

Putting the Garden to Bed - A Fall Checklist



| Task | Do I need to do it? | Is it done? |
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| Garden Cleanup: | | |
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| <p>Rake up the leaves on your lawn. Use them to mulch your perennials and shrubs or chop/shred them and put them on the compost pile.</p> | | |
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| <p>Top your compost pile with a thick layer of leaves or straw during the fall and winter. This helps prevent excess moisture from building up and also insulates the pile so that it maintains a higher internal temperature during the winter.</p> | | |
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| <p>Discard dead annuals (after saving seed if you're so inclined).</p> | | |
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| <p>Move perennials in containers or hanging baskets to a garden bed to overwinter. Be sure to do this early in the fall and water well after planting so the plants have a chance to "dig in" for the winter.</p> | | |
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| <p>Mulch any perennials you are overwintering (if they need it).</p> | | |

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| Winterize drip watering system or underground sprinkler systems. | | |
| Section by section, clean up the beds in your garden putting the debris on your compost pile. Be sure to inspect plants for signs of disease before you do, however! Diseased plant material should be burned or disposed of rather than composted so you don't reinfect your beds in the spring! | | |
| Till or fork over each bed as you clean it. Tilling the beds in the fall can help expose insect eggs and grubs to hungry birds now for fewer insect problems in the spring! | | |
| Plant a cover crop! Planting a cover crop is easy. Oats and buckwheat or winter rye get scattered over the garden, covered with a light layer of soil and watered if needed. The cover will crop will die during the first hard frost and stay on your garden to protect it from weeds until you turn it under in the spring. | | |
| Clean empty containers, pots and hanging baskets with a mild soap and a weak bleach solution to kill any disease organisms and put them away for the winter. | | |
| Tend to tools. In most gardens, spades and trowels have played hide-and-seek all over the plot by the time fall arrives. Round the wayward tools up, wipe their dirt off (scrub them if necessary with a wire brush), oil them with vegetable oil (to fend off rust), and store them away for winter. | | |

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| Disinfect all seed-starting equipment with one part liquid chlorine bleach to nine parts water. Let the equipment dry before storing. | | |
| Put away any trellising, stakes, plastic sheeting and spunbond material that you're not currently using. | | |
| Winterize engines. Drain or run out all the gasoline from lawn mowers, tillers and string trimmers. Otherwise, water can condense in the tanks over winter and make for hard starting next spring. Disconnect the spark plugs and store the machines under cover to keep them dry. | | |
| Make a list. Just because you know now that next spring you'll need such items as a new hoe, mower blade, piece of wire fencing and red paint for the tool handles (it's hard to lose red-handled tools) doesn't mean that you'll remember all those things the next time you're at the hardware store or the flea market. | | |

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| Fall/Winter Gardening: | | |
| Mark roots. Searching through snow or frozen ground to find overwintering root crops is no fun. So mark the borders of those plantings now (mulch the areas when the crops' tops die back). | | |
| Plant cold hardy crops like kale, spinach, mustard, lettuce (types like oak leaf and Boston), parsley, chives, Swiss chard and Chinese cabbage. (This last crop is especially well adapted to low light and temperature conditions.) Protect them with simple cloches of clear plastic over PVC arches, wooden cold frames or recycled windows atop bales of hay. | | |
| Hasten maturity. A dose of manure tea or foliar fertilizer may help crops like lettuce, spinach, broccoli, cauliflower, Swiss chard, Brussels sprouts and Chinese and regular cabbages reach maturity before killing frost. | | |
| Take in tender herbs. In most climates, cold-sensitive herbs such as rosemary, lemon verbena, scented geraniums and tender lavenders and sages won't survive unless they're brought indoors for winter. There they can continue to provide you with fresh seasonings. Kate and Fairman Jayne of Sandy Mush Herb Nursery say these tenderfoot plants need tough treatment (even though it may seem like blatant plant abuse). First, wait until after the first hard freeze to dig the herbs. Then set them on the garage floor for several days. This shocks the plants into a very short (but necessary) dormancy period. Next, prune back the stems and pot each herb in a container that is two inches wider than the root ball. Bring them indoors, and water minimally until their stark branches show signs of perking up, and water only moderately after that. | | |

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| <p>Take herb cuttings. To have the benefits of fresh herbs-either tender or hardy-in winter, you can start cuttings from them anytime from two months to two weeks before the first frost date. Clip of sections that are three to four inches long. Strip off the leaves on the lower third to half of each piece, and dip it in a commercial rooting hormone. Then put it in a light soil mix. Keep the soil moist but not flooded.</p> | | |
| <p>Take cuttings of spring flowering trees and shrubs for forcing into blooming indoors. Take cuttings in the fall and keep them in a cool, dark place.</p> | | |
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| <p>Fall Lawn Care:</p> | | |
| <p>Fertilize - Fall is the best time to fertilize your lawn. It's best to do it around Labor Day but you can fertilize as late as Halloween if you haven't had a hard freeze yet. Top quality lawn fertilizers contain slow-release or controlled-release nitrogen. Look on the label for slow-release forms such as ureaform, sulfur-coated urea, milorganite, and IBDU. These forms stimulate uniform growth over a period of time and are less likely to burn the grass. In early fall use a regular lawn fertilizer with N-P- K ratios of 3:1:2 or 4:1:2. Check out this excellent website for more information on how to calculate how much to apply: http://urbanext.illinois.edu/hortihints/0208e.html.</p> | | |

