

Fall Garden Chores

Since our summer was so late in starting, it hardly seems fair to be thinking of putting the garden to bed before tasting that first tomato. With a little luck a warm September will ripen our warm season veggies. However, a little preparation during the early fall days can give you a head start for next spring.

September

Since the soil is still warm, plant your winter cover crops; sow salad greens for winter enjoyment and add some compost to your beds. The warmer soil allows soil bacteria to mineralize the compost nutrients to make them available to winter vegetables. September sown greens may require a cloche - tunnel or covering - as the weather worsens in order insure a steady winter harvest. Carrots, arugula, mustard greens, snow peas, fava beans, beets and spinach can be sown to overwinter. Also hardy annuals can be your friend going into the dismal season - alyssum, johnny jump ups , bachelor buttons, forget me nots. Beware, gone to seed, these annuals may be your worst nightmare; so proceed with discretion.

Look at what worked this season. You can recognize nutrient deficiencies by careful observation . Pale yellow leaves and leaf veins, as well as early drop of older leaves can mark nitrogen deficiency. Purple leaves and stems , pale new leaves, poor fruiting and flowering can indicate low phosphorus. Cold wet conditions in spring inhibit the absorption of phosphorus, but should be alleviated as the garden dries out. Low potassium is marked by scorched leaf margins, mottled yellowing of older leaves, and poor disease resistance. A calcium deficiency will cause flower buds to be poorly formed or drop off. Blossom-end rot on tomatoes and peppers signals calcium deficiency – a most common problem here in the northwest. A soil test may confirm your suspicions and you can begin to address these deficiencies.

Seed or sod new lawns now to give them time to establish before the rains begin. Stop feeding existing lawns in September.

October

While the weather is still nice, set up your season extenders. Cloches, (clear structures that protects plants from frost), or tunnels will help prolong your harvest. Find out how to build a simple cloche out of material you may already have on hand. Cloches can keep the rain off of your tomatoes and protect your tender greens from rotting when the rains do begin. Due to our heavy cloud cover and diffuse light during the winter, cloches work better than cold frames because they let in more light. Vent your cloches to provide good air circulation. Open the ends on days above 40 degrees. Cover crops can still be sown on bare soil. Sowing a legume crop (peas, vetches, clovers, beans) can help add nitrogen to the soil when they are turned under in the spring. Other crops such as mustard can help release the calcium, sulphur and potassium held in the soil so that these nutrients are available for your plants. Mustard's broad leaf habit covers the soil quickly and helps smother overwintering weeds.

Now is the time to plant garlic and onions and other fragrant alliums. Don't forget to get your spring blooming bulbs in now, too. You may want to stop deadheading your perennials. Letting them go to seed will signal the plant to go dormant for its winter sleep. Seed heads also provide winter interest and forage for the birds.

Keep after weeds so they don't set seeds and overwinter. Be on the look out for slug eggs which are the size of bbs and attack them with your favorite method of slug control.

November

Corral your fallen leaves and use them for mulch. In the spring, rake them off and add them to your compost for leaf mold. Leaf mold is one of the best sources of organic nutrition because it concentrates calcium, magnesium and trace minerals needed for seedlings. The best mineral content can be found in oak, beech, maple, ash and alder. Beware of using leaves of the walnut family and horse chestnuts, as they contain chemicals in their leaves that can prevent germination and inhibit growth.

Before applying winter mulch, clean up and remove dead or diseased leaves so that disease problems are not perpetuated over the winter.

As the temperature warrants, snug up containers in protected spots and make sure that frost tender plants are safely inside or in a heated greenhouse.

Dig and lift tender tubers such as dahlias, begonias, cannas about 2 weeks after a killing frost or no later than November 15. If you leave them in the ground, cut the stalks below the ground and cover with mulch. Excellent drainage is required or else your tubers will rot.

Late fall and winter is a great time to add new shrubs and trees to your landscape, as long as the ground is not frozen and the soil remains workable. Your new shrubs and trees will concentrate their energy on establishing a good root structure during their dormancy. If you have fruit trees, apply dormant sprays as warranted.

See that all plants staying outdoors for the winter are deeply watered. The more hydrated the plants are, the better they're equipped for cold weather survival.

December

Except for the frenzy of the holidays, December can be pretty dismal. Now is a good time to be ruthless with any sign of serious disease. If you haven't already disposed of the summer growing fruits and vegetables – tomatoes, peppers, cukes, squash, bush bean – do so now because they may harbor a host of funguses, if left to overwinter.

Clean, sharpen and oil your tools so they will be ready for next spring.

Decorate your empty pots with evergreens and string lights on your bare trellises. Stay warm and curl up with a good seed catalog!

Refer to the following archived articles for more specific information on roses, container plants, and winter veggies.

[Preparing Roses for Winter](#)

[Mulching Tender Plants](#)

[Dormant Care of Fruit Trees](#)

[Fall the Perfect Time to Plant](#)

[Winter Care for Containers](#)

References

Seattle Tilth. *The Maritime Northwest Garden Guide*. Seattle, WA: Seattle Tilth Association, 2009.