

Ordinary fall garden chores PLANT OPPORTUNITIES for extraordinary next year

Cleanup, mulching, composting – your garden will appreciate your touch

By Donna Cuin

I doubt any of us are ready for a long winter's nap, but even if we aren't, our gardens are ready for a rest.

Eliminating as much potential for disease and insect problems in the year to come is the most important part of preparing a garden for winter. This is done by cutting down and destroying all the dead plant material from plants that showed signs of pests. Either compost it (at the proper temperature – see <http://bit.ly/backyardcomposting>) or send it to a landfill. This will keep any bacterial or fungal disease organisms or insect eggs from surviving the winter and re-infesting plants in the spring.

Choose Which Plants to Keep Through Winter

After removing diseased foliage, take time to assess which other annual or perennial plants you'd like to remain intact. You may decide not to cut back dead foliage on plants that provide food and shelter for birds or other wildlife. Others you may want to keep for winter viewing enjoyment as they collect beautiful tufts of white snow or show a contrasting color against the white background throughout winter. Winter is usually our longest season (or at least seems like it), so it's nice to have plants to add visual interest to the landscape. After such consideration, undesired foliage can be cut and composted.

The last major cleanup task is to rake the leaves that have fallen from trees. What a windfall! These valuable leaves can be used as mulch for perennial plants or composted to further enrich your garden soil. If you plan to use them as mulch, pile the leaves over tender perennials in a layer of about 6 inches. Once the season has cooled down and the chances for more warm fall days have gone by, plants like roses can be covered with leaves and insulated with rose cones.

This should be done after all chances of warm up have diminished because a rose plant can literally cook inside the cone if it gets too hot under there.





Compost provides nutrients to the still-growing roots of perennial flowerbeds during the cooler months.



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Compost, Compost, Compost

Fall is also a great time to empty a compost bin or finished compost pile to benefit next year's garden and to have the bin ready to receive all the fall leaves and all the kitchen scraps throughout the winter months.

Adding compost in the fall is one of the best things you can do for a vegetable garden. In addition to the nutrients it adds to the soil, the beneficial organic matter it provides will help develop the soil structure as freezing and thawing occurs in the fall and early spring months.

Compost can be added in a 2-inch layer (or more if you have the compost available) and tilled into the soil. The organic matter from the compost, in addition to helping the soil structure, will help absorb the moisture from snow. However, tilling the soil is not recommended if there is no compost available. Tillage only

disturbs the soil structure and, if overdone, can pulverize the soil so much that a hard layer will develop over the top of the garden bed. The winter moisture would just run off instead of soaking into the soil and improving it through the freezing and thawing cycles.

Adding compost is somewhat difficult in perennial gardens and tree and shrub beds because you don't want to bury the existing plants. However, adding about an inch will provide nutrients to the continually growing roots of the established plants through the cooler months and will allow the compost to be worked into the soil as new plants are added in the spring.

And Now Add to the Compost Bin or Pile

With the compost bins empty or piles gone, you can now begin next year's compost. The plant material

from the various gardens can be added and the last grass clippings of the year can be mixed with the leaves for a good carbon-to-nitrogen ratio. With adequate moisture, the plant material will start decaying into compost, and kitchen scraps can be added through the winter months. For information about composting, go to barnyardsandbackyards.com.

If fall weather allows, more detailed work like pruning dormant trees and shrubs can go onto the "to do" list, which will leave more time in the spring for other garden chores (pruning information available at the same website under Landscaping).

Every chance to get outdoors and enjoy our gardens this time of year is a delight. Winter soon will be upon us, and we'll be dreaming once more about next year's garden season.

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