the client or the Professional Gardener to bring herbaceous perennials and annuals into the design.

Refer to the Landscape Design chapter for questions that need to be answered by the client. In addition, the Professional Gardener may ask the client the following questions;

1. Are there deer or rabbits on site?
2. Does the client enjoy edible plants, herbs or cut flowers?
3. What constitutes the client’s color palette? Are bold or pastel colors preferred?

It is important to pay attention to the unique needs of the project and client, thus avoiding a cookie-cutter approach. Many designers develop a style, whether it is English or American cottage, clean and bold, unique and funky, minimalist, naturalistic or prairie style. Numerous books are available on the fine art of garden design, and regular reading of them can help expand a gardener’s range of design. Great significance should always be placed on texture, form and balance in garden design. Of increasing importance is the sustainability of the plantings and their place in an ecologically healthy community of plants, insects, birds, humans and perhaps mammals. Color is a key ingredient, as the annual and perennial color is the frosting on the landscape “cake.” After a thorough client interview and site analysis, the design process can begin.

Soils – Crucial to understanding garden soil is a soil test, which can be performed by the University of Minnesota. The results will provide an analysis of the soil conditions such as pH, texture and fertility. Some professional gardening companies use a garden soil mix or compost to amend the soil. Compost helps improve soil texture at the time of planting. Fine textured “Black Dirt” is not recommended because it will usually be detrimental to soil aeration and porosity.

Occasionally it is necessary to excavate heavy clay soil to ensure appropriate drainage and provide a friable soil. This is best completed before any plants are planted. To prevent creating a “bathtub effect” when new porous soil is added to the planting bed, mix some of the existing soil with the new mix in a ratio of approximately 50:50. If necessary, install vertical or lateral drains to provide drainage. It is essential to be diligent in creating a transition zone between the two soil types. Refer to the chapter on Soils for Nursery and Landscape Management for further information.

While adjusting pH can be successful in the greenhouse or in container media, significantly altering the pH in a garden setting is difficult. Elemental sulfur, iron sulfate or ammonium sulfate will **lower** the soil pH and lime can be used to **increase** pH. Seldom is it necessary to increase soil pH in Minnesota soils. A better approach is to plant the right plant in the right site. For example, if the soil is acidic, plant acid-loving azaleas, rhododendrons or hydrangeas. If the soil has a pH of greater than 6.0 do not plant these species.

Yearly incorporation of coarse humus, leaf compost, rice hulls or composted woodchips is beneficial. Suppliers sell these composted products by the cubic yard. Although this compost can be added in the spring, fall is a better time for soil preparation. Often the spring soils are too wet to work wherein soil should not be tilled when the soil moisture level causes the soil to form a clump when squeezed by hand. Spring is also an extremely busy time, so from a time management perspective, fall soil preparation is also more efficient. Thoroughly incorporate the amendment as deep as possible into the soil. If a rototiller is used, extreme care should be taken not to over-till, not to get too close to the roots of perennials, shrubs or trees, and not to injure a crown or bulb that is not visible above ground.

A slow release or partially slow release fertilizer should be incorporated into new beds at the minimum rate of two lbs. of actual nitrogen per 1000 ft². For a fertilizer such as UAP 18-18-8-4-5, apply ten lbs. of this product per 1000 ft². Top dress existing perennials at two lbs. of Nitrogen per 1000 ft², which is ten lbs. of the 18-18-8-4-5 product per 1000 ft². Fertilize trees and shrubs at three lbs. of Nitrogen per 1000 ft², which is 15 lbs. of the 18-18-8-4-5 product per 1000 ft². Refer to the chapter on Fertilization in the Nursery and Landscape for additional information.

Installation

Subsequent to proper soil preparation, planting can begin. Proper spacing of plant materials requires planting plants close enough to achieve the desired effect quickly, yet not too close that the plants become overcrowded. If annuals are competing with each other, they will not last as long into the fall season. If perennials are crowded into a site, they will become weaker as they compete for light and nutrients among other plants. Aggressively growing plants need to be divided in a timely manner so they do not take over a space or other plants. It is often necessary to educate clients about the recommended spacing between plants and the importance of giving them time to fill in a space. It can take perennial gardens three to five years to become established. Annuals can be planted among the perennials until they fill in any open spaces.

