

## **GARDENING TIPS, SEPTEMBER - DECEMBER**

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### **SEPTEMBER**

A successful vegetable garden greatly depends on locating it in the right spot. The ideal site for a vegetable garden would receive a minimum of six hours of full sun each day, and eight to ten hours would be even better. The soil should be a loose, well-drained loam (not too sandy or clayey) with plenty of organic matter, but if you don't have that you can always improve your soil by adding organic matter such as compost. Perfectly level ground isn't absolutely necessary, but it decreases the chance of soil erosion.

If you want to plant a new vegetable garden next year or enlarge your present one, you must test your soil first to find out whether you need to add organic fertilizer such as compost or lime to raise the pH and to test for heavy metals in the soil, such as lead from old peeling paint. Go to [www.umass.edu/plsoils/soiltest/](http://www.umass.edu/plsoils/soiltest/) where you will find out how to prepare and send in a soil sample. Note: Even an established garden needs a soil test every year or so to check the fertility of the soil and the pH.

To kill grass or weeds where you have chosen to locate your garden, pile onto the area 5 or more layers of newspaper (no glossy paper) and then a very thick layer of fallen leaves or partly decayed compost to smother the weeds or grass without having to disturb the soil by tilling it.

While you still remember, write down what did well in the garden this year and what you want to change so you can plan for next year during the coming winter.

It's time to plant bulbs this month and in October for spring bloom. Some kinds such as species and Dutch crocus, Siberian squill, snowdrops, glory-of-the-snow, and daffodils and narcissus that "naturalize", according to the catalogs, will multiply readily.

Early September is a good time to plant evergreens, and there are sometimes bargains at local nurseries. If the weather is dry, water newly planted evergreens weekly and deeply so they go into Winter well-hydrated. Plants

lose water mostly through their leaves. In Winter, because they hold some leaves all year, evergreens, especially those with broad leaves, can lose water, which can't be replaced by the roots on sunny, windy days when the ground is frozen, and will become "burned" (dried out). That's a good reason to plant most rhododendrons where they will get some shade and protection from the wind. Needle-leaved evergreens have leaves that are much better adapted to sunny, dry conditions.

## **OCTOBER**

Don't take those fallen leaves that you rake off your lawn to the dump. They can form the foundation of a compost pile in an inconspicuous corner of your yard. Gardeners say that compost is their black gold. You can put composting materials in an informal pile or in a compost bin. Keep adding raked leaves and tuck under the leaves grass clippings (but not ones that have been sprayed with pesticides), vegetable scraps, tea, coffee grounds, egg shells, and extra soil. Never add any animal products or greasy foods that might attract animals or smell bad, and put in no weed plants that have gone to seed or garden plants infected with insects or fungi.

The compost pile will decay more quickly if it is turned onto a nearby space or mixed several times in Spring, Summer and Fall allowing plenty of oxygen to reach the earthworms, soil bacteria and other soil organisms as they break down the components of the pile to a form that plants can use.

Don't remove the leaves from under shrubs and trees unless the leaves are large and form a thick layer, in which case you should put some of them on your compost pile. In Spring the leaves will decay in place to compost, replacing some of the nutrients in the soil that were removed by the plants as they grew. The fallen leaves also can form a natural mulch for perennial plants during the winter, preventing the repeated freezing and thawing of the soil that causes these plants to "heave" out of the ground.

## **NOVEMBER**

Clean up and discard (not in your compost pile) diseased or severely insect-damaged plant material from your vegetable garden. Plants that had parts that turned yellow, reddish, grey or white or similar colors earlier in the season when the plant was actively growing probably were afflicted by fungus diseases and should be discarded. Other vegetable plant parts and unharvested vegetables or fruit can be added to the compost pile.

This is a good time to adjust the pH (acidity) of the soil in the vegetable garden or where you have planted blueberry bushes because it takes time for lime or sulfur to act. Based on the results of your soil test (see [www.umass.edu/plsoils/soiltest/](http://www.umass.edu/plsoils/soiltest/)), you may need to sprinkle on limestone to raise the pH which means to reduce the acidity. There are two kinds of lime available; if your soil test indicates high magnesium levels, switch from dolomitic limestone, which is high in magnesium, to calcitic limestone. You may need to add sulfur to further lower the pH in some areas where you want to grow blueberry bushes.

You could tuck your vegetable garden in for Winter by planting a cover crop such as oats, which can be dug into the soil in Spring as “green manure”. Pine needles or salt marsh hay (has no weed seeds) could be applied to the paths between the vegetable rows.

Another option is to pile some of your decayed or partly-decayed compost on the vegetable garden each year; in Spring earthworms will, in their meanderings, distribute the compost through the soil. No tilling, which might disturb the all-important soil organisms and the soil structure, would be required.

## **DECEMBER**

Time to enjoy evergreen trees and shrubs; the plants that hold their fruit into and through Winter and provide wildlife food such as native viburnums, native hollies, and crab apples; and those deciduous trees that have good form and interesting bark such as native birches, native dogwoods, and Japanese maples.

On a clear day you could do some needed pruning in your yard and bring some decorative branches into the house. Winter is a good time to prune.

With more time indoors you might contemplate some of the life lessons you can learn from gardening such as: patience is needed to wait and see what will happen next month or next year; every year is different so experience over many years brings wisdom; “nothing gold can stay”, so enjoy the present – smell the roses, watch a bee collecting pollen; ecosystems are very complex and hard to understand totally; there are limits to human control so appreciate how challenging growing food can be.

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