

Fall Gardening Activities for Spring Success

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If you are reading this in the late summer or fall, hopefully you had a successful year of gardening. If not, there's always another growing season! To set yourself up for success next year, there below are some steps you can take now.

Garden Clean-Up

There is nothing wrong with a messy garden. Leaving plant residue in your garden is a great way to add organic matter and protect the soil. You may also choose to remove the plant residue and add it to your compost pile. Whether you're leaving the residue for the winter or putting the plant material in a compost pile, make sure you **REMOVE** any plants that experienced disease.



You should not compost diseased plant material unless you are an experienced composter and are confident your compost pile will exceed temperatures of 140° F, this will ensure the disease organisms are killed. Many diseases are able to over winter in dead plant material.

This is also a great time to stockpile dropped leaves from deciduous trees. Leaves can be utilized for a number of purposes. Dried leaves are an excellent carbon or brown source for composting, leaves can be used as mulch, and they provide great habitat for overwintering insects.

Get Your Soil Tested

If you haven't tested your soil in the past 3 years or have noticed a drop in productivity, it's a great time to get your soil tested. A soil test from a certified lab is an affordable way to get accurate measurements of macro and micro nutrients required for plant growth. A soil analyses will also come with pH, cation exchange capacity (CEC), and organic matter percentage. Most labs will also include fertilizer and lime recommendations.

To get a soil analysis that accurately represents your garden, soil needs to be collected in a strategic manner. You will take at least 3 soil samples (about 6 inches deep) in different spot of your garden. This is the bare minimum, the larger your garden is, the more samples should be taken, upwards of 10 samples. Those samples should be placed in a bucket, mixed, then a subsample (about a cup) will be put into a plastic or paper bag. If you use a soil probe it will be easier to take more samples but a clean trowel is a good substitute. With the trowel, dig a small hole, then take a slice of soil off the side of the hole. When using a trowel, for the sake of time, take only a few samples.



Plant a Cover Crop

Planting a cover crop provides a permanent soil cover, roots to build soil structure, food for soil microorganisms, and suppress weeds. There are so many cover crop options to choose from. Whatever your garden goals and management capabilities are there is a cover option for you. Below are just a handful of cover crop options and what major benefits they offer. It's popular to combine multiple cover crops for a mix of benefits and to add diversity to the garden.

Winter Cereals—Winter cereals include winter rye, winter wheat, and triticale. The winter cereals are the hardiest of the cover crops and are great because they can be planted late in the season (some times as late as mid-October). These crops establish in late summer, survive the winter, then continue to grow when spring breaks. They have robust root systems, boosting soil health, scavenging nutrients, and providing food to microbes. They are also great at weed spring weed suppression.

Cover crops continued...

Oats—Oats are another type of cereal grain like the winter ones, however, they significant less hardy. Oats need to be planted mid-August to September for substantial growth. An oat cover crop will not survive winter but with enough growth can create a thick green mulch come spring. Winter killed cover crops are easier to manage in the spring. Oats provide the same benefits as the winter cereals but the benefits are reduced in the spring as the crop will not be growing.

Legumes—Are an excellent cover crop because of their ability to fix nitrogen. Most crops up-take available nitrogen with their roots from soil. Whereas legumes form a relationship with certain bacteria that infect their roots. The bacteria are able to convert nitrogen gas into plant available nitrogen and exchange the nitrogen with the host plant. Because of this relationship legumes can increase soil nitrogen levels.



Hairy vetch and crimson clover are the most common legume cover crop. They are both winter hardy and will require termination in spring. Peas and certain clovers will not survive the winter if spring termination is not possible.

Radishes—The most popular radish cover crop are daikon also known as tillage radishes. They get the name tillage radish because they produce a massive tap root that can break compacted soil. They can be upwards of 20 inches long and have diameter of 4 inches. Daikon radishes will typically die back in the winter but can if winter temperatures are mild. They are a great choice for compacted soils.

Buckwheat—A fast growing and powerful weed suppressing cover crop whose flower attract pollinators. Buckwheat is warm season cover crop with a short growing window (~50 days). This is a great cover crop for gardens with vegetables that are harvested early in the summer. They establish fast and can quickly smother weeds. With this fast growth they flower and go to seed quickly and can become a nuisance if not managed. Buckwheat will die back in the winter but growers should be careful with hands off management.

Plant your Perennials

Late summer weather and into fall typically provides plants with plenty of moisture and mild temperatures. This makes it an ideal time to plant perennials because it allows the plant to establish their roots before winter. When spring breaks the following year, the plant is set up for ideal growth. Fall is also the perfect time to plant spring flowering bulbs.

Not all perennials should be planted in the fall, however. Evergreen trees/shrubs can struggle to survive the winter if planted in the fall. Plants lose a lot of moisture through their leaves, and this is amplified from the dry and windy weather associated with winter. Evergreens may struggle to uptake enough moisture through their roots to support itself. Gardeners should wait until the spring to plant evergreens. Trees with taproots like oak and hickory can be planted in early spring or in late fall when the tree goes dormant.



Create Overwintering Sites for Beneficial Insects

Winters in New York can get very cold and because of that many beneficial insects rely overwintering sites to survive. As gardeners we can create easy and simple winter sites for these insects.

The easiest way is to leave a layer of leaves on your lawn. The whole lawn does not need to be covered, pick an area an leave a layer of leaves a couple inches high.

You can also create a small brush pile which can be a simple pile of sticks. Brush piles create excellent habitat for all insects as well as small mammals.

Hollow and pithy stems are excellent overwintering sites for cavity nesting insects. Cone flowers, elder berries, swamp hibiscus are examples of pithy stemmed plants. When the plants die back in the fall, do not cut dead stems down to ground level, leave them anywhere from 8-24 inches tall.