

A close-up photograph of a bright orange pumpkin resting on dark, moist soil. The pumpkin is surrounded by large, green, lobed leaves of the same plant. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the pumpkin's skin and the veins on the leaves.

SIX WAYS TO PREP GARDENS FOR FALL & WINTER

ATLAS  ORGANICS

A landscape photograph showing a golden field in the foreground, a line of trees in the middle ground, and a bright sun setting on the horizon, creating a warm orange glow and long shadows. A dark blue banner with a subtle wave pattern is overlaid across the middle of the image.

Introduction

Seasons Change

As much as we don't want to say goodbye to warm summer days and the bounty of the season's garden, shorter days are coming. With the cold and grayer days, comes the hardy greens of winter ready for use in soups, stews, and casseroles. As the last of the summer tomatoes ripen and the final batch of pesto is enjoyed, bust out your planning tools to design your winter garden. Plan a planting and feeding schedule, select seeds and begin transplants, and prepare the soil with a healthy dose of compost. If winter gardening isn't your cup of tea, simply let the soil rest with a cover crop that does the winter work for you! As always, compost is an integral part of the garden preparations as a soil amendment, light feeder, and an excellent mulch.

Let's dig in to the six ways to prepare your garden for the upcoming fall and winter season!



Prepping Gardens for Fall & Winter

1. Plan-plan-plan

The first step to any good garden is planning! Plants have to grow from something, so July and August are the perfect times to stock up on cool season crops and get a late harvest of quick maturing varieties of summer crops in the ground to produce before the first frost. By the end of August, fall crop seeds should be purchased and if seedlings are being grown, they should be planted. Transplant time for fall crops can vary, but generally, planted by mid-September to early October is best. Check with a local Extension office or Master Gardening program for excellent resources tailored to your planting zone, which will show you your expected first and final frost dates.

It's also helpful to review your garden plans from the previous winter. Certain plant families, like brassicas or solanaceous plants, can deal with some disease issues if planted repeatedly in the same spot year after year. Mix it up and plant lettuce or a root vegetable where you had brassicas the previous fall to get ahead of any soil-borne diseases that may strike and help to break up any compaction for future plantings. Additions of compost will add a base level of natural disease suppression from the diverse microbiome present in compost and can help with a variety of foliar and root-acquired diseases.



Prepping Gardens for Fall & Winter

2. All Sorts of Seeds: Pick Your Winter Favorites

Seeds can be picked up just about anywhere. More standard varieties are available at most big box stores, but skip them for heirloom varieties for a more interesting, tastier, and unique gardening experience. Heirlooms can provide different tastes, colors, and varieties of produce we don't find at the usual seed display! Hunt for heirloom and growing-zone appropriate seeds (or seedlings) from smaller suppliers, like your local garden store or a nearby educational farm. Check out nature centers for plant sales, as well, to find some winter-hardy ornamental plants to accompany your food crops. Flowering plants, or even just cover crops, can provide winter pollinator support, help mitigate pests, and can nurture your soil as it's growing and again once it's been mowed down for next season's garden.

A few crops prefer to be transplanted, which can be easier for new gardeners, however quite a few fall crops prefer to be direct seeded into the soil. Turnips, radishes, carrots, garlic, and lettuce are easily direct seeded and will do much better than as a transplant. Some plants just hate to be moved after establishment of the seedling. Direct seeding can be regarded as more difficult due to steady moisture requirements for seed germination, but if you're properly amending your soil (hint: it's time for compost!), direct seeds should have an easy time establishing.



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3. Get Seedlings Started for Transplants

Transplants require time to mature to a suitable size for transplanting and need additional time to acclimate to the outside environment also known as “hardening off.” Most fall crops are easily transplanted. Kales, collards, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbages, chards, beets, and onions are best transplanted, particularly for new gardeners. Transplanting is a helpful tool for gardeners of all skill levels.

Transplanting is a quicker, more reliable way to get your garden going. Seedlings for transplant can be purchased from your local gardening stores or farm stores and are easily started at home to save money and offer a wider variety of plants to put in your garden. Seed trays can be purchased, but things like cardboard egg cartons can be repurposed to make seed starter trays that easily breakdown in soil. Seed starting soil mix is different than the soil you’ll want in your garden. Try a mix of 4 parts compost, 1 part perlite, 1 part vermiculite, and 2 parts coconut coir to start your seedlings! This will ensure enough moisture is present to jumpstart germination, but will not cause the seed to rot due to drainage imparted by all four ingredients. If you have peat moss on hand, use that instead of coconut coir, since it’s always most sustainable to use what you have on hand. Consider switching to coconut coir on your next trip to the supply store, as coconut coir is a sustainable alternative to peat moss that should be used when possible.



