

Autumn Home & Garden



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What To Do To Prepare Your Garden For Winter

A gardener's work is never truly done, and the work to make gardens stun in the spring actually begins during the preceding fall.

Gardens provide an idyllic escape from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. In fact, many gardening enthusiasts typically cannot wait for the spring thaw so they can spend the next several months tending to their plants under the warm sun. But a gardener's work is never truly done, and the work to make gardens stun in the spring actually begins during the preceding fall.

Preparing gardens for winter is an important step that can help homeowners ensure their gardens return to full strength in the spring. The tasks necessary to prepare gardens for winter may depend on what homeowners are planting, but the following are some general maintenance suggestions that can keep gardens safe this winter.

- **Remove weeds and debris.** Weeds and debris are unsightly and detrimental to plant life in spring, but they also can be harmful in the winter. Weeds and debris left to linger in



gardens through the winter provide overwintering spots for insects and can contribute to disease. So it's imperative that weeds and debris are removed before the ground hardens in winter. Don't wait until the ground hardens, as that can make it hard to remove the roots of weeds, adversely affecting the garden as a result.

- **Prepare the soil.** The Farmer's Almanac advises homeowners to gently till the soil in their gardens so they can expose any insects before they settle in for the winter. Once garden soil is exposed, add a layer of

compost, leaves, aged manure, and, if necessary, lime, gently tilling it into the soil. According to the North Carolina Cooperative Extension, the only accurate way to determine if lawn or garden soil needs lime is to test it. Lime makes soil less acidic and reduces soil pH. Low soil pH makes it hard for certain plants to grow, but acidic soil is ideal when growing blueberries. Test the soil for lime and amend it depending on what you hope to grow in the spring so it's ready to thrive when winter ends.

- **Remove dead or diseased plants.** Dead or diseased plants should not be left in the garden through the winter. These plants can attract insects and are vulnerable to disease, which can make it hard for the garden to thrive in the spring.

- **Protect fruit trees.** If you have fruit trees, install mouse guards around the base to prevent mice and voles from killing the trees over the winter. If left to their own devices over the winter, mice and voles may eat the bark of fruit trees, killing the trees as a result. The Farmer's Almanac notes that mouse guards made of fine mesh hardware cloth can effectively protect fruit trees from hungry mice and voles over the winter.

A gardener's work is never done, and the work to create beautiful spring gardens begins in the fall.



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How to care for perennials

Certain care is needed to help perennials thrive, and that starts with the soil.

Perennials can add color and vibrancy to any garden. One of the more desirable components of perennials is that they come back year after year, meaning homeowners do not have to invest in a gardenful of new flowers every year. That can add up to considerable savings. Perennials often form the foundation of beautiful gardens.

Annuals only grow for one season, produce seeds and then die. However, perennials die back to the ground every autumn and their roots survive the winter. So the plants reemerge in the spring, according to The Farmer's Almanac. Some perennials are short-lived, meaning they will come back a few consecutive years; others will last for decades.

Though planted perennials require less maintenance than annuals, they are not completely maintenance-free. Certain care is needed to help perennials thrive, and that starts with the soil. In fact, soil is the single most important factor for growing healthy plants. Penn State Extension

says most perennials grow ideally in well drained, fertile soil with a pH of 6.0 to 7.0. In addition, organic matter can improve soil texture and water-holding ability.

When including perennials in the garden, make sure you wait for the right time to plant them. The ideal time is during the spring or fall. Perennials come as container-grown perennials, which already have been established in the soil. Bare-root perennials are just roots that are often packed in peat moss. In order to plant bare-root perennials, soak the roots in water for several minutes before gently planting in the ground, indicates the how-to resource Tip Bulletin.

Perennials should be watered deeply, especially during the first growing season. However, the soil should never be overly dry or wet. Most perennials do not need to be fertilized heavily. A single application in the spring typically is all that's needed.

