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Preparing the Vegetable Garden for Winter

By the end of October, most Virginia gardeners are wrapping up the garden season. With a little care now, gardening can be easier and more rewarding in future seasons.

Remove all crop debris from the garden. Dead plants provide winter hiding places for insects and disease which can cause problems the following spring. Either leave these plants on the soil to till into the garden or put them on the compost heap. Plant material that is diseased should be disposed of in the trash.

Spread any available organic matter such as collected leaves on the garden if you will be tilling it before winter. If you will not be tilling until spring, compost the organic matter to add at that time. Leaves that are tilled into the garden in the fall will have time to decompose and release valuable nutrients to the soil as well as improving soil structure. However, a thick layer of leaves left on the soil surface will mat down and decompose slowly. This mat of leaves will delay warming and drying of the soil in the spring.

Fall plowing or tilling can benefit the garden in several ways. Besides mixing in organic matter to improve structure and fertility, it can also disrupt the life cycle of many insect pests, exposing larvae and pupae to winter cold. The thawing and freezing throughout the winter will break down clods of soil left after plowing, resulting in a smooth and friable seed bed ready for sowing in the spring. If a soil test indicates a need to apply lime or sulfur to alter soil pH, apply them to the garden before fall tilling. By spring they will have corrected the pH problem.

Cover crops are an excellent way of improving garden soil over the winter. Cover crops decrease winter erosion and add organic matter when incorporated into the soil. Check with your county agent or seed store for the recommended varieties for your area. Till the soil and broadcast the seed at the recommended rate. Rake it in lightly. Plant the seed as early as August 1 but no later than late October so the plants will have a chance to grow some before frosts kill them. Till the plants into the soil several weeks before planting so that the residues will have time to decompose.

Do not apply fertilizer to the garden in the fall. Winter rains will leach most fall applied nutrients from the soil, wasting your time and money. The nutrients which are washed away can cause problems where they are not needed, polluting groundwater or causing algal blooms in ponds, streams, and rivers where they end up. Wait until spring and planting time to apply fertilizer. With a little fall preparation, spring planting will be easier than ever.

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