



WSU EXTENSION  
Thurston County

Master  
Gardener  
Program

## Fall Gardening Tasks

Fall is a perfect time to spend some time cleaning up from the summer and to start planning for the spring growing season. Here are some tips and resources to help you stay on top of the most important fall gardening tasks.

### General Tips

**Make notes and take pictures** of everything in your garden. For vegetable gardens make sure you note the location of each species of plant. This will help with determining how to rotate your crops next spring. Write down characteristics of each species i.e., did they grow well, how did the taste, any insect or disease problems, etc.

For your perennial beds make note of bare spots or areas in which you want to add plants to build year-round interest.

Before you clean up spent flower heads decide if you would like to **save seeds** from open-pollinated plants. Echinacea, zinnias, foxglove, delphinium, and rudbeckia are examples of plants where it is easy to save seeds. You can also leave some plants intact and let them self-sow.

**Figure out your growing zone and first frost date.** Knowing your growing zone and first frost date will help you identify the plant species you can grow in your space and if you need to give any specialized care for the winter. Moving plants to a protected place or digging up bulbs are actions that will help plants that are on the cusp of growing zones.

**Dig up and store tender bulbs.** Some bulbs are ok to leave in the soil while others should be dug up and stored in a protected place for the winter. Bulbs that are considered “tender” are dahlias, gladiolus, caladium (elephant ears), canna etc.

**Consider moving tender plants to a protected space.** This could mean moving them closer to a

building, under the roof, garage or moving plants inside for the winter.

Some examples include succulents, citrus, ivy, coleus, cacti, begonia, rosemary, basil, geraniums, hellebores, heuchera etc. It is best to check for bugs and disease before moving plants indoors. You don't want to introduce a new disease or pest to your houseplants.

**Weed and mulch.** Weeding in the fall is critical for having a successful garden in the spring. Add mulch to bare spots after weeding. This will help deter new weeds from establishing themselves. Arborist wood chips is an excellent mulching material for fall application. If you are mulching around trees and shrubs leave the crown exposed. Do not make mulch volcanos around the trunks of trees and stems of shrubs.

**Watch for pests.** Slugs and snails mate in the fall and lay eggs. Eggs will remain dormant throughout the winter and hatch next spring. Removing eggs in the fall will help control the population in the spring. Squash, cut, drown, or bait non-native slugs and snails and their eggs.

**Do not prune** summer blooming shrubs in the fall. This will stimulate new growth which is susceptible to damage during the winter. You can prune summer blooming shrubs in late winter/early spring.

**Remove and destroy diseased plants** while they still have their leaves. It is easier to spot disease while the plant has its leaves. Do not compost diseased plant material.

**Lawns.** Remove weeds before they go to seed. New lawns can be seeded after Labor Day or in the spring. Thatch the lawn by raking it then overseed and top-dress thin areas in September-October. Fertilize as needed, using an organic fertilizer (September-October). A slow-release synthetic fertilizer can be used through mid-November.

### Planting

**Plant spring bulbs.** Follow the label on the package. Planting bulbs in clumps improves the aesthetic quality. Don't forget to put a plant label after you have planted your bulbs so you know where they are located.



**Replace summer annuals with cold tolerant plants in containers i.e.,** ornamental cabbage, ornamental kale, pansies, viola, boxwood etc.

**Plant garlic.** Plant point up 2 to 3 inches deep while the ground is still workable, typically through mid- November.

**Plant 6-8 weeks before hard frost.** Fall is a great time to plant and transplant. Fall planting is all about establishing good roots and not foliage. If you still have plants in their nursery containers it is best to plant them in the ground before winter. This will allow them to establish roots. Don't forget to water newly planted items until ground freezes. If you can't plant them in the ground, then at least make sure the nursery containers are insulated. Add mulch or move them so they stay protected.

Stake newly planted trees until their root systems become established.

Some species of rhododendrons, hydrangeas, boxwood, and butterfly bush can be prone to winter damage. They will respond better if they are planted in the spring. Avoid planting zone border plants in the fall, wait until spring so their roots have a better chance to establish. Depending on where you live within Thurston County you are either in zone 8a or 8b according to the USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map. Or zone 4 or 5 according to the Sunset Western Garden Collection. Zone border plants are plants that do well in a zone higher or lower than your planting zone. You can go lower than the zone you are in but should not go higher. Planting zone border plants will require more attention and could have varying outcomes from success to death.

### **Cleaning & Organizing**

**Clean up vegetable beds.** Compost disease-free plant material. Add mulch, cardboard or plant a cover crop to help keep weeds from establishing in your planting beds. Cleaning up spent plant material from beds helps prevent disease from establishing in the beds. If you are growing cool season crops you can push bed clean up to later in the season.

