

## 10 "MUST-DO" CHORES FOR FALL TO PREP FOR WINTER

By Kathy Jentz

Fall is a busy time for many of you, but do not ignore those gardens just because Mother Nature appears to be slowing down. Continue to deadhead, prune, and weed as you did all spring and summer. This will help set a good foundation for next year's garden.

Here is a top 10 list of Fall Gardening Chores. Try to tackle two or three of these items each weekend in October and November then you and your garden will be all set for a long winter's nap.

1. Tool Cleaning & Storage - Yeah, yeah, we know this has been on your 'to do' list for eons and it certainly not one of the more "fun" gardening endeavors, but move it to the top of your list and maybe it will get a chance this year.

Think of the scraping and scouring as a Zen meditation exercise and maybe you'll actually learn to enjoy it one day. OK, maybe not. Here are two tips to make this chore easier: After cleaning and drying your garden tools for the long winter storage, spray them with a coat of cooking spray or WD40. And second, fill a bucket with sand and mix in motor oil. Store your tools in this and give them a stir each time you pull them out. This gives you cleaning, sharpening, and lubricating benefits all at once.

2. Set Up Bird Feeders - Take your feeders out of storage or down from your yard. Scrub with weak bleach solution (gloves on!). Thoroughly dry the feeders then hang in a good spot. Take into account not just from which windows you and your pets will best witness the feathery floor shows this upcoming winter but also what is best for the birds. Is there shelter nearby that they can quickly duck into such as an evergreen shrub?

3. Rake Leaves & Build Up Your Compost Pile - Pretty self-explanatory. This is one of my most hated chores, so I'm always looking for shortcuts. Leave the leaves where they fall for a few weeks; do not feel the rush to clean up each one as it falls and soon enough a blustery day will come along and cut your task in half.

Buy a small "shrub" rake. This has been one of my best tool investments. It has made the task of reaching into azalea and rose bushes to pull out that clump of stubborn brown oak leaves ever so much better.

4. Mulch Around Roses, Strawberries, Tender Perennials, etc. - Again, self-explanatory and not much I can share to cut the work here, other than to take a long slow walk around your garden to make sure you haven't missed a favorite plant or two. Also make sure that mulch is not building up around the base of trees. Your trees should have a well around them, not a volcano.

5. Clean Up & Till Veggie Beds - After the first frost, there won't be any mystery about what needs ripping out, composting, or tilling under. I call this the "overcooked broccoli" effect - nothing is as unattractive as a tomato plant past its prime. While you're at it, pull out those suffering impatiens and the rest of your spent annuals, as well.

6. Plant Flowering Bulbs - A little work this month or next will pay in big dividends next spring. Set aside an evening with a sketch pad to plot out and purchase what should go where and you'll be ready the next crisp Saturday afternoon to start digging and planting.

One of my bulb-planting tips is to look over your shoulder frequently. Many times I've caught my "friendly" neighborhood squirrels watching my moves, quite attentively memorizing each hole. Some have the nerve to not even wait until I've left the vicinity before starting their feast. My main tip to curb them is to buy a bulk shaker of red pepper flakes (I found some at a Dollar Store last year!) and shake away both in the hole with the bulb and on top of the disturbed ground.

7. Lift Tender Bulbs - This task could be combined with #6 -- as you pull out your elephant ears, cannas, and caladiums, you could place tulips and daffodils in those same holes. Let the tender bulbs dry in a sunny, protected spot, then wrap in newspaper to store in your cellar or garage.

8. Bring In Houseplants - I have a neighbor across the street who loves to give her spider plants a "summer vacation" from her elementary school classroom. It is a nice way to decorate your front porch in pleasant weather, but don't forget to take them in before that northeast wind comes up towards the end of this month.

9. Divide Over-crowded Perennials & Best Time To Move Shrubs - I like to call this time of year "moving season." My gardening at this point mostly consists of walking around in circles and trying to debate what can move where. For some this is the heart of gardening; for others, it is a drab chore. My only advice is to only dig up as much as you'll be able to replant that same day or next. In this way, I believe many gardeners are more ambitious than their time and energy allows.

10. Work-In Compost and Fertilizers - Most of us cut out fertilizing after late summer, but evergreens, trees, shrubs, and your lawn would appreciate an extra vitamin boost before the hard freezes set in.

And 1 Bonus Tip: Attend a local garden club meeting or garden center class - The kids are back to school, so why not take a few hours to study up on some landscape trends or refresh your memory on some planting techniques? Many of these classes are free and open to the general public.

