

SUSTAINABLE LIVING GUIDE:

46. THREE WAYS TO PREP YOUR GARDEN FOR FALL AND WINTER, THE TRADITIONAL FARMER'S WAY¹

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Just like on an organic farm, fall cleanup in your garden should be aimed at keeping your soil healthy come spring. Many chemical-based farmers commit a cardinal sin of soil management every fall—they till under plant debris in their fields and walk away, leaving the soil exposed and vulnerable to harsh winter conditions. "Unfortunately, most of those farmers don't cover their soil," explains says Jeff Moyer, farm director at the Rodale Institute, an experimental organic farm in Pennsylvania. "In fact, many plow in the fall to speed up their work flow in the spring, leaving it not only bare but open to all the elements—not good!"

The good news is, home planters can up their garden game this fall by adopting a few techniques many organic farmers swear by. "Fall is not the time to quit gardening," explains Moyer. "Putting a farm or a garden to bed properly in the fall will make waking it up early in the spring easier and better for the health of the garden's soil."

Here's how to handle fall garden cleanup like a true organic farmer:

#1. Plant Cover Crops.

It's very simple to plant cover crops like hairy vetch or even cereal rye, and these plants will keep the soil microbes alive and active during the winter months, giving your garden a boost at planting time. While these crops are tilled into the ground, or even rolled down to form a mat, in the spring before they go to seed (check with your local extension office for details) to add organic material to the soil, they also do a great service in the fall, winter, and early spring months, including suppressing weeds and reducing erosion that carries away valuable topsoil.

In fact, Moyer says that some farmers find cover-cropping to be so successful that they actually "inter-seed" by flying over fields in an airplane or helicopter to seed the cover crop before they even harvest their cash crop. "You can do the same thing by dispersing your cover crop seed around plants that are still producing crops, like your tomatoes and peppers," Moyer says. "When they are through for the season, the cover crop will just be getting started.

You can gently rake the cover crop seeds into the soil surface, so as to not disturb any standing crops, but even that step isn't really necessary, as the seeds are small and the rain will help them establish, Moyer says. Plant fall cover crops at least four weeks before the frost. Legumes are slower to germinate and need to go into the ground between now and mid-September. Oats should be planted around this time, too; cereal rye crops can be planted a little later, up until a frost.

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#2. Clean Up and Cover Beds With Compost.

You wouldn't dare sleep outside without a sleeping bag and tent this winter, so why put your garden beds through a harsh winter unprotected? The first step is to remove crop debris and residue and add those to your compost pile. If that ideal scenario is not possible, go to plan B. "At least shred the debris up and get it close against the soil, just like farmers do, to speed up the decomposition process," Moyer says. "This will also help to minimize insect and disease pressure next year."

And, he says, just as compost is soil microbe food before and during the growing season, spreading some on your garden beds now will help the soil through the winter, and alleviate some of the workload in spring by providing well-fed soil when you're anxious to get those first seeds in the ground. If you plan on tilling the soil to establish your cover crop (which isn't really necessary), add the compost before tilling so it works into the soil.

Or, you could just spread well-made compost on the surface of the beds and leave it there. "Adding straw or hay on top won't hurt, for sure, as it all protects the soil in the winter," says Moyer. "The point being, protect the soil, don't leave it bare and exposed to the elements of winter."

#3. Let Certain Plants Linger.

Vegetables in the brassica family, including cabbages, kale, broccoli, brussels sprouts, cauliflower, and radishes left in the ground now and until pre-planting time in early spring can act as pest lures. As spring hits, the plants release cyanide compounds that can kill off nuisance wireworms. Leave some stalks standing in your flower gardens, too, especially local native plants and those with seeds and berries. They'll attract birds, adding life and color to your winter landscape.