

Home/Garden

Fall is the best time to clean up your garden

Our homes traditionally get turned out for an annual spring cleaning. But in the garden the fall cleanup is important to get you off to a healthy and early start at planting time.

The first thing to do is pull up all spent vegetable plants, bean and pea vines, squash and tomato plants that have gone mushy with frost, and weeds. Unless this debris has been infected by disease you can dump all this organic material on the compost pile.

Some of this refuse, like corn stalks and broccoli stems, is heavy and will take some time to turn into usable compost, but if you have a shredder and turn this rough matter into little pieces, with lots of surface area, it will break down much more quickly.

If you notice that any of your plants have suffered from early blight (on potatoes and tomatoes) or mosaic virus (on squash or other cucurbits like cucumbers and pumpkins), remove that diseased foliage from the garden entirely. Take it to the dump or burn it.

Keep grass cut and clean up well around the garden if you've been troubled with disease because many weeds are host plants.

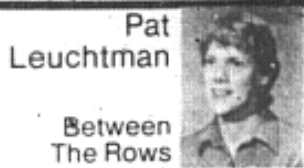
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There is still time to make some notes about where you've planted what crops, if you haven't kept a garden map during the summer. Crop rotation is an easy and effective way of preventing disease and pest damage. Don't plant the same crops, or even the same family in the same row next spring. Plant root crops where the greens were, tomatoes in the old bean patch and so on.

You can leave carrots and beets in the ground to be dug later in the season. I've found I can't mulch these root crops for harvest during the winter, because burrowing rodents get them before I do. However, I don't worry about leaving them in the ground until I have time to tend to them. Other crops like brussels sprouts, kale and some chunese greens can be left in the garden until very late. I'm usually able to pick the last few vegetables for our Thanksgiving dinner every year.

Gather your leaves. Dump them on the compost pile, mulch shrubs with them or bag them and bank your house foundation with them until you use them in the garden in the spring. Don't throw them away. They are valuable. They return organic matter and nutrients to your soil.



Pat Leuchtman

Between The Rows

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Because I raise pigs and chickens I have wonderful manure to use in my compost. I also till it into the soil



to rot and break down over the winter. Since I'm not planting in those beds right now, it doesn't matter that the manure is relatively fresh

and hot. If you have acid soil (and in New England it's hard to avoid) it's best to lime the gardens and the lawn in

the fall. Ground limestone will break down slowly over the winter, and for several years, providing calcium and some magnesium if you've chosen dolomitic limestone. Also as it neutralizes the soil, it releases some of the potash and phosphorous that are there as insoluble compounds. This is why, even if you don't do any other fertilizing, liming your soil will make it somewhat more rich and productive.

Hardwood ashes are a good source of lime and potash, but these nutrients will leach away in the rain, so it's best to keep them dry over the winter as they accumulate, apply them in the spring.

The flower garden needs cleaning, too. I've found fall weeding much easier than spring weeding, possibly because the ground is usually dryer.

Cut back flower stalks and foliage that are done blooming for the year. Although I know where most things are in my flower garden, I still keep some labels in place, especially for plants that come up later in the spring. Otherwise, I see this empty spot and till it or plant something else on top of it.

It's a cliché, but it's true: an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. A clean garden is going to be a healthier, more productive and less troublesome garden.