

Fall Garden Chores

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Autumn is the best time to prepare for next year's garden. Some well spent time in your garden this fall can save you time come spring. Balancing garden activities is best for the soils, the plants, and you. Following this simple list of fall garden chores will allow you to stop and smell the daffodils next spring.

Let's start with the soil. If it has been a while since you have completed a soil test, take one this fall. Gardeners can test soil to determine the garden's nitrogen, phosphorous, calcium, magnesium, and pH levels. If you have never tested for micronutrients and heavy metals before, test them this fall. Always test for heavy metals before gardening in a new site. Follow the directions for taking a soil test by using a clean bucket and garden trowel, taking 10 random cores in one garden soil type, and mixing them together well before filling the bag. Add needed amendments, liming or sulfur materials, rock powders and composts, based on soil test recommendations. Fall is a great time to manage soil nutrients as amendments, such as limestone and sulfur, since they need about 6 months to react and organic matter needs similar time to decay. By adding these materials this fall, the nutrients will be available for your plants come spring.

Additions of organic materials this fall can help build good soil tilth. Many soils were damaged this year because of gardening activities during this very wet summer. Wet clayey soils are especially susceptible to compaction. Tilling in organic materials, leaves, garden residues, and old mulches can help break up compaction, and rebuild topsoil crumb structure.

Your 2009 disease management starts this fall! Many disease-causing plant pathogens can over-winter on dead vegetative tissue. You have two choices. You can rake up and remove every speck of plant tissue from your gardens and orchards to your compost pile, including dead blighted tomato or potato leaves, mildewed squash plants, scabby apple tree leaves, and all other plant tissue that was hammered by 2 months of wet weather. Or, you can till dead materials into your garden soil. Tilling and making garden beds in fall allows you to focus on planting in spring. Remember to always remove any virus infected plant materials and bury them away from the garden and compost areas.

Bare, freshly tilled autumn soil should be protected from the winter elements and erosion by dead or living mulches. My favorite two choices are straw mulch and

cover crops. Straw mulch is more expensive than mulch hay, but is less work because it should have little weed seed in it. Straw protects soil over winter and can be pushed aside in the spring to allow soil to warm. It can then be reused for weed control after plants are growing. Cover crops that do not survive winter provide dead mulch on the soil surface, which can be planted through in spring.

Autumn is a wonderful time to do a final weeding. Many annual weeds make a last effort to go to seed in the fall and this one small act will save you countless hours next year. Unless your compost system is set-up to deal with weed-seeds, put them elsewhere. Weeds that haven't gone to seed can be used to make compost for use in fall 2009.

Fall is the best time to revisit your compost system that make have lacked attention over the busy summer. Use corn stalks and other brushy material as a base to help allow for good air flow into the pile. You'll then want to layer your pile with a diversity of organic materials to create pore space. Grass clippings can be added if they do not have a lot of weed seed but remember that clippings can form dense mats that impede oxygen diffusion if they are not layered properly with other materials. Manure can stimulate the compost process, but they can also contain some weed seeds. U-shaped piles work best as they shed water.

In order to plant garlic and multiplier (also called potato) onions this fall, review your garden rotation plans for next year. Spend some time mapping out how your garden will be rotated. Remember to rotate out of families or crops with similar pests and diseases. So, for example, don't follow tomatoes with potatoes. Consider weed pressure and plant crops with more closed canopies where these pressures are greatest. If you have grown a legume that will provide some nitrogen, follow it with a crop that has greater nitrogen needs. Your thoughtful consideration will help you make the most of your rotation.

Completing your autumn chores will give you a great start to next spring's gardening season improving your success and giving you time to stop and enjoy your flowers.

