



Fall Garden Checklist

Though the growing season may soon be coming to a close, the fun in yard and garden work never *truly* ends. Between shutdown, cleanup, modification, preservation, and protection efforts, avid gardeners often find themselves “just sitting down” at the point when the growing season is about to return. Nevertheless, for those actually looking forward to and anticipating a little downtime in their gardening efforts during this “off season,” we’ve put together a few nifty little to-dos to help streamline your success.

Vegetable Garden fall checklist:

Remove debris. Unlike ornamental beds, vegetable gardens don’t apply to the “leave it lay” rule. While plant debris provides winter shelter for beneficial insects, it also helps protect garden pests such as squash bugs, squash vine borer, cucumber beetles, and more. Clear it out to reduce pest pressure in the year to come.

Test and amend your soil. Fall is the perfect time for vegetable garden soil amendments since it is the only time where heavy-duty amendments such as raw manure can be used. Doing so, the amendment will be given ample time to incorporate into the soil, “cooling off” to a point where it won’t burn growing plants. The long period before replanting will then also mitigate any pathogen contamination issues that can arise, so long as the amendment is applied at least 180 days before a harvest.

Mulch, or plant cover crops. Protect your amended soil with straw or plastic mulch to mitigate erosion from wind, rain, and snow. Alternatively, consider planting cover crops. These offer numerous benefits based on the crops selected, from erosion prevention to nitrogen fixing, to natural soil tilling. The most important thing to remember with them is to *never* let them go to seed. Know their exact growing schedule, keep a diligent eye on them, and be ready to take quick terminating action with a mower or tiller.

Flower Garden Fall Checklist:

Dig up tender warm-season bulbs. Dahlia lovers take note! They won’t survive the winter without your help. Any warm season bulbs in your garden should be removed from the soil in autumn, brushed free of soil, dried at a surface level, and then stored in sawdust or burlap in a cool (frost free) location.

Plant spring bulbs. If looking for a burst of color in the early spring, now’s your shot to make it happen! Plant spring bulbs like tulips, daffodils, hyacinths, and crocus now. They’ll soak up the fall moisture establish their roots nicely for the season to come.

These are the ones that you actually do want to “let lay” until the spring –if you can make it happen without causing problems. Dropped leaves and dormant canes offer winter protection, nesting, and hibernation locations for ground bees and other beneficial insects, priming them to return to your garden in the year to come. Also of note, heavy mulching of perennials in the fall will help ensure they’re well insulated and protected from the cold in the winter to come.

Lawn Fall Checklist:

Overseed cool season lawns. September-October is the time to apply seed to cool season lawns if they need a bit of a revitalization. Make sure you soften any bare soil spots to ensure good seed-to-soil contact. Water the seeds in well, and then ensure adequate soil moisture is maintained until the new plants go dormant.

Give it a snack. Applied by mid-October, one last hit of high-nitrogen, low phosphorus and potassium, fertilizer will give your lawn the food it needs to survive well through winter – also helping it stay green a bit longer than the neighbor’s lawn. Be sure to follow label instructions for application rates and water in right away.

Following this checklist now, your garden will be set for a successful winter! Just remember, soil moisture still depletes throughout the winter, so stay on top of it. Also, if excessively cold temperatures show, further protection efforts may be required with the more finicky plants. Nevertheless, these steps will have plants in their best position for thriving in the coming growing season.

by Anthony Reardon, Horticulture Small Farms Agent, 2025