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4. Pull Summer Annuals from Garden Beds

Step four to a bountiful Fall garden is to remove all of the dead and decaying plants from the past summer! Annuals like tomatoes, squash and cucumber vines, beans, and tender herbs like basil will die off once a frost has occurred, but you'll want hardy winter greens and brassicas growing by that time, anyway. Healthy plants (with no noticeable diseases) can be composted. Any diseased plants must be trashed or burned to prevent spread of the disease through compost applied for springtime planting. After the plants are no longer producing and have been pulled, remove any weeds, and follow with compost applications.

Flower gardens, especially with flowering plants that hold spent blooms over winter, can be left as is to provide seeds for non-migrating birds. Native flowers, like Black-eyed Susans (*Rudbeckia*), Sunflowers (*Helianthus*), Coneflowers (*Echinacea*), Joe Pye-weed (*Eutrochium*), and Pincushion Flowers (*Scabiosa*) all leave striking seed heads to add winter interest to your garden while supporting your overwintering native birds.



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5. Prepare Soil with Compost

Compost is just as useful in fall as it is in the spring! Adding compost to fall gardens can help to replenish organic matter lost during summer (higher temps and brighter, longer sunlight hours increase oxidation of organic matter in soil) and lightly nourish seedlings, transplants, and full-grown plants. If opting for a cover crop only in fall and winter, compost can nurture the cover crop and then, with the broader microbial community that compost brings to soil, can help to breakdown the cover crop once it's mowed or winterkilled, adding more organic matter to your soil for springtime.

Aim to add at least 1-3 inches (3.1-9.3 cubic yards/1000 sq ft) of compost to gardens where veggies or cover crops will be used throughout the year. Once cool season veggies have been planted, additional compost can be used as a mulch to keep the soil warmer, retain moisture, and help suppress soil diseases.



Prepping Gardens for Fall & Winter

6. Consider a Cover Crop

In addition to growing cold hardy veggies and herbs, winter and fall are a great time to introduce cover crops to your garden. Cover crops function to hold nutrients throughout the winter that can be returned to the soil in spring, prevent soil erosion by protecting from the mechanical effects of wind and rain, help with soil compaction, and can be used as a living mulch under taller crops to keep soil temperatures warmer over winter. Some cover crops pull double-duty and act as a mulch while providing added nutrients or provide a food crop while helping with another issue!

Root systems can also play a part in breaking up soil compaction: a tap root is able to penetrate deeper into soil than a fibrous root system, while a fibrous root system is best to mitigate erosion. In general, a successful cover crop plan should include a mix of five plants: a broadleaf species to shade out weeds, a legume to fix and provide nitrogen to the soil, a grass to provide a fibrous root system to prevent erosion, and a pollinator support plant. Winter cover crop mixes often use brassicas, like collards for the broad leaf species. Daikon (or oilseed) radishes are a great taproot option to provide a food source and break up clay hardpans. Clover and lupines are excellent nitrogen-fixing legumes and can provide pollinator support when flowering in late winter.



Prepping Gardens for Fall & Winter

6. Consider a Cover Crop cont.

Ryegrasses, particularly, cereal rye, are a popular grass choice for erosion control, although, they need to be mowed prior to forming a seed head, and are better used in larger gardens. Phacelia is a popular choice for both winter and summer cover crops and provides great pollinator support. When developing your own cover crop, cross-reference your list with native plants in your region to make your garden extra-helpful to your specific land area. Also, check to make sure no cover crop plants are listed as invasive weeds in your area. A county extension office is a great place to look for cover cropping resources, as they often support local Master Gardening programs and provide a plethora of gardening knowledge from publications, libraries, and local practitioners alike.

While winter isn't the typical season everyone attributes to gardening, there's no reason to slow down your own food production just because the weather has turned cold. Plenty of vegetables are at their peak in winter and with a bit of extra compost mulch and compost added to your soil, you can keep the garden goodness growing all year long!