

The Garden in November

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The garden in November tends to not be very beautiful. I don't mean to be a Negative Nellie here but take a look around. Perennials that haven't yet been cut down for the season languish in varying states of decomposition and frost blackened leaves smell strongly of decay. Most deciduous trees have dropped their leaves and are skeletons of their former selves with bare branches clacking mournfully in the wind. And the annuals. Those bright, cheerful, flower power houses of summer color have been reduced to gelatinous piles of slimy goo unless they have already been cast off to the compost pile. It's enough to cause the most seasoned gardener to shudder and slam the door on it all, burrow deep into warm winter hibernation with feet up and aimed in the general direction of a toasty fire. A stack of gardening books waits on the table beside the cozy chair. After all, the most seasoned gardener knows, for all the garden's grim appearances, that all is well and as it should be this time of year. Just as we retreat indoors and carry on planning, creating, celebrating and loving, so too the garden is carrying on. Roots grow as soil dwellers help to break down plant material to create food so the plants can store this energy and save it for spring. Sure, maybe things could be spiffed up a bit, but the work can also wait for a time when perhaps the wind isn't blowing quite so hard and the rain isn't falling quite so steadily.

In the ornamental garden (between rain showers, of course!)

- Get your bulbs in the ground. Don't forget about them! They don't carry over season to season the way some seeds do. Besides, they are so refreshing and cheerful once spring comes around! You will be happy!
- Let the fallen leaves lay where they land (unless they're diseased). Leaves are an excellent mulch and if left alone they will provide shelter for important overwintering beneficial insects and spiders. Remember, these little critters do good work for us in our gardens and they need a safe habitat over winter. Plus, over time leaves will break-down and add nutrients to the soil and help improve soil structure.
- Leave as much as you can to rot on its own and remove only what you need to in order to satisfy your sense of tidiness. Hydrangea blossoms hold their rich color long into the season and many perennials, like *Eryngium*, *Sedum*, and *Echinacea*, keep their form and lend interest to gardens when we forget to pay as much attention. Plus, they look lovely laced with frost.
- Leave your grasses alone for now. Their tawny hues and graceful structure lend beauty and softness to the fall and winter garden.
- Drain and store hoses for winter. If you have an irrigation system, make sure to drain it too so there's no water left in the pipes to freeze.
- It's still ok to do a bit of rearranging in the garden. Part of the beauty and fun of gardening is that nothing is static. You can change anything you want in your garden. If you need or want to move perennials or shrubs, or even trees, fall really is the best time to do it. Plants are going dormant so there is less chance of transplant shock. Plus, you can count on more regular rainfall so you don't have to do as much hand-watering. Always deeply water right after you've moved something to be sure to give your plant a good start.
- Fall is also a really good time to create new garden beds or enlarge old ones. My favorite way to do this is by sheet mulching, mostly because it's so darn easy! It does take time though. Plot out where you want your new bed installed and then dig out around the perimeter, removing only about six inches or so of sod (lawn). Leave the rest of the lawn alone. Cover your entire bedding space (including the part you dug out) with flattened cardboard or lots of layers of newspaper (I mean lots, like twenty pages thick). I prefer cardboard because it seems to smother the grass better, but avoid any cardboard that contains wax. I've found that if it's been dry, watering the grass helps with decomposition. In the past I've also sprinkled the ground to be covered with cottonseed meal, which is high in nitrogen, so supposedly

it speeds up the process. My experiment was not scientific in any way, but it did seem to speed things up a bit. Water down the cardboard or paper to prevent it from blowing away before you have a chance to apply a mulch. Cover the cardboard or newspaper with a 6-8 inch layer of compost or woody mulch. You can mix straw and/or leaves in with the compost if you want. Then just leave it alone for about 6 months or so. The grass under the cardboard and mulch gets smothered and rots and becomes beautiful garden soil that is ready to be planted in the spring. You can skip the digging out the perimeter step if you'd like. I always do this step because it creates a nice crisp edge and keeps the grass from encroaching on your new bed.

- Don't forget to pot up a few paperwhites and Amaryllis for the holidays. There are lots of different varieties at Christianson's and the bulbs are absolutely giant! Size matters when it comes to bulbs and these promise lots of color. Paperwhites take about 6 weeks to flower and Amaryllis take about 8-10 weeks, depending on the temperature in your home.
- If you have plants in ceramic pots outdoors, remove the saucers from underneath them so they don't fill with water and then freeze. This task will help prevent winter damage to your pots.

In the veggie garden:

- There's still time to plant garlic. However, your window of opportunity is narrowing. Garlic should be in the ground by the middle of this month to allow time for the roots to develop before the ground gets too cold. If you can't or don't plant garlic now, it's ok. You'll have another opportunity to do so in the spring. It just means a different harvest time.
- Mulch your empty veggie beds with fallen leaves or straw (NOT hay, as this contains seeds of whatever that grass is and they will sprout in your beds).
- If you are growing asparagus, now is the time to cut the tops off down to the ground. Mulch to protect the crowns over winter.
- Make sure to bring in all of your winter squash so that it doesn't rot. Wash away any mud, dry and store in a cool, dry spot.

I hope you all have a very great Thanksgiving, filled with all the good things! Friends, family, tasty food, and a deep feeling of well-being and gratitude. After all, we do have a lot to be thankful for!