



Toronto
Green
Community

FALL GARDENING BASICS

Fall is the time when we put our gardens to bed for the winter; pruning, pulling up plants and harvesting any remaining crops. Below are a few basic things you can do to prepare for the fall and winter months and give your garden a great head start for next year!

Building Soil

Every year that you grow in your garden, more nutrients are taken up from the soil by plants. Adding nutrients back into your soil through compost, mulch and other organic amendments is a critical step in maintaining a healthy and productive garden.

Cover crops (red clover, winter rye and alfalfa) are planted over a field, allowed to grow from late fall to early spring, then cut down and mixed under to add nutrients to the soil. These crops also help to prevent erosion and can reduce compaction by loosening up soils with their root structures. They are generally planted in September, giving them 6-8 weeks to establish, and left on the beds until April.

Mulching involves putting any kind of material over the top of your soil to trap water, suppress weeds and keep soil cool. One simple method is to simply cut down all non-infected aerial (aboveground) parts of your plants, chop them and use them as mulch on the spot. This has the added benefit of leaving roots in the ground, allowing them to decompose and improve the soil from beneath.

One popular fall mulching technique is called sheet mulching, or “lasagna gardening”. This method can be used to improve an existing garden bed, or create a new bed where there wasn’t one before and is especially attractive because it doesn’t require any digging, makes use of available materials like leaves and grass clippings, and does a great job of suppressing weeds. How to “lasagna” mulch:

- . Lay down one layer of brown corrugated cardboard sheets (ripped up into small pieces) or three layers of shredded newsprint directly on top of grass or garden bed.
- . Add a second layer with a mixture of any of the following: compost, grass clippings, straw, leaves, weeds (that haven’t gone to seed)
- . Add alternative layers of “browns” and “greens”, and include a few layers of soil as well
- . Build up your layers to a height of 2’-4’. Your pile will shrink over winter as the layers decompose, leaving you with healthy, nutrient-rich soil to plant with in the spring.

Planting Bulbs

Fall is the time to plant edible and flowering bulbs for your spring garden. Planting in fall allows bulbs to establish roots before the ground freezes, giving them a head start in spring.

Garlic is one of the best bulbs to plant in fall, as it will provide you with 2 low-effort harvests (edible flowertops called scapes in spring, and bulbs in late summer) and they repel many pests from the garden as they grow. Choose larger cloves to ensure good-sized bulbs for next harvest. In mid-October, separate bulbs and plant point-side up at least 2 inches below the surface. Space bulbs about 6" apart either in a designated bed or around the perimeter of all plantings. As garlic doesn't like repeated freezing and thawing, it's best to cover with a 2-3" layer of mulch to insulate the bulbs. Planting onions follows a very similar process – simply plant onion or shallot bulbs with roots facing down and mulch well.

Planting Flowering Bulbs is an easy fall gardening activity to prepare for spring. They are a favourite for burrowing and digging animals so bulbs might need some extra protection. Bird netting and sprinkling blood meal over your planting can help repel digging animals. Some of the most popular spring bulbs for fall planting are: tulips, daffodils, hyacinths, grape hyacinths, crocus, snowdrops, anemones, bluebells and irises.

Larger bulbs (tulips, daffodils, hyacinths) should be planted about 6-8" deep and no more than 6" apart. Smaller bulbs (crocuses, snowdrops, etc) should be 4-5" deep and no more than 3" apart.

Saving Seeds

Saving seeds allows you to save money at the beginning of the season, and improve the quality of the plants in your garden by propagating seed from the best varieties in your garden each year. In addition, saving seeds is an important part of maintaining genetic biodiversity and increasing food security by resisting patenting and genetic modification of seeds. Whenever you save seed from plants, you should look for varieties with the best possible characteristics, for example, good taste, pest resistance, or high yield. If seed saving is something you enjoy, visit the Seeds of Diversity Canada website (www.seeds.ca) to learn more and to find out about Seedy Saturday – a yearly seed exchange event that takes place in communities across Canada.

Season Extension

Many cool-tolerant crops (leafy greens, kale, peas, mache, etc.) thrive in the fall months. If you want to try to include a fall harvest, there are some season extension techniques that you can try for your garden space. There are two basic models that most gardeners use: cold frames and tunnel cloche.

Cold Framing involves building "frames" to fit over your plants and using passive solar heat to keep the internal temperature suitable for growing in cooler months. Another similar type of model is the tunnel cloche, which is a tunnel formed out of pvc or metal hoops and covered with 6mil poly film. Glass is an alternative but more costly material but will be sturdier. The most important thing about cold framing is that you need to make sure there is adequate ventilation and a way for condensation to be managed. Frames can be bought as packages to assemble, or created using recycled and reclaimed materials depending on your creativity and building skills.

For more information on designs and workshops, Kyla Dixon-Muir is Toronto's ColdFrames and Season Extension Techniques expert, and her website www.mudpies.ca provides links to resources, videos and workshops on season extension.

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