

An Alaska Gardener's Fall & Winter To-Do List

Fall To-Do List

- Remove crop residues from garden plots.** Most crop residue can be composted. Removing it also helps to prevent disease and insect pests, such as root maggots, from overwintering and returning.
- Remove and store poles, trellises and portable frames.** Avoid the effects of winter damage and weathering. Needed repairs or refinishing can also be accomplished now. Mark perennials for spring. A marked stake can indicate location and provide information on what should be emerging next spring.
- Apply mulch.** Mulch provides a protective, insulating layer around sensitive perennials. Avoid conditions and timing that would allow rodents to overwinter in the mulch. Use grass clippings or leaves or, even better, straw and weed-free hay. Mulch conserves moisture, reduces erosion and leaching, prevents rapid temperature fluctuations and improves soil structure after it is incorporated. Don't forget spring removal.
- Surround perennials in containers with insulating mulch.** The amount of soil in containers is not sufficient to buffer the fluctuating extremes of winter weather. Other options would be to place the container in the ground or store the plant in a sheltered location such as a crawl space or cool garage.
- Till and turn heavy or compacted soils, then add organics.** This allows faster drainage and warming in the spring. More organic material may be added in the spring when the soil is prepared for planting.
- Dig in a top dressing of compost for raised or deep beds.** This increases drainage, improves physical structure and adds nutrients. Material should be well composted to avoid introduction of weed seeds and other pests.
- Put up windbreaks, fences and protective shelters.** Sheltering is an effective way to reduce the drying and damaging effects of winter winds on woody perennials. Fences may also be useful in preventing damage to plants by animals, winter traffic and other harmful activity. Windbreak material may include boards, burlap or other material that will disrupt the force of the wind.
- Build a compost pile.** Select an open site with good drainage. Use finely divided material and turn the pile periodically to maintain aerobic conditions. Composting can recycle plant debris. Selected household scraps such as raw vegetables and egg shells provide nutrients when added to the soil and maintain the physical structure of garden soil.
- Empty buckets, watering cans, rain barrels.** Emptying reduces freezing damage, prevents the accumulation of debris and allows for any needed repairs or refurbishing.
- Put away hoses and sprinklers.** Drain completely. Check for cracks and other damage. Store in a location where they will not be subject to physical damage.
- Store clay and terra-cotta pots out of the weather.** Clean thoroughly if they have been used. Store in a dry location away from activities that may cause breakage.
- Keep evergreen and deciduous shrubs well watered before the ground freezes.** Watering prevents winter desiccation. Plants can lose water even during dormancy. Watering is ineffective after the ground freezes. Insufficient moisture, frozen ground and winter wind combined can result in drying or winter kill.
- Carry out any garden expansion plans at this time.** Fall is usually a time of decreased activity, which allows opportunity for these projects. Conduct a soil test on the new garden area to determine fertility and liming requirements. This may be a good time to construct raised beds and improve the soil for their use.
- Plant bulbs.** Soil should be well drained. Fall planting allows time for root development so that the bulb can produce and push forth leaf growth as soon as spring soil conditions allow. Mulch to prevent temperature extremes. Remove the mulch in spring to allow soil warming.
- "Winterize" perennials.** This includes watering, pruning to remove dead, damaged or diseased parts, mulching to provide insulation over the root area, and wrapping thin bark trees to prevent damage by winter sun and rodents. Shrubs and small trees also need to be protected from moose. Dividing and replanting some perennials may also be required.
- Prune raspberries, currants, roses, gooseberries and other berry bushes.** Remove old nonbearing canes, thin overgrown areas, prune, and remove any damaged, dead or diseased parts. Remove branches that are too close to the ground. Cut back canes or branches that have grown too long. Canes may be saved for markers or supports.
- Watch the weather and protect perennials and shrubs with frost cloth if a sudden frost is forecasted.** A sudden or early frost can damage garden crops and perennials that have not had time to prepare for dormancy. Damage from a light frost can be prevented with frost cloth, but a hard freeze will probably result in extensive garden damage. Frost cloth is available in a variety of weights — the higher the weight, the more effective it is at protecting plants from frost. Bed sheets or plastic can be used in a pinch.