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| <p>Control Weeds - September and October are the best months to control perennial broadleaf weeds like dandelions and clover. In autumn the weeds prepare for winter by pulling nutrients and starches from their leaves into their roots. By doing this, they also draw herbicides into their root systems, thus more effectively killing the weed. Actively growing grass will quickly fill in the bare spots created after the weeds die.</p> | | |
| <p>Control Thatch - Thatch is a build-up of living and dead grass roots and stems between the soil and green grass blades. The amount of thatch in the lawn may be checked by cutting three to four inches down into the grass with a shovel and lifting up a piece of sod. Thatch looks like a thick tangle of dark brown roots above the soil level. If thatch is greater than 1/2 inch, the lawn should be core aerated or dethatched in fall or spring. In lawns with a thatch layer over 3/4 inch thick you should aerate then top dress with a thin layer (1/8 to 1/4 inch) of soil or compost. Top dressing adds microorganisms that help breakdown thatch.</p> | | |
| <p>Start a new lawn or renovate an old one - The ideal time for planting grass seed to either establish a new lawn or renovate a poor quality one is the middle of August to the middle of September. During September grasses grow rapidly in the cool fall weather and have less competition from germinating weeds.</p> | | |
| <p>Mow one last time to control weeds and make spring cleanup easier.</p> | | |

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| Fall Greenhouse Maintenance: | | |
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| Remove all plants/weeds from the greenhouse. Even if you have a permanent greenhouse and plan to move some of your plants back in, take everything "green" out of the house and get rid of all weeds. | | |
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| Glass or other "permanent" greenhouses - Using a solution of 10% bleach, soap and water, clean all surfaces and supports. Soak pots, trays and containers in the bleach solution, scrub and dry. | | |
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| Plastic-covered greenhouses - If you're not going to be using your greenhouse over the winter, take down the plastic covering and inspect for damage. If your covering looks too damaged for another year, dispose of it and make a note to purchase new greenhouse plastic before next spring! | | |
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| Insect Patrol - This is a good time to look for wasp nests and other insect hiding places and get rid of them. | | |
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| Bringing plants back into the greenhouse - Inspect plants for insect hitchhikers and disease before bringing them back into your nice clean greenhouse. | | |

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| Getting Ready for Next Spring: | | |
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| <p>Do a soil test. Autumn's the best time to send soil samples off for analysis. The labs aren't swamped with work, so you get results back faster than in spring. The soil's generally drier, which makes sampling easier and more accurate. And there's more time for any of the recommended amendments you add to break down and work their way into the soil.</p> | | |
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| <p>Plant your garlic. Fall is the time to plant garlic. Set cloves out now in soil thoroughly prepared with composted manure, compost, lime and bone meal. During the cool, short days of winter, cloves develop strong roots. In early spring foliage begins to sprout and fat bulbs form for harvest later on. Mid-September through Mid-October is a good timeframe for this task depending on your microclimate.</p> | | |
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| <p>Plant perennials vegetables. Jerusalem artichokes (sunchokes), rhubarb, horseradish and asparagus can be planted in fall.</p> | | |
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| <p>Plant perennial flowers. Take advantage of fall weather and plant perennials such a campanula, candytuft, catmint, coreopsis, delphinium, dianthus, foxglove, gaillardia, geum, penstemon, salvia, Shasta daisy, yarrow and verbena. Use a high-nitrogen fertilizer at planting and don't forget to mulch!</p> | | |
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| <p>Prepare planting sites for spring bulbs and plants. Availability of spring flowering bulbs is at its peak this month. Plant some now for a splash of color next spring. Get ready for planting bulbs such as daffodils, crocuses, tulips, lilies of the valley, irises and peonies by digging in lots of compost and bone meal.</p> | | |

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| Add compost to empty flower and vegetable beds so that they are ready to plant in the spring. | | |
| Plant Winter Flowers. Perk up the gray days of winter with pots of colorful anemones, pansies, violas, Johnny-jump-ups, primroses and Icelandic poppies. | | |
| Prepare for bare rooting planting. Act now if you're planning to add fruit trees, berries, asparagus, artichokes or rhubarb to your garden in late winter or early spring. These crops are available during the rainy season, a time when digging and tilling is next to impossible. Till under beds and add organic matter. Dig holes for fruit trees and blueberries and add compost. Cover prepared holes and beds with black plastic after a thorough watering. When bare root season arrives, you'll be ready to plant immediately. | | |
| Plant Bulbs. Availability of spring flowering bulbs is at its peak this month. Plant some now for a splash of color next spring. | | |
| Get early spring planting beds "seed ready." If you're planning to plant a bed early in the spring -- for a crop of peas, lettuce or spinach -- make sure that bed is ready to go. Till it, amend it and, if you're going to be using a trellis or similar planting structure, get it in place now. You won't want to be doing this in the cold and muck of spring weather! | | |
| Prune deciduous trees and shrubs but wait until February to prune members of the rose family (this includes most fruit trees) and grapes. | | |

Sources:

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