To ensure proper planting, perennials and annuals should be planted to the depth that they are in the container. Certain plant materials, such as coleus, tuberous begonias and sedum, are subject to root rot. Therefore, planting these plants too deeply can also promote stem rot and facilitate injury from cutworms.

The anticipated frost-free date for the Minneapolis/St. Paul Metro Area is approximately May 15. Tender annuals may be planted earlier in certain microclimates such as the south side of a building or next to hardscapes that collect and radiate heat. Covering plants with sheets, microfoam, white poly plastics, reemay or gilbond blankets can protect plants if frost is anticipated.

If an entire bed is not pre-fertilized with a slow release fertilizer at the time of bed preparation, each plant should be fertilized at planting time by incorporating into the backfill, one to five teaspoons of slow release fertilizer per plant depending on the size of the plant. Plant materials should always be watered immediately after planting. Depending on the weather, one inch of water is usually recommended per week to keep plants properly irrigated. This is approximately equivalent to one hour of run time for most sprinkler irrigation systems. Deeper watering two or three times per week is better than shallow watering every day. Early morning irrigation is better than late afternoon irrigation. Sub-irrigation is better than overhead irrigation as it does not promote fungal diseases.

Cocoa bean, mini pebble pine bark and rice hulls are all effective mulches for annual and perennial borders. Because it is important to cultivate annual garden soils every season, a smaller particle mulch

should be used as it can be more easily incorporated into the garden soils. All mulches have advantages and detrimental traits. They should be chosen based on client preference and site requirements. Cocoa bean mulch looks well and has a good aroma, however this aroma can be too strong for some people. Cocoa bean mulch tends to mold if applied too thick or kept too moist and it can blow in the wind. Cocoa bean mulch should not be used if dogs have access to the garden. Mini pebble pine bark has a nice rich look, similar to cocoa bean mulch, but it does not mold. It is better at preventing soil erosion, but it can be difficult to obtain. Rice hulls may wick away moisture from the existing soils, which may be beneficial for a wet site. It often only comes in bulk quantities which may not be feasible for certain situations. The extent to which the hulls have been milled or composted differs among suppliers. This affects the appearance of the mulch and length of time the hulls are effective. If milled too fine it will still conserve moisture and prevent weeds from emerging through it, but weeds may germinate on the surface of the mulch. Whatever mulch is selected, it is best to apply it subsequent to planting, but before any weeds germinate.

Incorporating a pre-emergent herbicide after planting, but before weeds emerge, can ease garden bed weeding. When using any herbicide, it is essential to read, understand, and follow the label for appropriate use and application rates. If the product is not labeled for use on a specific plant, do not use it on that plant.

Spring Gardening Activities

The first activities of the gardening season begin at the end of March or the beginning of April and include removing holiday lights, and winter greens. Winter mulch should be removed from garden beds at this time. Spring and early summer are also the appropriate times to prune many shrub and trees including Berberis, Euonymus, Hydrangea, Juniperus, Physocarpus, Picea, Pinus, Spiraea, Taxus, Thuja, and Weigela. Spring-blooming shrubs, Forsythia, Rhododendron and Syringa should be pruned immediately after flowering. Refer to the chapter on Pruning Trees, Shrubs and Perennials for additional detailed information.

Compost, pre-emergent herbicides and appropriate amendments can be incorporated into growing areas in early spring. Spring is also the best time to cut a new edge on perennial gardens if they are not edged with plastic, steel or stone. Insure that edge walls are vertical to create a clean edge and that the curves are

smooth and even, and straight lines are perfectly straight.

Mid-April is the time to lift roses if buried with the Minnesota Tip Method or to uncover them if soil is mounded up around them. Care needs to be taken not to damage the tender feeder roots or the canes of the roses. The most critical part of this process is washing off the canes. If soil is left on the canes or crown, the spring winds will dry out the soil and the stems which could be detrimental to the plant. Depending on how much growth has flushed out, some pruning may be required at this time or in a few weeks. The Minnesota Tip Method will be explained in detail later in this chapter.

