

# Fall Cleanup in the Garden

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November 6, 2015



## Preparing your garden for next spring

It's time to enjoy our beautiful, sunny fall days while you prepare your garden to survive the winter. One of the very best things about fall cleanup is that you'll be rewarded with a healthy garden in the spring. So grab a jacket, step outside, take a deep breath of that fall fresh air, and get moving!

Here's how to get started.

Rake your flower beds to prevent over-wintering diseases on fallen leaves if left on the ground, winter and early spring rains will cause the spores from infected leaves to 'bounce' right back up on the plants and the disease will spread. Also, debris left in beds gives winter protection to pests. A final raking can make a real difference in your garden's health.

Leaves not showing disease are great mulch for a compost pile since they decompose quickly when they are shredded. If you don't have a shredder, just run over them with the lawn mower. Tip: When using a lawn mower, spread them out in a very large circle and mow them blowing towards the center.

Pull up any annuals you don't want to self-seed. Many annuals can come back even more prolifically. Now is the time to over-seed your lawn, however.

After your trees have dropped their leaves, prune to shape them, and remove crossing branches and dead wood.

Clean up your tools and reorganize your storage areas keeping in mind what items you will need first in the spring.

Winterize faucets and store hoses.

Make notes of what worked in your garden and what you want to change next year. Carry a piece of paper and pencil in your pocket while you're doing fall clean-up so you can make quick notes.

If you have taken in plants for over-wintering inside, be sure to spray them with insecticidal soap and isolate them for about 10 days to keep whiteflies and other outside pests from infesting your other houseplants. Don't forget to spray the underside of the leaves.



A flower and vegetable garden in need of cleaning up after a summer's harvest. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Any tree or shrub you want to move in the spring can be prepared now. This procedure is very simple and will make the moving job much easier and more successful in the spring. Using a shovel, cut a ring around the plant just as if you were preparing to move it. New feeder roots will form inside the cut line. Next spring, move your shovel out about 1 inch from your fall cut line and your plant should lift out easily with the new feeder roots intact.

To make sure your pots do not carry diseases into next spring, wash them out with a scrub brush dipped in a solution of bleach and water. The solution is 1 part bleach to 10 parts water. Tip: When stacking pots, put newspaper between the pots to make them easier to separate.

The time to divide perennials is when they are dormant. Dividing is a great way to get lots more plants for your garden or to share with friends. It is also good for the plants because growth and performance decrease when plants are crowded. Move and divide perennials that have overgrown their space, gotten too large, have dead centers, or are now located in the wrong sun location due to shading from maturing plants or trees. Transplants have a much better chance of survival in cool temperatures because the loss of moisture is greatly reduced.

Centers die out on many plants such as Siberian iris (*Iris sibirica*) and division will rejuvenate them. To divide them, select vigorous shoots from the outer plant of the clump. Discard the center. Divide the plant into several sections of three to five shoots each. Make large divisions, because

small divisions will not bloom much the first year after planting. Before replanting, add compost or other organic material to the soil. At this time of year, finely chopped leaves makes a good organic amendment to the soil.



Cleanup up your garden by thinning and separating plantings that have become too bunched together. Pruning and thin back bushes that are overgrown. Cleanup cuttings and rake the ground for a nice clean look, ready for the next spring. *Photos by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Fall is considered by many gardeners to be the best time to plant trees, shrubs and many perennials. The main reason plants get off to a good start when planted in fall is that the growth of new roots is most rapid during fall. Because your plants are not expending energy putting on top growth, they can devote their energy to developing roots. But, keep in mind that fall plantings installed later than the end of October are more likely to suffer winter damage.

Basically, the sooner you plant in the fall, the more success you will have because when the ground temperature falls below 40 degrees, root growth stops. If plants can have 4 weeks of root growing time before that 40 degree soil temperature is reached, hardy trees, shrubs and perennials should have a good root system established. If you are planting marginally hardy plants, you will need to plant them even earlier.

Got questions? Call your Skagit County Master Gardeners at (360) 428-4270, Extension 227.

### **Resources:**

- "Sustainable Gardening." *The Oregon-Washington Master Gardener Handbook*. EM8742. October 1999. p. 451.
- *How to Be a Gardener*. Alan Titchmarsh. Copyright 2003.
- "Cleaning & Disinfecting Plant Containers." Horticulture Home Pest News. Iowa State University Extension & Outreach. <http://www.ipm.iastate.edu/ipm/hortnews/1994/3-16-1994/clean.html>