#### **Clean up select perennials from beds.**

Some species of perennials are an ideal home for overwintering insects. Leave the plant intact and layer leaves or other mulches around the base of the

plant while leaving the collar exposed. This will provide good habitat for birds and insects throughout the winter. While this is true for most perennials there are a few exceptions where it is best to cut them back i.e., hostas, peonies, daylilies, astilbes, and tall ornamental grasses. These species can be messy, harbor pests and disease if not cut back for the winter. Powdery mildew prone plants like bee balm, phlox, peonies should also be cut back. Semi-herbaceous perennials, such as Shasta daisies and rudbeckias should be cut back 2-3 inches above the base of the plant.

Remove old fruiting canes from raspberries and blackberries.

**Containers.** Clean and sanitize any unused containers. Use a strong stream of water to dislodge any soil and debris. You can use a cleaning solution of 1-part bleach to 10 parts water to sanitize your containers. Let dry before storing empty pots in a place protected from the weather.

**Tools.** Clean, sharpen, and oil tools after fall clean-up tasks. Make note of any tools that need replacing and watch for end of season sales.

**Stock up on seed starting supplies.** Fall is a great time to check clearance sales for gardening supplies including seed starting supplies. Buying in the off season increases your chance for getting what you need.

**Clean your bird feeders, houses, and baths.**

**Winterize your irrigation systems and fountains.** Drain lines and fountains. Clean and store pumps in a protected space. Place burlap sacks at the bottom of fountain bowls to soak up rainwater. If freezing temperatures occur, then the burlap will freeze instead of your fountain bowl.

**Winterize your lawn furniture and bring in garden art and fragile pots.**

**Manage hazardous trees.** WSU Master Gardeners always recommend that you use a certified arborist when work is needed on your home landscape. To find a local certified arborist visit: [www.pnwisa.org](http://www.pnwisa.org) or [www.treesaregood.org](http://www.treesaregood.org)

## Sources & Resources

<https://extension.wsu.edu/thurston/>

WSU Master Gardener and Master Recycler Composter Programs of Thurston County website. This site has various local resources related to gardening, composting, and recycling.

<http://hortsense.cahnrs.wsu.edu/Home/HortsenseHome.aspx>

WSU Hortsense website is intended to provide gardeners with information on how to manage plant problems and weeds using integrated pest management or IPM practices. This information is local, unbiased, and proven to work in Washington.

Download information publications from the WSU publications website,

<http://gardening.wsu.edu/home/>

Select from the category titles on the left side of the screen or use your mouse to scroll over the photo to select a title.

EM057E *Home Vegetable Gardening*

EB2036 *Small Trees for the Home Landscape*

EB0482 *Home Lawns*

FS123E *Organic Soil Amendments in Yards and Gardens*

PNW 400 *Training & Pruning Your Home Orchard*

FS111E *Cover Crops for Home Gardeners West of the Cascades*

FS047E *Planting Trees and Shrubs in the Landscape*

<http://www.greatplantpicks.org/>

This is an excellent website for lists of plants that are proven to grow well in this area.

<http://www.arborday.org/>

Website of the National Arbor Day Foundation.

This is a program that is dedicated to trees and lots of great information about how to select a tree for your home.

<http://www.treesaregood.org/>

Website of the International Society of Arboriculture with information regarding tree benefits and care. This site also lists certified arborists in our area.

If you have a gardening, composting, or recycling question please email the WSU Thurston County Extension Master Gardener and Master Recycler Composter Question/Answer Clinic at [master@co.thurston.wa.us](mailto:master@co.thurston.wa.us)

Extension programs and policies are consistent with federal and state laws and regulations on nondiscrimination policies. Evidence of noncompliance may be reported to your local Extension office. Reasonable accommodations will be made for persons with disabilities and special needs who contact Cori Carlton, Program Manager at [cori.carlton@co.thurston.wa.us](mailto:cori.carlton@co.thurston.wa.us) or 360-867-2162 at least two weeks prior to the event.

Info sheet compiled by Cori Carlton

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## Fall Clean-Up Bingo

Divided plants or made note of what needs dividing next spring.	Fertilized or aerated your lawn.	Cleaned and sharpened garden tools.	Saved seeds- TIP- Put a desiccant packet near seed packets to keep from molding.	Cut backed your strawberries
Sketched or noted your vegetable bed layouts from this year.	Applied mulch, compost or planted a cover crop in your vegetable beds.	Raked and removed leaves under rose bushes.	Drained gas from machines/tools that won't be used over the winter.	Cleaned and sanitized containers.  Bonus- with what solution.
Planted garlic.	Started a new compost pile or applied compost from a finished compost pile.	<b>FREE</b>	Planted spring bulbs or dug up tender blubs.	Remove or squish into the ground and cover any unharvested fruits.
Raked leaves.  Bonus: Did you use them in another way in the garden.	Removed diseased plants from yard.  Bonus: Did you compost them?		Pulled weeds.	Put away garden art or decorative pots.
Cleared leaves and debris from downspouts and gutters.	Watch for and discard slug eggs.	Harvested castings from your worm bin.	Removed fruiting canes off raspberries and blackberries.	Applied or stock-piled manures.