

Get Your Yard Ready for Winter

By Chris Cooper

Fall is the time to begin preparing your lawn and landscape for the winter months. Many gardeners consider fall their favorite time of the year. Leaves begin to drop, the days start getting shorter, there is a little chill in the air during the evening hours, and Saturdays are all about SEC football!

To better prepare your yard and gardens for the winter, ensure that plants receive sufficient moisture during the fall months to ward off stress and death of plant tissue throughout the winter. Use organic matter to cover garden soil in vegetable beds to improve soil health over time and reduce the loss of precious topsoil. Do not forget native pollinators as you prepare your garden beds for winter. Leave some plant material in

place throughout the cold months to provide an overwintering habitat for pollinators. One added benefit? These plants can also provide seasonal interest throughout the cooler months.

Fall Watering

Water your trees, shrubs, lawns, and perennials during the fall to prevent root damage that affects the overall health of the entire plant. Plants that are weakened may be subject to insect and disease damage. Check soil moisture at least weekly during the driest parts of fall, when plants have a higher demand for water. Be sure to water deeply so the water penetrates at least the top six inches of soil; this usually requires one to two inches of water. Watering deeply but infrequently encourages a deep root system, making plants more drought tolerant. Winter winds can cause additional loss of water, especially if you have evergreens. Evergreens should be watered deeply in the fall if precipitation

has been insufficient. They are prone to lose water during the winter months when the temperature is above 40 degrees Fahrenheit and on days when it is sunny and windy. These plants will then become desiccated, turn brown and eventually die.

Improve the Soil

Fall is a great time to get your soil tested. Gardeners should test their soil at least every three years. The results you receive will give you the entire winter to plan for nutrient management in the upcoming year. Use a trusted lab, like the UT Soil, Plant & Pest Center in Nashville, for accurate readings. Having your soil tested can ensure that your plants get the nutrients they need without damaging the environment.

Don't leave the soil uncovered. Keeping your soil covered is key to soil health. Consider planting a cover crop. This will mitigate soil erosion during the winter, improve soil quality, and



add organic material when turned under in the spring. Popular fall-planted cover crops include crimson clover, hairy vetch, oats, and winter rye. Crimson clover and hairy vetch are legumes. These plants add a great

deal of nitrogen to the soil after they decompose. The roots of cover crops grow deeply into the soil which helps to pull up nutrients. The crops are then turned over into the soil in the spring, before going to seed. If you

have any questions about planting cover crops, please reach out to your county extension office. They have a list of cover crops that are appropriate for your area. Be a good steward of the earth by planting a fall cover crop!

Left, courtesy of Peter Richards: UT Extension Horticultural Agent and Coordinator for the Extension Master Gardener Program in Shelby County, Chris Cooper, author of this article. **Below, courtesy of Evan Buchholz, Unsplash.com:** Fall blooming perennials like aster can provide butterflies with the food to prepare for winter.



Another approach to covering the soil is to simply add leaves, other organic material, and straw to your garden beds. Organic matter is a vital contributor to soil health. Most garden plants benefit from an increase in soil organic matter, which includes living, dead, and decomposing plants, small animals, and microorganisms. Soil high in organic matter improves biological activity, soil aeration, root growth and water drainage. Organic mulches such as grass clippings, tree leaves, and straw decompose and contribute to soil organic matter. These organic materials may be available in your yard—or a

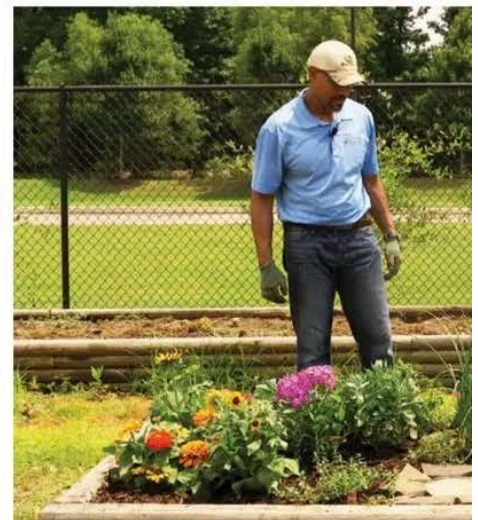
neighbor's yard. The recycled nutrients will permeate the soil, which is then taken up by your plants. Shredded or mulched leaves will rot much more quickly than whole leaves. Shredded leaves can be spread on garden beds to protect the soil over the winter. Again, most garden and landscape plants perform best when soil organic matter is present. The leaves on your lawn can be mowed and mulched into the turf. This will aid in building organic matter and return nutrients to the soil. If you have an abundance of leaves on your lawn, you may have to make multiple passes to grind them up.

Don't Forget About the Pollinators

As the days start to cool and shorten, many will venture out into the yard to tidy it up a bit. This usually includes raking leaves and cutting back dead or dying plants. Is this the right thing to do for the pollinators in the garden? We think of some species of birds and butterflies like monarchs that migrate for the winter, but many of our pollinators and wildlife will remain with us. During the winter months, most insects will stop developing due to unfavorable conditions, whether egg, larva, pupa or adult. Insects seek out protected locations to overwinter regardless of their developmental stage. Leaves that have made their way to the ground can be an excellent place for insects to overwinter. These leaves provide much needed protection, especially for many species of moths and butterflies. Consider leaving some leaves in garden beds or other areas of your landscape to provide habitat for pollinators and overwintering animals.

When those beautiful perennials begin to decline in the fall, consider leaving them in place. I know that many of us will go out and start removing dead foliage and flower stalks because we want our landscape to be nice and

Below, left, courtesy of Peter Richards: Chris Cooper and Joellen Dimond examine a plant. Dimond is director of landscape at University of Memphis. At center they are planting a pollinator garden.



neat. While this will give us the visual appeal that we are seeking, it may not be best for our pollinators. If possible, wait until spring to remove dead plant material. Embrace the beauty of winter in your landscape by leaving flower stalks, dried leaves, and ornamental grasses. This gives your landscape an added dimension of winter interest.

You will discover that dried or dead plant material can provide habitat for pollinators and other beneficial insects that we crave in our gardens. These beneficial insects may lay eggs on those plants. Butterflies will pupate and spend the winter months on these plants as well. Leaving these plant materials in your landscape preserves these insects for the coming year. Do not forget to leave flower stalks, as they can benefit birds. Seed heads of purple coneflowers, Joe-Pye weed, sedums, and black-eyed Susan are an important food source for seed eating birds during the winter. The insects that overwinter on these plants will provide a nourishing meal for the babies of seed eating birds in the spring.

If you cannot resist the urge to cut back your plant material, instead of putting the cuttings in your trash, keep them in an area of your garden where they are out of view. Some native bee species like mason and leaf-

cutter bees may appreciate the hollow stems and use them as nesting habitat. If you've had issues with diseased plants in your landscape, you will need to remove those plants. Disease organisms overwinter on plant debris, and will pose a problem again next year. Additionally, insect pests can overwinter in plant debris. Removing diseased plant debris not only helps reduce the amount of diseases, it can also aid in the reduction of the number of pests you

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may encounter in the garden next year.

Fall is a great time to prepare your landscape for the winter months ahead. If you have questions, reach out to your local UT Extension office. They have resources available that can help get your yard ready for the winter.

Learn more:

- uthort.com
- extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Pages/default.aspx
- utextension.tennessee.edu.

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Below, courtesy of Markus Spiske Unsplash.com: Pick up fallen fruit because it can be a place for diseases and insect pests to overwinter.

