

Preparing Gardens for Late Fall and Winter

By Earl Hockin, Master Gardener

Winter does not mean no vegetable gardening to enjoy and benefit from. Hardy vegetables will tolerate hard frosts at least as low as 25F. Kale, collards, and parsnips are examples of vegetables that actually become sweeter in fall and winter after being exposed to frost. Broccoli and varieties of spinach are very cold hardy and will survive down to 15F without protection. If colder, they and others such as cabbage, Swiss chard and kohlrabi will likely survive if protected with row cover. Root crops such as carrots, parsnips, beets, and turnips can remain in the garden especially if covered by a mulch such as straw, grass clippings, or leaves.

If you are not maintaining your vegetable beds or growing garlic, then you want to protect them from cool season weeds. Do not leave the ground bare. The best option is to sow seeds for a cover crop as soon as you harvest the summer vegetables. As mentioned in last week's article, cover crops reduce the risk of weeds and add organic matter and nutrients to the soil.

If you are going to grow garlic, consider doing a soil test. Besides getting a soil test done by University of Tennessee you can buy soil tests at local nurseries. Garlic prefers a neutral pH, 6.5 to 7. If necessary, raise the pH by adding dolomitic limestone or wood ashes (sparingly). To lower pH, fertilize with ammonium sulfate. Make sure the soil is loose as garlic does not grow well in densely compacted soil.

Another important activity is caring for your gardening tools. Drain the gas from gas powered lawn mowers etc. Clean all your tools with a metal brush and a bit of isopropyl alcohol, then coat the metal parts with a light oil or lubricant like WD-40. One reason for cleaning your tools is that they can harbor disease organisms. Sharpen metal tools with a file or power grinder. Apply linseed oil to the wooden handles to preserve them. Store your tools indoors over winter.

Once we have had a few killing frosts, which won't be until November, cleanup by pulling out summer annuals and summer veggies. If any of the plants such as tomatoes show signs of disease, do not put them in your compost as many bacteria and viruses will survive and can affect plants grown in the composted material.

Fall is the time for planting many ornamental bulbs such as Asiatic lilies, iris, gladiola, daffodils, crocus, etc. Many trees and shrubs benefit from being planted in the fall. They can begin their root development over winter to better support their growth in the spring.

Don't give away your leaves to the city. Keep them and use as mulch over strawberries and root vegetables. Instead of raking them up you might consider mowing over them to chop them up. Leave them lying to be used as a natural mulch as exists in nature. The leaves will decompose enriching the soil. Additionally, the layer of leaves will support several overwintering organisms. If you don't want to leave them in place, you can use them to enrich your compost or simply create a leaf-based compost. To do so, pile up the leaves, enclose the pile with something like chicken wire, and over the next 8 to 12 months the pile will decompose. You can use this compost to enrich the soil in vegetable beds, containers, or floral beds.

Leave perennials such as Echinacea (cone flower), black eyed Susans, Rudbeckia and Helianthus which have dried seed heads that are a food source for seed-eating birds such as native sparrow and goldfinches. Plants with hollow stems such as Hosta, Joe-Pye weed, Baptisia and milkweed can serve

as spots for hibernating insects many of which are native pollinators. Don't cut them down. If you do want to cut them, leave about 12-18" above ground for stem nesting bees.

Prepare Your Vegetable Garden for Winter

<https://extension.umn.edu/yard-and-garden-news/prepare-your-vegetable-garden-winter>

Preparing Your Vegetable Garden for Fall

<https://extension.umn.edu/yard-and-garden-news/preparing-your-vegetable-garden-fall>

Protecting Gardens and Pollinators During Winter

<https://mastergardener.extension.wisc.edu/articles/protecting-gardens-winter/>

Lawn and Garden Soil Samples

<https://soillab.tennessee.edu/soil-analysis-2/lawn-and-garden-soil-samples/>

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, "ASK A MASTER GARDENER" to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.