Spring is a good time to divide over-grown perennials, or divide and balance perennials for design purposes. Spring-blooming perennials should not be divided until after they have flowered, or they can be divided in the fall. Fall blooming perennials are best divided in the spring. Certain perennials are known to be aggressive, especially those in the mint family. Perennials that spread quickly benefit from digging out the edges and rounding them off with a shovel. Examples include Aster, Monarda, Oenothera, Physostegia, and Rudbeckia. Some perennials develop a woody center that should be removed. The best approach for this is to dig up the whole clump, and divide the plant in half. Woody centers can be discarded and the younger, healthier growth replanted. Some perennials, such as peonies, never need to be divided, but many respond well to division every three to five years. Even the supposedly ever-blooming daylilies bloom better when divided on a regular basis. Water plants immediately after dividing and transplanting.

Seasonal Presentation Schedule

Coordinating the seasonal needs of each client can be a time-consuming task. The time required on a job site for a Professional Gardener varies significantly from week to week depending on how much planting, staking, weeding, deadheading, and plant removal is required. Because of this, most garden services charge the client on a time and materials basis. If clients require a set fee for every visit, careful consideration needs to be paid to assessing what the priority should be for that particular week.

To take advantage of the short growing season in the Midwest, many garden services perform four seasonal switch-outs of container plantings. Most clients appreciate front door planters rotated throughout the season, and many also enjoy something in the backyard or outdoor living areas.

Soil preparation is performed on these planters either in the spring or just before the annuals are planted for the summer. It is recommended that a balanced time-release fertilizer, along with a water-holding polymer gel, be incorporated into the soil. Some container growing media include these amendments. Completely changing the growing media is not necessary every season, but it is prudent to do so every other year. Discarded planter media can be tilled into garden beds.

Spring – The spring planting, approximately April 15th, begins with plants that can tolerate some cold weather, such as forced bulbs, alyssum, fiber optic grass, heather, Hydrangea, lobelia, pansy, primrose or Schizanthus. Pussy willow or corkscrew willow branches can be added for height. Spring containers usually continue to look well through early June, which allows the garden service to take care of other urgent plantings in May.

Summer – Summer annuals provide a showing from late May through late September. Many variations, schemes and vignettes are possible in planters. Plant materials previously not widely available are becoming a mainstay in container gardening. Argyranthemum, Diascia, Dracaena, Gaura, Ipomoea, Melampodium, and Nemesia represent some of the newer annuals now available. Old favorites that are being brought back with new cultivars include Celosia, Coleus, Dahlia, Pelargonium, Nicotiana, Petunia, Tagetes, Verbena and Zinnia. Tropical plants, perennials and tree standards, which are various species grafted on top of a small tree trunk, are also becoming more popular.

Fall – If the proper selections are made, many containers do not require a switch-out in fall. However, some plant materials start to deteriorate earlier than others, or the client may desire new plants. Fall color is represented predominately with Dendranthema. Garden designers often add landscape grasses, dianthus, flowering kale, annual Rudbeckia and snapdragons to the summer ivies and vines that still look good in the container. To round out the presentation, bales of straw, shocks of corn, gourds, and pumpkins can be added to the display.

Winter – To create the festive feel of winter, one final seasonal switch-out is performed. Winter containers last approximately from November through spring clean-up in early April. This is a five-month-long display that can range from simple to elaborate. Evergreen spruce tips are the mainstay, with boughs of pine, arborvitae and juniper for extra depth. Branches of redbud, dogwood or birch are

traditionally added to achieve height. Beyond that, individual preferences and style come into play. Color and texture can be added with dried Eucalyptus, Hydrangea, rose hips, Sedum and various pods and berries. Small lights can be added to these containers, which should be strung before any other greens or color are added to help hide the wires and to avoid damaging the more delicate materials. Timing is critical to get the spruce tips into the soil before it freezes. Watering the soil is recommended to keep the evergreens from drying out too quickly in the winter wind and sun. The wet, frozen soil also helps stabilize the arrangement. Containers that are in the shade or underneath eaves maintain their shape and color longer.

