

Putting the Garden to Rest: Garden Care for Autumn

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Late summer and fall are great times of year to garden. The air starts to feel cool and the warmth of the sun is welcomed and not shunned. Plants feel less stress, and even though daytime temperatures decline, the soil is warm and encourages new root growth, so new plants have a leg-up on spring. It is also a great time to prepare your garden for winter, and by following these simple steps, you can ensure your garden recovers from the stress of the hot dry summer, slumbers well this winter, and is ready to grow again next spring.

General Garden Cleanup

- **Rake:** Remove fallen leaves; don't let them stay on the lawn under the snow. Whole leaves left in garden beds and on lawns can form a nearly impenetrable mat and can keep water and air from circulating. To use the leaves as mulch on the lawn or in the garden, run over the leaves with your lawn mower to break them up into little bits.
- **Recycle:** Start a compost pile with all of those raked leaves or grass clippings, but remember to add some soil to the pile to help it start "cooking."
- **Prune:** Remove damaged, diseased, or broken limbs and branches, but save major pruning for late winter (February) as pruning encourages new growth.
- **Weed:** Getting those last weeds pulled, especially the perennial weeds, means less work next spring, and less competition for your desirable garden plants over the fall and spring months.
- **Water:** Deep water newly planted trees, shrubs, and perennials twice a month if there is no snow or rain. Until the ground freezes, water existing evergreens and trees once a month throughout the winter if there is less than an inch of rain or a foot of snow each month.
- **Mulch:** Apply a 3 to 4 inch layer of mulch under trees and shrubs out to the drip lines, and around perennials; take care to not pile mulch against the trunks of the plants.
- **Plant:** We've heard the nurseries proclaim that fall is the time for planting, and this isn't just a sales pitch. Providing you can find the plant you are looking for, fall offers many benefits to planting. The air is cooler and the days are shorter, so the plant endures less transfer stress. Plus, the soil is still warm and moist so the roots can actively grow and will be that much farther along come spring. Just don't forget to water new plantings thoroughly and periodically.



Lawn Care

- Raise the mower height to 2 1/2 to 3 inches. The longer grass blades will shade weed seeds, keeping them from sprouting. Also, the longer blade will provide extra protection for the turf during the winter. Stop mowing as soon as a hard frost hits.
- If snow molds or other fungal diseases have been a problem in the past, bag grass clippings, and rake up any leaves that are on the lawn before the snow falls.



- Reduce watering to once every 10 to 14 days in October if there is no rain or snow; frequent watering will encourage fungus and molds and keep roots shallow.
- Aerate compacted soils, leaving the soil plugs on the lawn to provide rich organic material (this can actually replace a fertilizer application).
- De-thatch if your lawn feels spongy or if you can't feel the soil when you dig your fingers into the lawn.
- Over-seed in thin areas to improve your lawn for spring; consider over-seeding with a lower water species such as a dwarf tall fescue. Warm season grasses, such as buffalo grass and side oats grama are best left to early summer seeding.

- Fertilize with a slow-release nitrogen fertilizer or home-made compost; organic fertilizers tend to be “slower” than chemical fertilizers so new blade growth will be minimal but the roots will get what they need.

Vegetables

- Mulch fall crops, especially root crops. This will keep the soil from freezing and allow you to continue harvesting through the winter months.
- Remove summer crop plants, composting healthy plants and destroying plants infested with insects or disease.
- Plant onions or garlic for early summer harvest.
- Plant a green manure crop such as annual rye or clover to improve soil quality and moisture retention; till in the “crop” in the spring.

While the list may seem daunting, many of the chores can be combined. For example, when you rake up all of those lovely fall leaves, spread them out over the lawn and make a few passes with your lawn mower. You now have mulch for the garden beds, you can leave a little on the lawn, and if there is any left over, well, that’s the start of your new compost pile. A little extra effort in the fall and winter can pay large rewards in the garden next spring and summer. And at least you don’t have to worry about sun stroke.