Care along the way can include deadheading spent flowers so that plants can use their energy on seed production and reblooming. Perennials should be divided when



they grow large, every three to four years when the plants are not in bloom. Perennials produce fewer flowers or may look sickly when the time has passed to divide them. Early spring often is a good time to divide perennials, advises The Farmer's Almanac.

A thick layer of mulch can help perennials to overwinter successfully. Perennials planted

in containers will need to be transplanted into the garden before it gets cold because most containers cannot thoroughly insulate perennial roots.

Apart from these strategies, perennials pretty much take care of themselves. As long as sunlight requirements match plant needs, the perennials should thrive.



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Establish winter habitats for backyard animals

These tips can help local wildlife when the temperatures dip.

Preparing a property for winter involves putting away lawn furniture, raking leaves and removing any annual plants that have shriveled up and spent the last of their energy. It can be tempting to want to clean up completely and leave a blank slate in the yard. But by doing so, you may be robbing wildlife of the resources they need to overwinter.

The nature and conservation resource In Habitat says plants and animals depend on one another to survive. During the winter, animals may struggle to find adequate shelter and food, especially when there is a lack of sufficient plant matter available. In turn, these animals may actually take up home in people's residences, turning into pests in the process. Bats, field mice and even opossums and raccoons may move indoors into attics or basements, leaving behind waste and damage if they can't find adequate shelter outdoors.

Homeowners concerned about potential pest infestations can take



steps to ensure animals have places to bed down and escape the cold in their yards this winter. These tips can help local wildlife when the temperatures dip.

- **Leave parts of the yard wild.** Animals can make a nest in leaves or piles of brushwood. Just make sure piles left out are away from the home so curious critters don't try to get inside. Leave the task of tidying up shrubs and garden borders until spring, as shrubs can be dense areas to hide for both insects and animals.

- **Consider planting animal food sources prior to winter.** Plants like elderberry, holly, mulberry, sumac, and crabapple will grow in colder months and animals can enjoy them as a vital food staple.

- **Don't forget water sources.** Provide access to fresh water and replace as needed if the water freezes. For homeowners with fish ponds in their backyards, use a hot pot to melt a hole in the top of the pond. This will allow gases that have accumulated underneath to escape. This allows oxygen to reach fish, frogs and other

aquatic wildlife that live in the pond.

- **Leave bird, squirrel or bat houses in the yard.** This is a fun and crafty project that can ward off winter boredom while also providing a safe place for local wildlife to shelter in winter.

Animals and insects need some extra help staying comfortable when cool temperatures arrive. Leaving some clean-up tasks for the spring ensures that there are plenty of backyard habitats available to local wildlife.



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Plants to be weary of even in the Fall.

When cleaning up foliage, it's wise for homeowners to familiarize themselves with certain plants that may not be very welcome in their entertaining areas – particularly those that are dangerous. Poison ivy, oak and sumac may be some of the better-known poisonous plants, but there are others that can prove problematic as well.

- **Hogweed:** This is an invasive plant that grows throughout North America but is particularly well-known along the Atlantic coast. The sap in the leaves can cause phytophotodermatitis, which is a chemical reaction after exposure to sunlight. Painful, severe blisters can form on the skin wherever it touches, and hogweed sap may cause blindness if it gets into the eyes.
- **Lily of the Valley:** This plant is known for delicate, bell-shaped flowers and a sweet scent. While Lily of the Valley is not poisonous to touch, if ingested, toxic glycosides in the flowers, berries, leaves, and stems may cause a host of problems, including disorientation, vomiting, blurry vision, and rashes.
- **Bleeding Heart:** Native to woodlands, this perennial loves the shade. It produces unique flowers that resemble tiny pink or white hearts with drops of blood at the bottom. Roots and foliage of Bleeding Heart contain alkaloids that are toxic to animals if ingested in high quantities.
- **Nerium Oleander:** All parts of this beautiful shrub are extremely poisonous. It should definitely be kept away from pets and treated with caution or avoided altogether.
- **Foxgloves:** Adored among pollinators, Foxgloves produce towering pink and white trumpet blooms in early summer. The whole plant is toxic if eaten, however. People who eat any part or attempt to make tea may find their heart rate slowing down or becoming irregular.
- **Stinging Nettle:** Brushing up against Stinging Nettle can be a painful experience. The plant has tiny stinging hairs on its leaves and stems.
- **Wild Hemlock:** This is a very poisonous member of the carrot family. If consumed, Wild Hemlock, which looks like parsley, can cause health problems. Toxins also can be absorbed through the skin.
- **Deadly Nightshade (Belladonna):** A beautiful plant that produces shiny, black cherry-like berries, this contains a poison that can paralyze the gastrointestinal muscles and eventually the heart. The Royal Horticultural Society says that even rubbing up against it can irritate the skin.