Season-long Gardening Requirements

Most garden companies perform maintenance services on a regular basis; thus, a thorough knowledge of plant requirements throughout the season, and appropriate scheduling of these activities is essential.

Deadheading Annuals – Deadheading of annuals means removing the seedpods so the plant will remain in a continuous flowering status. Learning the proper techniques and timing for each individual plant is important. Specific requirements of some species include the following: Remove spent blooms to encourage new flowers on Argryanthemum and Pelargonium. Prune spent flowers down to the first node on Calendula and Osteospermum. Remove older flowers to encourage bushy rather than spindly growth on Antirrhinum, Salvia farinacea and Zinnia elegans. Lightly shear Diascia and Nemesia to rejuvenate blooming activity.

Deadheading Perennials – Perennials do not flower continuously throughout the summer, therefore removing seedpods is not always a necessity. Do not remove seed pods and seed heads that hold interest throughout the growing season or into the winter months on plants such as Agastache, Astilbe, Baptisia, Chelone, Echinacea, Iris Siberica, Limonium, Pardancanda, Perovskia, Rudbeckia, and landscape grasses.

A second flush of flowers or longer bloom time can be achieved if the following plants are deadheaded appropriately and in a timely manner: Achillea ‘Moonshine’, Hemmerocallis ‘Stella de Oro’. Monarda, Phlox paniculata, Platycodon, and Veronica.

Cut Achillea ‘The Pearl’, Achillea millefolium, Centaurea, Delphinium, Leucanthemum, Nepeta

‘Blue Wonder’, Salvia nemorosa and Tradescantia to the ground after blooming to maintain a tidy appearance and promote new growth. For Alcea, Iris germanica and Paeonia, deadhead and cut back foliage to avoid disease problems.

Staking Plants – If staking is needed for a plant, it must be staked before the plant has tipped or fallen over. Some annuals can be held up by a single stake with a twist tie; others require a triangle of three stakes. Dahlias perform best with one large metal or wooden pole to support the massive flower heads. Peony hoops and tomato cages are frequently used, as are grow-through rings for bushy plants. Lily stakes and other bracing-type stakes can be helpful and are easy to install. Often the method depends on the personal preference of the Professional Gardener and client. The most important detail to remember is to stake before the plant has tipped over. Refer to the chapter on Field Production of Nursery Stock for additional information on staking trees and tree caliper growth.

Fertilizing – As indicated above, fertilizer should be incorporated at the time of planting all plants. Existing plants should be top-dressed in early spring and perhaps again in mid-July depending on whether a soluble or slow-release fertilizer is used. Refer to the information above, to the chapter on Fertilization in the Nursery and Landscape, and the chapter on Container Production for detailed information on fertilization of landscape plants.

Pesticide Management – Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is critical in establishing a maintenance plan for any site. While there are a few common fungal diseases such as powdery mildew or botrytis in a garden setting, it is best to prevent these diseases with proper site planning and good air circulation. Diseased foliage must be removed or, occasionally an entire plant such as cosmos, which can get severe powdery mildew in late summer, must be removed. Roses, however, usually require a properly scheduled preventive series of fungicide applications.

There are insects that pose regular problems in flower beds. It is important to determine what the tolerance level is for insect damage. This will vary depending on the Professional Gardener’s philosophy and the preferences of the client. Aphids are common and create unsightly conditions. These insects can often be physically sprayed off with water, or they can be treated with insecticidal soap. For larger aphid problems, a broad-spectrum insecticide should be used.