- Sharpen and repair hand tools.** Resharpener hoes to a blunt angle, about 30 degrees, with a flat file. Other cutting tools can be sharpened to a finer angle, 20-26 degrees. Clean off all rust and dirt and apply a protective coat of oil (such as linseed oil) on both the metal and wood parts of the tool before storing for the winter.
- Bring in soil, sand, compost and flats to use for starting seedlings the following year.** Pasteurize starting media and screened compost by heating to 180°F for one-half hour. Avoid contaminating pasteurized media. Store all materials in a dry location. Clean flats with a mixture of one part bleach to nine parts water if they have previously been in contact with soil.
- Check to see that leftover and collected seeds are stored properly.** Provide a cool, dry location for maximum storage life. Conduct a germination test on leftover seeds in the spring to determine viability.
- Change management activities for the greenhouse accordingly.** As days shorten and temperatures decrease, plant activity slows and requirements for water and nutrients diminish. After harvest is complete, remove plants from the greenhouse.
- Index stored, frozen and canned crops.** Make everything easy to find and maintain an inventory of what is remaining. Storage cannot maintain quality, so plan to use stored produce as soon as possible.
- Check the UAF Cooperative Extension Service website (www.uaf.edu/ces) for information on storing crops in a root cellar and drying, fermenting, freezing or canning produce.**
- Make Christmas gifts.** Jellies, jams and canned produce make very personal and welcome gifts. Design your own personalized labels; your thoughtfulness will be long remembered. Dried material from your garden can be used for wreaths and potpourri that will bring joy for many years.

Winter To-Do List

- Investigate new plant varieties in seed catalogs.** Try a few new varieties each year and compare them with others that have been consistently dependable. The Cooperative Extension Service has publications available on recommended varieties of vegetables and fruits.
- Review your garden journal.** Use what you learned to improve your garden next year.
- Build or plan projects for next season.** Spring is usually a very busy time. Accomplish as much as possible in the winter to make spring less hectic. Boxes, hangers, cold frames and indoor lighting may all be projects that can be accomplished indoors during the winter.
- Improve and organize your food storage facilities.** Determine storage requirements for each crop that you grow. Temperature and humidity control are important. Don't forget space requirements differ too!
- Collect containers and protective covers for seedlings.** Clear plastic containers are potentially usable as hot caps for protecting newly transplanted crops and as collars to prevent pest problems.
- Try new recipes for stored produce.** Tasty, fresh and nutritious produce is the reward of your gardening efforts. Obtain recipes from your local Extension office. Trade recipes with friends and neighbors.
- Avoid applying salt to paths and roadways near plants.** Use urea or other fertilizer that can benefit plants next spring. Apply sparingly since fertilizers contain salts also. Sand or other inert material can be a good alternative.
- Save wood ashes.** Wood ashes help recycle waste and will reduce the requirements for lime.
- Cut brush and branches for peas, beans and tall flowers.** Using naturally available materials for trellising can reduce the overall cost of gardening.
- Compost kitchen scraps.** Egg shells, coffee grounds, and fruit and vegetable scraps (no meats, fats or salad dressings) can be composted for later use in the garden..
- Swap gardening stories and information. Study insects, birds, plants diseases and gardening techniques.** Successful gardening requires constant learning. Benefit from other gardeners' experience and use books, magazines and Cooperative Extension Service newsletters and publications.
- Keep track of what you're buying in the store and think about how you could replace it with homegrown produce.** Gardening provides you with nutritious alternatives to store-bought vegetables, and you know what conditions they were grown in from seeding to harvest. Cost, freshness and quality are areas of concern for all consumers.
- Learn more about gardening.** Read books or blogs about gardening or sign up for a workshop or a class like the Alaska Master Gardener class.
- Garden indoors in pots and tubs.** Be aware of the plant requirements for light and temperature. Winter produce is a real treat.
- Rest. Dream. Plan.** Looking forward to spring can make the winters seem shorter. Plan ahead so that next year's garden will be the best one yet. It will be here before you know it.

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