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**WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME
YOUR SEPTIC TANK WAS CLEANED?**

How to effectively freeze your garden's vegetables

Fresh vegetables only last so long, so people need to learn how to safely freeze fresh vegetables to avoid throwing them out.

To say that COVID-19 transformed daily life would be an understatement. Few, if any, aspects of life were untouched once the virus hit.

One aspect of daily life that changed considerably is the way people shop for food. As recommendations to remain home and out of crowded places spread, many people felt that shopping in bulk, or at the very least, meal-planning and buying necessities for a few weeks at a time, would reduce the number of trips they needed to make to supermarkets or small food stores. In addition, due to shortages on popular foods, many people have purchased items they did not necessarily need in anticipation that such foods may not be available in the coming weeks or months.

Large packages of meat and poultry can be broken down and frozen easily. But what about the fresh produce that many people rely on for important nutrients? Fresh vegetables only last so long, so people need to learn how to safely freeze fresh vegetables to avoid throwing them out. To freeze vegetables properly so they retain their flavor and texture, it is important to freeze them within a few hours of picking them from a garden or taking them home. Certain vegetables can be frozen in their raw state. The texture might change slightly upon thawing, but they will remain flavorful. Other vegetables may require blanching before freezing. Blanching requires scalding vegetables in boiling water or steam for a brief time. Blanching helps stop the enzymes that cause vegetables to decay, a process that can occur even in frozen storage. Items that do well with blanching include spinach, kale, winter squash, and broccoli, according to HGTV.com.



Another way to freeze produce is to remove the air that can compromise the food. You can do so by filling containers or bags and pushing out the extra air. Vacuum sealers can work to remove the air and help preserve items in the freezer longer; otherwise, use a tray pack method to freeze items. Place chilled and drained blanched vegetables in shallow trays or pans. Freeze them until the vegetables are firm and then quickly fill freezer bags or containers, says the National Center for Home Food Preservation.

Remember to label and date containers so items can be used in the order in which they were packed. Most vegetables maintain high quality for eight to 12 months at 0 F or lower, according to the University of Georgia.

Freezing fresh vegetables is an option when stocking up on essentials. Flavor and texture can be retained and items will not need to be discarded before they can be eaten.

What are the best vegetables to freeze?

According to *The Washington Post* in an article that was published discussing how to freeze vegetables to their best quality, the best vegetables to consider are sweet corn, peas, broccoli, cauliflower, carrots, green beans, squash and winter greens such as spinach, kale, chard and collards. Onions, peppers, celery and various herbs can also be great options for being frozen.



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Signs your gutters are in need of repair

It behooves homeowners to learn the signs that gutters are in need of repair or replacement.

Fall is a great time to tackle projects around the house. The weather each fall allows homeowners to make improvements to their homes' exteriors without worrying about extreme heat or cold, while interior projects like painting are made easier because homeowners can open the windows to allow for proper ventilation.

Fall also marks a great time to prepare for upcoming projects that can make winter work that much easier. For example, fall is a great time to take stock of your gutters so you can address any issues before leaves begin to fall or the first snowstorm touches down. Compromised gutters can contribute to water issues in basements and adversely affect a home's foundation if not addressed immediately, so it behooves homeowners to learn the signs that gutters are in need of repair or replacement.

