

## **Winter Gardening Prep for Spring**

During the winter, many gardeners have already completed most, if not all, of their seasonal gardening chores - whether pruning annuals, raking and bagging leaves, or simply emptying pots with spent blooms. With spring just around the corner, for many gardeners, there are still chores remaining that will help them greet spring with a jump start. The following are ten steps to assist you with preparing your winter garden for spring.

=====

**1. Clean up all rotting and spent plants:** Spent blooms and old plants begin to look messy and may contain pests, funguses, and other diseases. Some insects that feed on various plants may lay eggs on the leaves and stems. Removing spent blooms from plants or burying them in garden troughs will prevent pests from getting a jump start in the spring. Removing rotted and spent plants also adds organic matter to the soil which tends to help to improve its overall health.

**2. Remove invasive weeds that have established themselves during the growing season:** The only way to completely remove invasive plants is to dig them up, then trash them or put them in burn piles. Invasive weeds will remain viable in a compost or weed pile so resist the urge to move them from one place to another in your landscape as you may simply be relocating a potential garden problem.

**3. Prepare your soil for spring:** Oftentimes, we wait until spring to consider prepping the soil. However, fall and winter are also good times amend your soil. Compost, kelp, manure, and hay/straw are excellent choices for this activity. In our zone, adding these nutrients at this time of year allows them time to start breaking down, thus enriching the soil and becoming organically active. This prevents you from having to wait until the soil dries out in the spring to begin working the soil. Once your soil is amended, consider covering the beds with plastic or other material to prevent winter rains from washing the amendments below the active root zone. Bear in mind that raised beds drain faster than in-ground beds. Remove any plastic in early spring and gently till with a hoe in preparation of spring planting.

**4. Plant cover crops:** Cover crops help prevent soil erosion, increase levels of organic matter, add nutrients, and break up compacted areas. For example, planting legumes like clover and field peas increase the amount of available nitrogen for vegetables. A general rule of thumb is to plan cover crops about a month prior to the first frost, keeping in mind that some cover crops are hardier than others. Do your homework and consider consulting your local extension office or seed provider to determine the best choices.

**5. Prune your perennials:** Depending on which perennial flowers or shrubs you plant, you may be inclined to keep them intact in order to create a beautiful winter landscape. While fall is an excellent time to prune some perennials, make certain to select the right ones. Focus on herbs like sage, rosemary and thyme, along with veggies like rhubarb and asparagus. Blackberries are also a good choice and benefit from removal of spent or crossing canes in order to assist with controlling their vigorous spread.

**6. Look at cultivars in your garden and determine your growing season:** Time and time again, we come to realize that some plant varieties perform better than others. This is a good time to determine what under-performing plants would be best served by replacing or moving to another location. If the plants are performing well, you may want to add varieties that ripen earlier and/or later in the season. Take note of what veggies worked well and others that didn't, bearing in mind that some failures might be weather related. Learn to focus on the things that are in your control such as moisture levels, placement, and proper soil. Some experts suggest recording "lessons learned" to assist you with future plantings and information to help you with ongoing success.

**7. Divide and plant bulbs:** This is a good time to divide and conquer. Consider digging up and dividing plants that are crowded or appear straggly during the growing season. Simply dig 4-8 inches from the plant's stalk and gently loosen the soil. You can then loosen the bulb and separate smaller bulbs, then immediately transplant in another place in your garden. If you have already dug up spring bulbs in order to divide, now is the time to replant them. Crocuses, daffodils and tulips are beautiful choices.

**8. Replenish mulch:** Winter mulching has many of the same benefits as summer mulching. Some of the obvious benefits are reducing water loss, inhibiting weeds, and protecting from soil erosion. Winter mulching helps regulate the soil temperature and moisture so the transition from winter to spring temperatures reduces the heaving and churning the roots may endure as a result of the extreme temperature changes. If you have root veggies, place a thick layer of mulch to help buffer against a hard frost. It will help prolong your crop. When the mulch breaks down it will incorporate fresh organic material into your soil.

**9. Harvest and regenerate your compost:** It's easy for gardeners to ignore their compost pile. The heat of the summer is over, we're out of the day-to-day regimen, and we don't see it nor think about it. However, this is a missed opportunity. The composted material is ready to go and rich in amended ingredients. The material is ready to top garden beds, fertilize your lawn and amend deficient soil. It also provides you an opportunity to clean the compost pile and make way for a new compost pile that can be insulated against the winter chill. Continue to use kitchen scraps, leaves, straw and other active green matter.

**10. Sharpen and clean your tools:** This step is a no-brainer but one that many a seasoned gardener tends to overlook and/or avoid. Fall and winter are the proper times to prime your tools for spring. Take a methodical approach to getting them ready and increasing your tools lifespan. Begin by washing your tools and remove soil and all debris. If rust is present, remove it with a wire brush or sandpaper. Afterwards, sharpen your tools with a basic mill file. Use a whetstone to sharpen pruners. Once finished, rub the entire surfaces with a towel coated with a light machine oil to seal the metal from oxygen. This will help to extend the life of your tools. Some gardeners choose to fill small tubs with sand and linseed oil, then stand the tools vertically for the entire winter.

Although we're in the midst of winter, you can continue to take steps to prepare your landscape for spring. Being proactive now will ensure your garden is not only ready for spring, but it will also help improve your yields for the long term.