Another pest that arrives in early June is the four-lined plant bug. They are bright red with black wing pads, which then change to yellow with black wing pads that have yellow stripes. Their damage appears as small brown dots in leaves. They prefer perennials such as chrysanthemum, mint, Chinese lantern, Liatis, basil, and Shasta daisy, but they also can be found on such shrubs as Azalea, Cornus, Forsythia and Viburnum. It is difficult to spray for these pests as they are very easily disturbed and fly away, but their presence is short-lived, so control may not be necessary. Individual bugs may be removed as well as any diseased leaves. For areas that are regularly infested year after year, a systemic insecticide may be used if it is applied before infestation occurs. It is important to educate the client on the advantages of an IPM program. Refer to the chapters on Disease Management, on Insect Management, on Weed Management, and on Pesticide Management for more in-depth information.

Animal Control – The largest pests that most gardeners encounter are deer and rabbits. The first possible solution to the problem is to install plants these animals do not prefer. Beyond that, a diligent and aggressive prevention program that begins immediately in spring and continues weekly or bi-weekly throughout the growing season is critical to the success of deer and rabbit control. Included in this program is the need to vary the repellent products applied so that the animals do not become accustomed to any particular one. It may be helpful to use deterrents such as predator scents of humans, coyotes or dogs, in conjunction with products that provide a taste repellent. Fences, motion detectors and dogs also help keep deer and rabbit damage to a minimum.

Fall Gardening Activities

Fall is an excellent time to plant bulbs and to accomplish many garden activities. As discussed earlier in this chapter, fall soil preparation can be beneficial. Typically, perennials that bloom in the spring need to be divided in the fall. Bulbs and some stressed plants may benefit from an early fall application of a complete fertilizer.

Installing tulips, daffodils and such “minor” bulbs as Scilla and Muscari, is an important value-added service for gardening companies. Planting bulbs in September and October can provide a pleasant experience in April and May. Bulbs come in an array of colors, heights and bloom sequences. Allium, daffodils, hyacinths and Scilla are spring blooming perennials that are not readily eaten by deer, while tulips are readily destroyed by deer. Tulips, other

than Emperors, perform best during first year, less well in the second year and somewhat poorly in the third season. Because of this, many companies treat tulips as an annual. If tulips are removed after blooming, they can be planted en masse in specific garden display areas. If they are not removed, it is best to conceal them among perennials so the emerging perennials disguise the bulb plants’ yellowing foliage as they die back early in the season. To achieve the greatest effect, bulbs should either be planted en masse in individual holes or grouped into holes containing ten bulbs. The holes of ten bulbs should be repeated at least three times for a small garden bed. The hole can contain one cultivar of tulip or one species of several different colors. A hole for ten daffodils may have 25 “minor” bulbs of Scilla, Chionodoxa or Muscari placed on top of the daffodils. Bulbs should be watered after planting. An animal repellent can be applied directly on the bulbs or to the top of the freshly dug soil to discourage foraging animals.

Peonies do not have to be divided for cultural reasons, but can be divided to obtain additional plants. When dividing peonies, insure that at least two to three healthy buds are located on each division. When planting new peony roots, a minimum spacing of three feet is recommended. When they are replanted, the eyes of the tuber should be placed no more than one to two inches below the surface of the soil or they will not bloom.

German iris requires dividing every three to five years to remain prolific. Iris rhizomes need to be inspected for iris borer and discarded if the borer is found. Soaking the rhizomes in bleach can help with sanitation. The unproductive centers should be discarded and the healthier offspring on the outside of the clumps can be replanted.

Annuals need to be removed from gardens and containers upon seasonal deterioration or dieing back from frost. Most annuals can be pulled out by hand, while others require the help of a trowel to remove the entire root. Shake off the soil from the roots to leave as much soil in the garden or container as possible. If self-seeding is a desire, shake the plant and distribute the seeds in favorable locations. Cleome and Nicotiana are good candidates for self seeding.

Clients will often request that large portions of their perennial gardens be left intact for winter interest rather than cutting and removing the plant materials. This is a much more sustainable approach to landscape management for the following reasons.

1. Leaving some leaf cover provides habitat and food for insects and animals.
2. Leaving the tops of plants protects these plants by providing their own winter cover.
3. Letting the plants die back naturally provides compost to the soil.
4. By spring, the decomposed debris that needs to be removed is much smaller in size than all of the green debris that would need to be cut down and hauled away in the fall.

