Putting the garden to bed each fall is important for a number of reasons. Many pests and diseases will persist in the soil and plant debris over winter, if they're given the opportunity.

Don't think of fall as just the end of the current growing season; it is the start of next year's garden as well. Along with the pleasure of enjoying the garden in the cooler fall temperatures there are important duties that should be addressed as we clean up and clear out. It is also the best time of year to get our gardens in shape for next spring and the growing season beyond. In fact, I look at this time of year as the *start* of my next year's gardening season.

Putting the garden to bed each fall is important for a number of reasons. Besides the obvious of cleaning and tidying up for aesthetic appeal, it's important for reasons that are not so obvious as well. A great spring garden next season begins with steps you should take now.

**Cutting back and cleaning up**

Many pests and diseases will persist in the soil and plant debris over winter, if they're given the opportunity. Removing spent annuals and vegetable plants from the garden, improves our chance of eliminating numerous future pest and diseases that would otherwise survive on that dead plant material. As you clean up your fall garden, include the following in your garden to-do list:

- **Cut back perennials.** These plants will come back next year because the roots survive, even though the growth above ground dies. Cutting off the dead and spent foliage a few inches above the ground in the fall will not harm the plant.
- **Remove spent annuals and seasonal vegetables.** Unlike perennials, annuals do not come back from season to season so there is no reason to leave these in the ground. Pull them up, roots and all, and add them to your compost pile.

- **Remove weeds and leaf debris.** These are common places for diseases and pests over winter. The less hospitable you can make the garden for winter hardy pests, the fewer problems you'll have come spring.
- **Compost only the healthy material.** As you remove debris from you fall cleanup projects, be sure to add only the pest-free and non-diseased plants to your compost. Destroy any diseased plant material or remove it from you garden. Pathogens and insect pests can winter-over and return next year in a compost pile that doesn't get hot enough.

**Protect and prepare**

- **Take pictures and make notes.** As the garden winds down for the season, there is still time to document what was growing there. This is especially helpful for perennials you will be cutting back for the season. As you add more plants, having a record of what was planted will allow you to avoid injuring dormant perennials. Notes are also a great way to document what worked and what didn't. While it is fresh in your mind this is a great time to gather you thoughts.

- **Winterize containers.** Not all plants or containers are able to withstand the winter outdoors. Containers can freeze and crack and non-hardy plants quickly die when roots are not underground. Either bring them indoors or at least to an area protected from winds and extreme temperatures. A garage or basement works well in many cases. For added protection, you might want to wrap the container in blankets or plastic wrap, several layers thick. You don't want to encourage new growth during this time, so don't add fertilizer and keep water to a minimum.

- **Get a soil test.** Fall is a great time to find out important information about your soil. Most reports include details such as pH level and nutrient analysis. Knowing this information in the fall is the perfect time to act on any deficiencies or amendments that may be necessary.

- **Amend the soil with natural organic materials** (homemade compost, manure, blood meal, bone meal, cottonseed meal, greensand, etc). Organic amendments are a great way to improve the long term health of your soil. By adding them in the fall, they have time to break down into a form that plants can use, just in time for spring. Organic material is not only optimal for adding nutrients in a safe way, it also improves the overall quality of soil as well. Structure, texture and tilth are all terms used to describe soil quality. Organic material is an easy way to achieve all the desirable qualities of healthy, productive soil.

- **Add mulch.** A fall layer of mulch provides a protective layer over plant's roots and protects evergreen foliage from soil borne diseases splashing back to the plant. In colder climates, mulch should be added after the ground freezes. This will help prevent frost heave and keep soil temperatures more even, while protecting roots.
- **Protect trees and shrubs from pests.** Fall is an excellent time to protect your trees and shrubs from certain potential pests next spring. Many damaging insects become active again in early spring, often times before we've had a chance to take action. Systemic insecticides applied to the soil as a drench are taken up by the roots and can be effective for many months. By applying a systemic agent in the fall, the active ingredient will be present in the plant or tree in spring when pest begin to feed again. It's an easy and more environmentally friendly way to control certain pests all year, but especially in early spring.

**Plant for next season**

Fall is also the very best time to plant trees, shrubs, perennials, winter annuals, bulbs and cool season vegetables. The soil is warm and the air is cool, so less energy is required of the plant overall. Some annuals such as pansies and snapdragons are ideal for fall planting. Color in the colder months is still possible with the right selections. However, making sure you add them to your garden before the soil gets too cold is important. The warmer soil will allow roots to become established and give the plants a better chance of looking their best.

Shrubs can also add color and structure to your garden in fall, just when much of the garden is going dormant. Shrubs with late season flowers such as Blue Mist Shrub (*Caryopteris*), Scotch Heather (
*Calluna vulgaris*
) and shrubs with colorful fruit like Nandina, Pyracantha and American Cranberry (
*Viburnum trilobum*
) extend interest throughout the season.

Evergreen azaleas are also a popular choice, especially the new repeat blooming varieties of Encore azaleas. They bloom in *both* spring and fall, and by planting now, next fall's display is even better as the plants have more time to become established in the ground. Although not winter hardy in all parts of the country, some gardeners treat them as annuals or over winter them indoors in zones 5 and above.

Ornamental grasses and perennials such as Chrysanthemum, Joe Pye Weed, Sedum, and Asters extend the colorful display. By planting them in the fall they have the best chance to grow

bigger and better every year. So, while you are putting your garden to bed for the winter, envision the pleasure next spring will bring.

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