Kathy's own "to-do" list just keeps growing as she expands her gardens. She is editor of *Washington Gardener* magazine ([www.WashingtonGardener.com](http://www.WashingtonGardener.com)) and a long-time D.C. area gardening enthusiast. Kathy can be reached at [editor@washingtongardener.com](mailto:editor@washingtongardener.com) and welcomes your gardening questions.

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## Giving Tender Plants Winter Protection

“Bundle up,” your mom always advised you when you went out to play in the winter winds. The same advice applies for your tender and newer outdoor plantings. The frigid northern winds and freezing nighttime temps can damage or kill those perennials, shrubs, and trees that are more marginal in our Mid-Atlantic planting zones. If a plant is classified zone 8 or above, take it is wise to take a few minutes to evaluate it for winter protection needs. Here are the top methods to give your plantings a bit of warmth and relief this winter:

- Take it indoors. You may not have a greenhouse, but you probably have a garage, cellar, or protected porch. Sometimes all your potted tender plant needs is a sheltered spot for those worst weeks of the year. You can also wrap a blanket or burlap around the base of the pot to keep it insulated. Alternatively, group a bunch of pots together and stuff the area with leaves.
- Plant it right. The warmest part of your yard is most likely at the base of a southern-facing wall. This is the spot to plant your camellias, figs, and others in your zonal edge.
- Mulch it. Pile up mulch around the base of the plant to give its root-zone a nice blanket of warmth. Grafted trees and shrubs especially are vulnerable to die-back, so give an extra mulching to your fruit trees and Rose bushes now. Be sure to pull back that mulch layer at the first signs of spring.
- Cover it. If you have just a few small tender plants to cover or want to give an early start to next season, use a cloche or glass bell. (An assortment of Colonial era cloches is pictured here.). You can make a modern cloche out of plastic soda bottles or milk jugs. Be sure to take them off or vent them during the day. To vent them, you can prop them up with a small stick or on stones.
- Blanket it. Watch the local weather closely and on the coldest nights of the year, have old blankets and sheets on the ready to throw over your plants. This is a good precaution to take on nights with an ice warning. Many plants that are solid Zone 6 and 7 can still suffer severe winter damage and breakage, so go ahead and cover them when an ice storm is predicted. Then uncover when the danger of icing has passed.
- Insulate it. Surround your most vulnerable plants with a metal cage (like your old tomato cages) or plastic mesh and stuff the frame full of leaves. You can also wrap the plant burlap tied with twine to achieve the same purpose. Then unwrap and unstuff your plant in early spring.

Finally, if you find you have a real cold spot in your garden that is a real frigid micro-climate, consider more long-term solutions for this spot. You can build a berm (earthen-wall) or stone wall to block some of the winds. You can plant a border of tall evergreens as a wind-break also. Consider also the next time you out an a shed, house expansion, or other out-building that this may be the location to place it and thereby create a new, warmer micro-climate for your plantings.

## WINTER GARDEN PREP TO DO LIST

### Don't Worry About

- Leaf drop on established evergreen shrubs and rhododendrons is normal this time of year.
- Bulb foliage already starting to surface? Don't fret. It is also normal and will not impact next year's blooms.

### Maintenance & Winter Damage Protection

- Keep an eye out for the first frost date and insulate plants as needed. In Zone 6, it is expected between September 30-October 30 and in Zone 7 it is predicted between October 15-November 15.
- Have your soil tested at least once every three years.
- Clean, sharpen, and store your garden tools.
- Turn off outdoor water valve and store hoses.
- Empty and turn over your rain barrels
- Store terra cotta pots in a shed or protected areas.
- Prune and mulch hybrid tea roses.
- Water evergreens and new plantings to keep them hydrated this winter.
- Fertilize your lawn and re-seed if needed.
- Rake leaves, shred, and gather in compost piles or spread back onto garden beds.
- Turn your compost pile weekly and don't let it dry out. Work compost into your planting beds.
- Provide some special protection to tender or early flowering plants such as Camellias.
- Stake newly planted large trees or shrubs to protect them from winter winds.
- Check any bulbs, corms, tubers and bare root plants in storage for rot or desiccation.
- Apply scale and dormant oil treatment (anti-desiccant) to evergreens to prevent dehydration.
- Gently remove layers of snow from evergreens with a broom.
- Use the branches from your Christmas tree as bedding mulch or as a wind-break.
- Keep watering newly planted trees and shrubs as needed.
- Check the plants under tall evergreens and under the eaves of the house to see that they have sufficient moisture.
- Weed. Weed. Weed.
- Do any filling and grading around your yard. The soil will settle during the winter months.
- Avoid walking in frozen planting beds.
- Clean your gutters to prevent ice dams.
- Prune any dead branches or anything hitting you in pathways.
- Prune maples, dogwoods, birch, elm, and walnut -- if needed.