• Gutters hanging off the home: Gutters were once installed predominantly with spikes. However,

many industry professionals now install gutters with hanger brackets. Why the change? Spikes loosen over time, leading to the gutters hanging off the home. That can contribute to serious issues if left untreated. Gutters hanging off the home need not necessarily be replaced, but rather secured to the home, ideally with hanger brackets instead of spikes. Brackets hook into the front of the gutter and are then screwed into the fascia of a home. A professional who specializes in gutter repair can perform this task relatively quickly, and it's an inexpensive yet highly effective solution.

• Gutter separation: Gutters that are no longer fastened together can leak and contribute to issues that affect the home's foundation, siding and appearance. Clogs and the accumulation of debris can cause gutters to separate because they are not designed to hold too much weight. Replacement of separated gutters may or may not be necessary depending on how big the problem is and the condition of the existing gutters. If replacement is not necessary, separated gutters may be remedied by securing the joints, another relatively simple and inexpensive fix.



• Peeling exterior paint: Paint that appears to be peeling off of your home may indicate that water is seeping over the edge of the gutter closest to your home. When that happens, water is coming down the side of the house, causing the paint to peel. In such instances, replacing the gutters is often necessary.

• Basement flooding: Not all signs of deteriorating gutters are outside a home. Many a homeowner has

been flummoxed by flooding in their basements, and such flooding can be caused by aging, ineffective gutters. That's because deteriorating gutters sometimes allow water to leak near the foundation of a home, contributing to basement flooding.

Fall is an ideal time to inspect gutters and have any issues fixed before leaves begin to fall or harsh winter weather arrives.



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How to recognize when you can stop mowing

Homeowners can keep an eye on these conditions to determine when the time is right to put their mowers away for the winter. These tips can help local wildlife when the temperatures dip.

Each weekend in spring, summer and fall, millions of homeowners fire up their mowers and cut the grass in their yards. A few hours spent mowing the lawn can be a great time to get some sun and some exercise in the great outdoors.

As fall gradually transitions to winter, homeowners may wonder when to stop mowing their lawns. Each lawn is different, and when to stop mowing may depend on a host of factors, including local climate and the type of turf. In addition to climate and turf, homeowners can keep an eye on these conditions to determine when the time is right to put their mowers away for the winter.

- **Frost:** Warm-season grasses typically go dormant after a couple of significant frosts. Homeowners can jot down each frost during fall. Frosts are most noticeable in the



early morning hours, so be sure to check lawn conditions each morning as the weather begins to grow cold. Frost may be noticeable without even going outside, but homeowners may need to go outside to check on chilly mornings or on days when the previous night was especially cold. If you must go outside, stay off the grass to protect it. Two or three frosts might be enough to make warm-season grasses go dormant for the winter. Cool-season grasses may keep growing and require mowing even after a few frosts, so it's imperative that homeowners

determine which type of grass is in their yards.

- **Soil temperature:** If it's hard to determine if frosts have occurred, homeowners can try checking the temperature of their soil to decide if they need to keep mowing. The lawn care experts at Pennington recommend homeowners continue mowing warm-season grasses so long as they keep growing. Lawns may not grow as quickly in fall as they do in spring or summer, and growth may not be as visible to the naked eye during this time of year

as it is in other times. Homeowners can routinely check soil temperature to determine if their grasses have stopped growing. Warm-season grasses tend to stop growing once the soil temperature is consistently

at 55 F or below, while cool-season grasses tend to stop when temperatures are 45 F or lower.

Falling leaves have long been a barometer used by homeowners to determine if they need to keep mowing their lawns. That's not necessarily a reliable metric, as grass can still keep growing even if leaves have been falling for weeks. In addition, using a mulching mower when leaves begin falling is a great way to provide the lawn with nutrients it can use throughout the winter. Some trees shed their leaves more quickly than others, but it's a good rule of thumb that lawns will need to keep being mowed if trees are still retaining more than half their leaves.

A host of factors can help homeowners determine when it's safe to put their mowers away for the winter..

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