

Putting the Garden to Bed

There's much to do before the ground freezes

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Fall's here and what needs to get done in the garden between the time the leaves start to fall and the ground freezes, can seem overwhelming. Start simply by getting organized: make an overall task list, grouping related tasks together, then prioritize into four levels: **1** = do immediately, **2** = can wait till later, **3** = do after first frost and **4** = not critical this year.

Remember, some tasks can be tackled at any time during the fall while other tasks are driven by Mother Nature's schedule, such as raking and composting leaves. Here are some ideas for your to-do list:

Make fall perennial divisions (1). It's best to make divisions now that you can see how big your plants have grown and can get a sense of how crowded a bed has become. If your perennial seems unhappy, this may be due to crowding, which affects air flow, water and sun availability, as well as creating root competition. Typically, division will revitalize your lagging perennials. What you don't replant, you can give away, swap or sell.

This is a great time to re-organize. **Transplant (1)** your evergreens early and keep them well watered. Wait till your deciduous shrubs have lost their leaves and are going dormant.

While you're at it, you may need to **dig new beds (1)** to make room for the divisions, transplants or new plants you've just had to bring home from the nursery.

Plan to **install hardscaping** such as new walkways and walls before any new bed work if possible, although masonry work can be done late until the ground freezes deep (**1-3**).

Plant spring bulbs and ephemerals (2-3). Consider deer-proof bulbs such as Daffodils, Checked Hen Lilies (*Fritillaria meleagri*), Grape Hyacinths (*Muscari*) and Hyacinths. Choose ephemerals — plants that die back by early summer — including Arum Lily, Jack-in-the-Pulpit, May Apples, Trillium and Bleeding Heart - my favorite Bleeding Heart provides a bright patch of yellow in the shade, *Dicentra spectabilis* 'Gold Heart'.

If you don't feel like doing divisions and transplanting now, **mark changes to make in the spring (2-3)**. Use numbered flags or tags placed in the garden, taking notes as you go.

Collect seeds from annuals (2), clean, dry, label, store. **Pull up withered annuals (3)** and compost them.

Cut back perennials (3) but leave some as seed and winter habitat for wildlife. Different perennials require differing techniques: Iris — fan leaves to 6 inches and dispose of cut leaves; most decorative grasses — cut back to 12 to 16 inches in late winter and compost; Daylilies, Evening Primrose, Yarrow, Artemisia — cut back to the ground and compost.

Be careful of **pruning vines and shrubs** in the fall. Know your plant's bloom and growth habits first. For example: Butterfly Bush — cut back hard to 24 inches in early

spring; Clematis vines — look up info online and prune by type; summer blooming shrubs — prune now or wait till early spring; spring bloomers — wait until after bloom, then prune.

Feed your beds (2-3). Spread “green sand” (full of minerals and micro-nutrients) and worm compost (using concentrated liquid form is best) on all beds. Do not feed evergreen shrubs or trees in the fall as this may cause winter damage.

Rake leaves, then mulch leaf piles using a mower (2). Apply as a winter mulch on beds or start/augment your own compost pile. For best results, layer “browns” (leaves) with “greens” (such as cut-back plants and grass clippings).

Leave irrigation active for as long as possible (3) in case of a dry fall. Shut down only after temps get to freezing, after the first heavy frost.

Put away (2-3) decorations, torches, outdoor furniture, umbrellas, bird baths, ceramic planters. Collect plant stakes, plant hoops, hoses, tools.

Bring out (2-3) and fill bird feeders. Clean out bird houses.

Place warning fencing or markers (3) to indicate beds and paths (for protection during winter snow removal or sledding).

Start a gardener’s notebook (4) for your ideas, wish lists, article clippings, etc. Begin keeping a month-by-month record documenting your yearly garden via photos and detailed notes about each plant.

Read up on natives plants, insects and backyard ecology (4) such as “Bringing Nature Home — How Native Plants Sustain Life in Our Gardens” by Doug Tallamay.

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