- Some alternatives to de-icing salts include sand, light gravel (grit), or non-clumping kitty litter. Using de-icing salts around driveways and sidewalks can harm your garden plants and turf.

### Wildlife Gardening

- Leave seed heads on black-eyed Susan, Echinacea, goldenrod, sunflowers, and thistles for the birds to enjoy.
- Start feeding birds to get them in the habit for this winter.
- Provide them with a fresh water source.

### Water Gardens

- Bring in any tender plants and tropical fish to over-winter in tanks indoors.
- Cover pond with netting to keep out fallen leaves and debris.
- Clean out the annual plants and compost them.
- Cut back the submerged hardy plants and group them to the deepest pond section.
- Unplug and store fountain or bubbler.

### Edible Gardens

- Harvest last of your vegetables.
- Dig up potatoes and sweet potatoes then store potatoes in a cool, dark spot.
- Till compost into the beds.
- Plant garlic.
- Plant cover crops in your vegetable gardens and annual beds (i.e. rye, clover, hairy vetch, winter peas).
- Set-up a cold frame, then plant lettuces, radishes, and carrots from seed.
- Vent cold frames on sunny days.
- Cut garden herbs and hang to dry in cool, dry place indoors.
- Mulch strawberry beds with straw or pine needles for winter.
- Cover carrots and other root crops with straw mulch to extend the harvest season.
- Spread ashes from wood fires on your vegetable beds.
- Protect fig trees from freezing by piling up leaves around them.
- Prune stone fruit trees like cherries, plums, and peaches.
- Remove this year's fruiting raspberry canes down to the ground from raspberries.

### Pest & Disease Management

- Keep an eye out for bark damage from rabbits and deer.
- Apply deer deterrent spray.
- Switch your deer deterrent spray, if you've been using the same one for several months.
- Prevent the spread of disease by cleaning up all infected plants and disposing of them in your trash - NOT your compost pile.

- Check for bagworms, pick off, bag, and dispose of them.
- Vacuum up any ladybugs that come in the house.
- Check for vole problems and set out traps.
- Remove and destroy gypsy moth egg masses.
- Caulk and seal your home to prevent wildlife coming indoors.
- Store your fertilizer, bird food, and seeds in rodent-proof containers.

### Plant & Propagate

- Plant spring-flowering bulbs.
- Pull out spent summer annuals.
- Plant hardy mums and fall season annuals.
- Sow wildflower seeds, such as California Poppies, for next spring.
- Dig up bulbs from your Gladiolus and Dahlias, cut off foliage, dry for a week, and then store for the winter.
- Continue to divide and transplant perennials.
- Deadhead spent mums and plant them (if still in pots).
- Transplant trees and shrubs
- Water evergreens and new plantings to keep them hydrated this winter.
- Check that all vines are securely tied for winter's cold winds.
- Collect plant seeds for next year's planting and for trading.
- Plant evergreens for winter interest.

### Indoor Plants

- Check houseplants and any plants you brought indoors for the winter, for insects.
- Force the buds on Christmas Cactus by placing in a cool (55-60 degree) room and 13 hours of darkness.
- Pot up Paper Whites and Amaryllis for holiday blooming.
- Lightly fertilize indoor plants in fall then discontinue on most for rest of winter (except Cyclamen).
- Clean the leaves of your indoor houseplants to prevent dust and film build-up.
- Set up a humidifier for indoor plants or at least place them in pebble trays.
- Start new indoor plants from cuttings -- try an easy one such as violets.
- Rotate houseplants regularly to promote even growth.
- Keep watering your poinsettias and give them plenty of light. Ensure they are away from drafts and that the pots drain freely.
- Force spring bulbs for indoor blooms this January by potting them up, watering thoroughly, and placing them in your vegetable crisper for about 10 weeks.
- Keep succulents and cacti on the dry side.
- Water your cut Christmas tree daily.
- Do not place live wreaths or greenery in between your door and a glass storm door, especially if the doorway is facing **south**. This placement will “cook” the arrangement on a sunny day.

- Gather holiday greens. Some, like holly and boxwood, benefit from being pruned by growing thicker.
- Collect dried flowers and grasses for an indoor vase.

#### Self-Improvement

- Take a break from holiday stress to enjoy your garden.
- Pick a budding gardener on your gift list to give some inspirational garden books and magazines then watch them blossom.
- Attend a local garden club meeting.
- Start organizing your pile of incoming garden catalogs.

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