



The heady days of summer have long gone and our gardens are winding down for winter. Sadly, that doesn't mean there's any less to do.

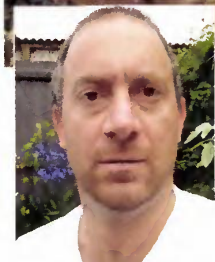
There's always plenty of tidying as the season ends. Although unkempt gardens are a haven for wildlife, it's always worth clearing old plant material as it often harbours pests and disease.

### Recycle, recycle, recycle

Composting is a wonderful way of recycling garden debris. After you've removed all the old growth, place it on the compost heap, crushing any thicker stems as you do so, as this will help them break down more easily. Avoid adding diseased material or perennial weeds as these may cause problems in the future. Either burn it or place it with your household waste.

A shredder may seem an unnecessary expense but woody material degrades much quicker if shredded - shredding increases the surface area available for microbial decomposition.

If you have the space, create your own bin using old pallets and chicken wire - compost decomposes much more effectively if air can circulate. Avoid plastic compost bins at all costs. It's really hard to mix the material inside properly and air can't penetrate.



# Ready and waiting

Prepare your garden now and it will emerge unscathed next spring, advises Gareth Salter.



**Far left** Dig over the borders as winter approaches. ©NTPL/Paul Harris. **Above** Autumn leaves, when rotted down are a great soil enhancer. ©NTPL/Ian Shaw. **Left** Available from Burgon & Ball, these natural hessian sacks will prevent your stored spuds from sweating.

Anaerobic decomposition is a much longer process and the results smell horrible.

Successful gardeners make the most of nature's bounty and autumn leaves are a wonderful resource. Instead of composting them with your other garden waste, use them to make leaf mould. It's the best soil improver you can make. Simply place them in a bin liner and, after tying it at the top, make holes in the sides. Leave it to rot down and you'll have excellent soil conditioner in a year's time.

A bonfire is the best way of disposing of woody or diseased waste and, with Guy Fawkes' Night on the horizon, it makes sense to save it until then. Many gardeners worry that byelaws prohibit the burning of garden waste but this generally isn't true. Never burn wet material or anything that produces noxious fumes and check with your neighbours if it's convenient. Courtesy pays dividends. Sprinkle the ash produced around your shrubs and let the rain wash the nutrients into the ground.

## Planting time

Spring may be the busiest time in the garden, but autumn's equally important. Traditionally considered the best time to plant - the soil's moist and warm from the summer sun, so anything planted can get established before winter arrives.

Autumn's also the best time to lift and divide overcrowded perennials. Once you've removed the clump, split it into several pieces and, after composting the woody growth in the middle, replant the remaining pieces making sure each has roots and stems.

Although spring-flowering bulbs are available from August onwards, you can continue planting them in the winter months, providing the ground isn't frozen or waterlogged. Indeed, tulips do best if planted in November. A few pots of snowdrops, eranthis, crocus, hyacinths and narcissi will really brighten your garden next spring. However, as one growing season starts, so another ends. Lift cannas, dahlias and hederichiums and place them in trays of slightly moist compost in a cool, dark shed until warmer temperatures return.

Years ago, most trees and shrubs were bought as bare-root plants during the >>



autumn. These days, with garden centres supplying containerised plants all year round, few gardeners restrict planting to this period alone. Nevertheless, the range of plants increases dramatically when you include those sold bare-root and most establish better because, having been grown in a field situation, their root systems are more extensive.

Plants ordered in this way usually arrive wrapped in brown paper and should be planted immediately. If the ground's waterlogged, frozen or covered in snow, heel them in elsewhere until conditions improve.

### Making cut backs

I find the autumn tidy-up a therapeutic process and enjoy cutting back herbaceous perennials once they've finished flowering. It gives me a chance to assess each plant individually and see if it's healthy, whether it needs dividing, or, if it isn't thriving where it is, whether it should be moved somewhere more suitable.

Some perennials continue flowering right into the winter months, such as chrysanthemums, rudbeckia and so, if your borders are lacking colour, use these to fill any gaps in the planting. The flowers of other perennials, such as sedums, look attractive throughout the winter months, especially when burnished by frost. Leave these and the seedheads of ornamental grasses (varieties of stipa, miscanthis and pennisetum) and thistles like eryngiums.



**Above** Spectacular during July, August and September, cannas (shown top right) should be lifted in autumn. © NTPL/Jonathan Buckley

**Left** Pick bunches of herbs and suspend them from a drier, £9.95, from Burgon & Ball.

Aesthetically pleasing, their seedheads are also a valuable resource for wildlife.

Although most gardeners prune their roses in March, large plants should be cut back now to prevent wind damage. Shorten stems by a third and remove any that are diseased or crossing. You should also prune fruit trees like apples while they're dormant. Never prune stone fruits such as cherries now though because you risk silver infection. Prune these during the growing season when the sap is rising.

Whether you believe in climate change or not, average temperatures are rising and many of us are mowing our grass in November. Mowing thickens it up so continue mowing while it grows but raise the height of the blades and leave alone if the grass is wet.

### The vegetable garden

A well-planned vegetable garden can remain productive well into winter with many root crops withstanding freezing temperatures. Indeed, parsnips taste better after a few weeks of icy conditions.

Nevertheless, it pays to lift and store root crops such as carrots, swede and turnips before the ground freezes. Potatoes should be lifted while the soil's still relatively dry to avoid slug attack. Once the skins are dry, brush off any mud and store them in sacks in a cool place.

Although the growing season's over, hardy crops such as broad beans and peas can be sown until November. Given the chance to establish properly, they should be less susceptible to blackfly than those sown during the spring, but watch out for mice.

If you want to brighten your sandwiches, sow winter-hardy lettuce, mustard and mizuna and bring them on using a cloche, greenhouse or coldframe. And, while you're sorting through your seeds, sow a few sweet peas. They often do better when sown now because they produce such an extensive root system during the autumn that they can grow away quickly during the spring. Although runner beans can't be sown until next year, you can prepare the planting site now by

**Right** Sow broad beans during the autumn and they'll overwinter happily and crop next spring.

©NTPL/James Dobson

**Below** Autumn's an ideal planting time in the garden. It helps to get plants established early should you get a dry spring.

©NTPL/Paul Harris



placing vegetable peelings in a trench. Extremely hungry feeders, runner beans require a heavily enriched soil to prosper.

### Preparing the ground

The soil in your garden will need replenishing after a heavy season so add plenty of compost by digging it in or leaving it on the surface for the worms. If your soil is sticky, dig it over and let the weather work its magic. Frost action will break down any large clods and make it more workable.

Alternatively, add nutrients by sowing a green manure. Seeds of crops like phacelia germinate quickly, producing masses of leafy growth. Once dug in, their leaves decompose releasing their nutrients. The remains of any leguminous crops should be dug in at the same time rather than added to the compost. Their root nodules are packed with nitrogen-fixing bacteria which convert nitrogen from the air into nitrates which the plants use when growing.

With little else happening in the garden during the winter, encourage birds by putting out food, erecting nesting boxes and cleaning the birdbath. They'll repay your kindness by eating pests such as aphids, caterpillars and slugs. Now, with some activity outside the window sit beside the fire with a glass of something tasty and flick through a few seed catalogues. There's no better time to start planning!