

SUSTAINABLE LIVING GUIDE

47. FALL GARDEN CLEANUP: NINE WAYS TO PREP YOUR GARDEN FOR WINTER¹

Leah Zerbe[©]

Winter will be here before you know it, but that doesn't mean it's time to completely abandon your garden. Although much of the brow-sweat-producing garden work is over for the year, there are some things that should be on your fall garden cleanup to-do list to prep for a successful spring season.

Here are the most important tasks for fall garden cleanup:

#1: Don't Let Late Blight Linger.

Northeastern farmers and home gardeners alike were slammed with late blight earlier this year. If you planted tomatoes or potatoes in your garden, make sure you remove all plant parts, including leafy material, pieces of tomatoes, and undug potatoes. Late blight spores cannot continue to reproduce throughout the winter unless there is live tissue from these plants.

There's some debate over what to do with the debris, but the general consensus is, unless you're a master composter, you should double-bag it and put it out with the trash. "If you're very good at getting good temperatures in the compost pile, those can go in," says Bill Waltman, Pennsylvania State University agriculture and horticulture educator. "If you're on the sloppy side of composting, it's not a good idea." Perfect composting procedure is needed for the pile to reach temperatures of 130 to 140 degrees that will destroy the live tissue that the spores need to develop. As an added measure to lower the risk of late blight next year, Waltman urges people to rotate crops next year, so tomatoes and potatoes don't grow in the same spots they did in the previous year.

#2: Get a Soil Test.

This is a good time of the year to spend \$5 to \$10 on a soil test. A soil test can show you where your soil's pH levels stand and, if needed, you can change it by using the proper amounts of lime this fall.

#3: Clean Up!

Fall is also a good time to clean up foliage from roses, peonies, and any other plant with diseased foliage. Just make sure those parts are bagged and put out with the garbage too. It is time also to divide spring-blooming plants such as iris, brunnera, dianthus, lamium, and primrose, and later bloomers like black-eyed Susans, geraniums, daylilies, hostas, coneflowers, and yarrows.

#4: Leave Free Bird Food Standing.

Avoid the temptation of cutting back all of the dead stalks in your flower gardens. Let purple coneflower, black-eyed Susans, sunflowers, and other plants with seeds and berries stand.

¹ Rodale Daily News, October 18, 2009

They'll provide hours of enjoyment as you watch birds feed from them in the winter. Especially leave any local, native plants standing, since they're the most likely to be edible for local wildlife.

#5: Leave Some Hiding Spots.

Beneficial invertebrates, such as such spiders and insects (solitary bees, ladybugs, and some beetles) rely on logs, brush piles, or dead groundcover in which to overwinter.

#6: Save Your Leaves.

Instead of putting your leaves out with the trash, bag them and let them break down over winter, or throw them on a pile, and in a few months you'll have compost. To use them sooner, shred them with a lawnmower or a leaf blower set on reverse (the only sensible use for a leaf blower, in our opinion) and rake into flower garden borders. You can also toss grass clippings onto garden beds, but composting them first tends to kill any weed seeds.

#7: Leave Certain Veggies in the Ground.

Leaving arugulas or brassica vegetables in the ground, including cabbages, kale, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, and radishes can attract, and then kill off, harmful pests, explains Waltman. For example, the plants attract nuisance wireworms, but as the plants decompose in the spring they release cyanide compounds that will kill off the worms.

#8: If Frost Hasn't Hit Yet, Consider Cover Crops.

Cover crops, aka green manure, build healthy soil, beat back weeds, and serve as aids in pest and disease control. You should plant fall cover crops at least four weeks before the frost. You can plant cereal rye cover crops up until a frost.

#9: Think spring.

As winter sets in, you don't have to abandon your garden—just move into the planning stage for spring planting. With a hot cup of coffee or hot chocolate in hand, you can map out a vegetable crop-rotation chart to lower the risk of disease next growing season. And make sure you order your favorite seed catalog (we like Seed Savers Exchange and Seeds of Change) to peruse during the colder months.