

Let the Fall Garden Clean Up Begin!

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Question: What should I be doing in the garden this fall that will help me be more successful next year? I am relatively new to gardening and there is still a lot for me to learn. I would appreciate some ideas to help with my efforts.

Don't hang up the vegetable and flower gardens yet, if you are interested in planting cool weather crops. Fall is an excellent time to extend the life the garden by planting and harvesting cool weather vegetables such as greens like lettuce and spinach. If planted now, these will have time to be harvested in about 30 days and before the chance of the first frost. If you have more time before Jack Frost really sets in, consider planting carrots, broccoli, collards, turnips, cabbage and Swiss chard.

If you are going to spend time and money on flowers, consider planting pansies. In our area, September 15- October 1 is prime time for planting these lovely cold weather beauties. Just remember, don't plant too early in warm weather, and don't plant more than you can maintain.

If you are not considering cold weather crops and flowers, autumn can still be a very busy time for gardeners. Summer color has faded from the flower beds and your vegetable and fruit crops have been harvested. Don't relax and think that it is all over. Fall is the time to clean up and prepare the garden for the cold of winter. Now is the time to attend to the landscape so that it will jump up and sparkle in the spring.

First of all, a soil test is recommended for gardens every other year and for lawns every two to three years. Then University of Georgia Soil Testing Lab will give you information to help develop and maintain a good quality soil. The test will provide information about soil fertility. The Lab provides information to help with proper liming and fertilization. This will help obtain optimal soil conditions for the vegetable and flower garden, lawn, and ornamental plants in your landscape. Contact the UGA Extension Carroll County office for information on preparing a soil test sample.

Cleaning up debris and decaying vegetation from the garden is important. Plants that have a lot of dieback on them can cause problems in the early spring when there are chances of heavy rains. Any dead growth lying around can be a breeding place for disease and root rots. The vegetation can be added to the compost pile and in turn will improve soil quality.

Leaves are nature's homemade mulch. If you don't like raking and bagging, recycle leaves into mulch. If you remove leaves, you must replace them with some other mulch. A 3 to 5 inch layer of shredded leaves can be used around trees, shrubs, annuals, and perennials. Leaves provide a natural blanket for protecting tree and plant roots from the extreme winter temperatures. A key to successfully using leaves as mulch is to shred them with the lawn mower bagging attachment or leaf shredder so that they won't blow away.

Warm weather is when fire ants are most active. The UGA College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences recommends September as a good time to fight them. Controlling ant colonies before they produce a mound is important. Check the lawn and garden areas for ants. Contact the UGA Extension Office for information regarding recommended treatment strategies.

Lastly, when all the other garden and landscape chores are done, clean and oil garden tools for winter storage. If you don't plan on growing fall garden crops, now is the perfect time to inspect, repair and clean your garden tools. Tillers and mowers should be emptied of fuel or have a fuel stabilizer added. Check the spark plugs, and change the oil and air filters. Don't forget to clean the underside of the mower deck and remove old grass and debris. Check and repair shovels, hoes, and other tools now. Nothing is more frustrating than pulling out the garden tools in the spring and find that they are rusty or broken. Even worse is discovering the mower and tiller won't crank. Prepare now to prevent frustrations in the spring.

For more information on all your horticulture questions, contact a Carroll County Master Gardener Volunteer at the UGA Extension Carroll County Office at 900 Newnan Road., 770-836-8546 or via email at ccmg@uga.edu.