

martha stewart

Four Essential Tasks to Complete in the Garden This Fall

Prepare for Fall Planting

Cooler weather doesn't have to be your garden's curtain call. In some areas (and for some varieties or plants), the blooming has just begun. As a matter of fact, some plants prefer the cooler nights and shorter days that fall brings, so you'll need to plan accordingly. This is especially true if you want to get your favorite fall annuals, like mums, in the ground; make sure your garden beds are clear of summer's leftover debris before you plant. And if you're expecting autumn flowers and foliage, add another another layer of compost, till the earth, and start any seeds that need time to establish well before the first frost.

As summer's swelter gives way to the crisp, cooler temperatures of fall, your garden begins to change—and so should your task list, since your yard's needs adjust as the seasons do. While some of your plants may be at the dawn of their growing cycles when autumn hits, others are at the end; these generally need to be cut back to begin their dormant period. Here, two garden experts explain all of key tasks to accomplish in your garden this fall, regardless of what you have growing there.

Fall can also be a great time to plant hardy trees; doing so during this time allows them the chance to form root systems before the next growing season. Plant them now so that they will be ready for spring, says Chad Husby, Ph.D. and Chief Explorer at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden. "It is also a good time to plant many hardy bulbs and perennials so that they can have a stronger start the growing season," he shares.

Protect Less Hardy Plants

If you have plants that are marginally hardy in your area, Husby suggests taking the time this season to protect the more delicate ones. This will give them a better chance of coming back in the springtime, when the weather turns warm again. Herbaceous plants, in particular, need your attention, says Husby: "Layers of mulch or compost can help insulate them," he adds.



Prune

Plants that put on their biggest show during these cooler weeks need to be pruned before new buds begin to form. And you'll need to act fast. "All-winter blooming shrubs and trees should have been pruned by the fall equinox—September 22—so not to interrupt the blooming cycle," explains Joel Crippen, the Display Garden Horticulturist with Mounts Botanical Garden of Palm Beach County. And for the varieties that are done for now? Cut them all the way back, so they're ready to go when they reawaken.

Collect Seeds

Saving seeds from your spring and summer flowers? Make sure you've collected them before frost or birds get there first. Just make sure you're storing them safely, so they will be ready to sprout next spring. "Best to dry and store them in paper envelopes. Put them in a cool, dry location until the late winter-spring sowing time," explains Crippen. And be mindful of seed type during this process—certain varieties need to be stored under different combinations of temperature, dryness, and humidity levels, says Husby. "Fortunately, when storing seeds for a single season, one need not have ideal conditions," he says, adding that the most important thing is to have *consistent* conditions, sans major fluctuations in temperature, humidity, or light. "The best places are consistently cool (not necessarily cold), dry, and dark," he says. "Refrigerators work well, but cool basements or cellars can, too."