However, many clients and gardening companies prefer to do a majority of the cleanup in the fall. Whether to do this in the spring or fall is a personal preference, but the foliage, not stems, of roses and the foliage of perennials such as iris and peony should always be removed as leaving it may allow fungal diseases to over-winter in the debris.

Two to four inches of straw or clean covering hay can be spread over tender perennials and spring flowering bulbs to keep them frozen when snow cover is inadequate. If the gardens are open and the sun comes out for days at a time in the middle of the winter, certain plants may begin to grow. When the cold temperature returns, these plants will be injured at the very least and may possibly be killed. Likewise, in the spring the sun warms certain spots before the weather is truly stable. The winter mulch also ameliorates frost heaving and prevents plants from heaving out of the ground due to freezing and thawing cycles. Winter mulch will also slow the freezing process in the fall and it will help keep the ground frozen during the winter and early spring.

It is important to purchase straw or hay that is clean of weed or crop seeds. Straw is more golden in color, but a greater amount is needed for good coverage. Leaves from a job site can be used instead of straw, however, leaves often need to be removed from the grass before the garden is ready to receive them.

Typically, winter mulch should be applied in late November or early December after the ground has frozen. It can be applied earlier, but the risk of smothering and rotting the plants is greater if the plants are not dormant or frozen. Leaves shredded by the lawn mower are good for the compost pile, but should not be used to cover gardens because they compact and get too heavy.

Proper winterization of hybrid tea roses is essential for winter survival. The Minnesota Tip Method of burying roses was developed by the University of Minnesota. By burying roses in soil or compost, tender hybrid tea roses can be successfully overwintered and the plants will grow well the following year. Procedures for the Minnesota Tip Method are as follows:

1. Spray the rose plants with a fungicide.
2. Tie the canes together with twine, leaving extra twine to use as a marker after it is buried.
3. Dig a trench to one side of the plant, making sure the small feeder roots are not damaged. Be sure the trench is long and wide enough to accommodate the entire plant.
4. Loosen the soil on the other side of the plant, and then tip it into the trench. Replace the soil into the trench covering the entire rose plant. Additional soil or mulch can also be added over the replaced soil. Leave the extra twine exposed to serve as a marker above the soil or mulch.

Additional marking can occur with a stake placed into the ground at an angle with the top of the stake pointing to the top of the plant. All of the canes need to be covered with soil to survive the winter. Additional soil may be needed to ensure coverage. Roses should be buried after they have been exposed to one or two hard frosts, typically in mid-October.

Most ever-blooming shrub roses are hardy in Hardiness Zones three and four and do not require being tipped for the winter. Mulching of these plants is, however, beneficial.

Winter Gardening Activities

To avoid disease and insect problems, certain trees need to be pruned in winter, typically from December through March. This includes flowering crab, hawthorne, honey locust, mountain ash and oak. Tree services typically maintain larger specimens; however, many garden services companies manage such smaller trees as flowering crabapple trees and cherry trees. Refer to the Chapter on Pruning Trees, Shrubs and Perennials for additional information.

If the weather warms to more than 40°F during the winter, additional applications of deer repellent should be applied at frequently visited sites. Typically, deer forage on arborvitae throughout the winter months, while rabbits eat the base of Euonymus, Spiraea, Prunus and many other shrubs.

Trunk guards should be installed around trunks of deciduous trees where deer rub their antlers.

Holiday lights can be strung in planters, window boxes, along roof lines, over arbors and around branches of trees. Outdoor timers greatly increase the enjoyment of these calming or colorful vignettes by turning them on and off automatically in accordance with the client's request. It is important to understand the electrical capacity of the outdoor outlets, wherein some homeowners need to install additional outlets to handle the additional electrical load.

Creating luminaries or ice lanterns can be a fun way to extend the season. These can be formed outdoors with a five-gallon pail, but their clarity is improved when created at a consistent temperature in a freezer. There is no guarantee that Minnesota winters will be cold enough to keep these from melting, but careful placement can extend their life. The north or east side of a building is best, or cover them with cardboard on warm sunny days.

Maintaining tools and equipment is an important element of the professional garden company. Backpack blowers, rototillers, shovels, pruners, lopping shears and sprayers are among the items that receive wear and abuse in the field. Preventive steps to ensure their longevity are prudent. Purchasing vehicles such as a pickup or dump truck, van or bobcat, along with scheduled maintenance of this equipment is a significant way to invest back into the company. Most of these activities should be accomplished during the winter months.

Some garden services companies offer snow plowing during the winter months. Refer to the chapters on Landscape Contracting and on Landscape Management for information on snowplowing operations.

Good Business Practices

The Professional Gardener uses the winter months to prepare for the next season. To prepare for another year, it is necessary to evaluate whether the last season's goals were met. For this, it is necessary to have taken notes for each job started and completed throughout the season. This information should then be cross referenced and catalogued with financial data and digital photographs. This provides the opportunity to revisit every garden, critique it and make the appropriate changes for the next year. Many clients simply need annuals from season to season, and winter is the time to re-design these planters, beds and borders. Plant orders should be placed early so custom growers can grow these

products to ensure availability in the spring. This also is the time to review notes regarding perennial division and soil situations. Computer spreadsheets can help determine the most efficient way to service all of these needs. Clients should have been contacted to get their feedback throughout the season, but such communication is also essential in winter as well. Designing, scheduling and ordering are the principal requirements to be completed during the winter, in addition to addressing needs and projects that did not get completed during the previous season. Good business practices and basic business sense are essential to keeping a company vital and to help it grow. Understanding financial statements and developing a strong relationship with an accountant and a banker are the best ways to track and critique the health of a company. Advice is freely dispersed from the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE), who have had years of experience in the business world. Courses for the small business person are also available through many colleges or business schools, and through professional associations.

Wisely selecting vendors and maintaining a working relationship with them is also a critical consideration in this seasonal industry. Annuals are a perishable produce, a material with a limited shelf life, which creates unique challenges. By having many growers available to help with supply and demand, companies can better position themselves in this short season. Maintaining some annual, perennial and woody inventory provides a fast turnaround time for last minute and smaller installations. Bulk purchasing, alone or in conjunction with another company, of hard goods such as fertilizer, deer control products or stakes can provide the advantages of volume discounts.

Hiring and managing staff members are key elements in owning and operating a garden services business. A simple approach for professional gardeners is to hire employees that are passionate about their work and have a variety of skills, ranging from product knowledge, to time management, to people skills and a creative flair. A good driving record is always necessary. Dependability and honesty are crucial traits. Flexibility is necessary as well because a Professional Gardener's job description changes based on the time of year, and the client's preferences may change from day to day.

Some company owners conduct all the office requirements while other owners hire support staff for most office duties. Some garden services have designers in-house; others contract out the design

work. Many company owners play a large part in the design process, bidding, office work and administration; including a constant review of insurance coverage.

In addition to daily operations, a focus on education, team building and staff development can always be useful to any company. It is important to continue to raise the bar by hiring employees who have an education in the green industry, are MNLA Certified, and/or hold a pesticide applicator's license. This all enhances the value of one company over another. Medical, dental and retirement benefits can also attract more qualified applicants.

Gardeners often develop ongoing relationships with clients; thus, possessing people skills is not only advantageous, it is essential. There is a direct correlation between the survival of these relationships and the success of the company. The process begins with a phone contact or email followed up by an initial consultation or client interview. Many important values can be expressed and understood in these preliminary exchanges. Much can be shared and learned by both parties in this process. The client may not agree with the company's approach, or the company representative may decide the company is not the right fit for the client's requirements. Establishing good rapport and trust initiates the connection between the client and the service company. Traditionally, some landscape companies install their designs and only return to the job site if the client requests that additional work be performed. Gardening companies occasionally operate that way as well, but generally they enter into long-term relationships with clients, which are usually kept active through providing continuous maintenance services. Working for and with a client once a week for approximately eight months, year after year, results in a strong working relationship with the client. It is the responsibility of the professional gardener to honor this relationship.