

What to Do in October 2023

Sep 30 – Oct. 6

Perennials: In established gardens, finish planting new perennials or dividing those in need. This will allow time for the roots to become established before winter. Remove diseased foliage throughout the garden. If you cut back late-blooming hollow stemmed plants, leave at least 12 inches of the stems intact for native cavity nesting bees. New growth can hide these after the perennials emerge in spring. Wait until the ground freezes to mulch the perennials you planted this fall. This will help to discourage voles and keep the soil from heaving during a winter thaw and exposing plant roots to cold air.

Flowers: If the garden and your interest in it typically fade by this time of year, perk it up with a final pop of color by planting mums, ornamental cabbage and/or kale, pansies, or other interesting ornamentals for fall interest that may be locally available. You can also plan ahead and make a list of late blooming plants to fill gaps in the garden that could use extra color. Thinking ahead will help you to get popular varieties of plants as they become available.

Fruits and Vegetables: Harvest fall greens, including those that have thinned out to make space for other plants as they become large enough to use. If there are still potatoes in the garden, finish harvesting soon. Keep up with the harvest of main season crops, tree fruit and fall berries that are still producing. Remember to take off any shriveled “mummy” fruit to prevent overwintering plant diseases in these locations. Garlic can go in the ground any time this month (the sooner the better). Now’s also the time to dig up and divide rhubarb if it has grown like crazy this summer.

Trees and Shrubs: Continue planting deciduous woody plants now through November, after they’ve shed their leaves. Be sure to remove any soil you see over the root flare (the area where the trunk or stems meet the roots) before planting. This can help to prevent deep planting that can cause trees and shrubs to fail. To prevent settling, make the planting hole as deep as the rootball. Mound an inch or two of soil beneath the plant in the hole to allow for settling. To facilitate root establishment, make the hole 3-5 times the diameter of the rootball and remove all burlap, twine and wires as you refill the hole with the excavated soil. Plants must be well hydrated to develop a healthy root system for successful establishment. Water well to settle the soil, but don’t fertilize.

Lawns: Finish seeding in the next 2 weeks or so to foster turf establishment before the ground freezes. Pick up leaves that are beginning to drop, taking care not to damage or uproot the young grass.

Houseplants should be inside by now. If yours are not, bring them in. Houseplants usually fare better if brought indoors before the heat comes on. (An exception is Christmas cactus, which can stay outdoors until temperatures drop to about 40°F.) Check the plants over for pests like aphids, spider mites and whiteflies before you move them inside. If you find houseplant pests, contact your local Cooperative Extension for advice. Also check pots and other outdoor items for egg masses of the spotted lanternfly: their eggs can be deposited on many outdoor surfaces in addition to plants. If you live in, plan to travel, or have recently returned from a place where SLF is established, be sure to check your vehicle and any items kept outdoors for hitchhiking lanternflies or their eggs, and remove all before traveling (a flashlight and mirror may be helpful in hard to see spaces). For more information on how to report spotted lanternfly if it is new to your location, and how to deal with this invasive pest, see <https://westchester.cce.cornell.edu/horticulture-environment/invasive-nuisance-species/invasive-pests/spotted-lanternfly>

Oct. 7 - 13

Perennials: If you have plans to create a new bed next year, you may get a jumpstart by removing grass or groundcover this way: Cover the area with corrugated cardboard and/or a thick blanket of newspaper, and top with mulch. Next spring once the soil can be worked, remove any perennial weeds that survived the winter, amend the soil if needed according to a soil test, and you'll be ready to plant.

Flowers: Asters and mums may bloom longer if you protect them before a forecasted hard frost. Cover them before nightfall or when frost is predicted (even a bed sheet will work), but remember to remove the cover the following day as it warms up.

Fruits and Vegetables: Harvest or cover less-hardy vegetables to protect them from frost. Start thinking seriously about fall cleanup around fruit trees. To discourage rodents, clean up fallen fruit, grass and weeds around fruit trees and consider protecting trunks with hardware cloth. Remove spent vegetable plants and discard any that are infested with disease or insects. If you have space, you may bury disease-free plants that are infested with aphids, other minute insects, or mites. Add pest and weed seed-free remnants to the compost pile. Keep up with the harvest of late maturing apples, pears and other tree fruit. If American persimmons are not completely ripe when picked they are unpleasantly astringent. Asian persimmons hardy to our region may be picked near-ripe and finish ripening off the plant.

Trees and Shrubs: Continue to prune dead, damaged and diseased plant parts, but save regular pruning of most shade trees and late-flowering shrubs for early spring (pruning will remove blossoms of shrubs that flower early). Wait until after the first frost to prune oak trees. At this point, oak trees will be entering dormancy and less likely to be exposed to the beetles that carry oak wilt. Invasive spotted lanternfly (SLF) adults are laying eggs now. The insects are especially attracted to tree of heaven and grape vines, but their eggs can be deposited on many surfaces in addition to trees. If you live in, plan to travel, or have recently returned from a place where SLF is established, be sure to check your vehicle and any items kept outdoors for hitchhiking lanternflies or their eggs, and remove all before traveling (a flashlight and mirror may be helpful in hard to see spaces). For more information on how to report spotted lanternfly if it is new to your location, and how to deal with this invasive pest, see <https://westchester.cce.cornell.edu/horticulture-environment/invasive-nuisance-species/invasive-pests/spotted-lanternfly>

Lawns: Last call: If you haven't yet fertilized the lawn, you may apply fertilizer now according to a soil test, and finish up for the season. Cool-season grass is perking up again, and since fewer weeds germinate in fall there should be less competition to create dense turf for next spring.

Houseplants: Ficus, hibiscus and some other houseplants often shed their leaves when they are moved indoors. This is less likely if plants are brought in before the heat goes on. Though this is not the best time to prune most houseplants, those that do not go dormant in winter indoors may be pruned a bit (no more than ¼ to ⅓ of the total depending on type) if they are too large. Provide plenty of sun for sun lovers and bright indirect light for shade lovers. To avoid size issues next year, prune overgrown specimens back when you first move them outdoors in late May. You may also want to make note of the plants that need a bigger pot, so you can be ready to transplant in the spring.

General: Make a date to have the gutters and downspouts cleaned out. When these clog with leaves, water may enter the home and cause structural damage. Clogged gutters also provide a good habitat for mosquitoes.

Oct. 14 - 20

Perennials: Continue planting spring-flowering bulbs such as crocus, daffodils and hyacinth. At your wit's end from animals digging up bulbs? You can protect new bulbs from critters that dig up the bulbs by planting them in hardware cloth cages or enclosing a whole trench with this metal mesh. Here's an informal experiment you can try. If lining a trench with hardware cloth is not an option, you can try planting standard size tulip and

daffodil bulbs (not short varieties!) more deeply than usually recommended. These may be less likely to be dug up, and there is a chance that some might last longer before needing division.

Flowers: Cannas and dahlias may successfully overwinter with protection outdoors if you are in a warmer location in Westchester Co. (USDA Zone 7). If you are in a cooler spot, dig the tubers and rhizomes up once a hard frost has killed back the tops. At that time, trim off the dead foliage and allow them to surface-dry in an airy, frost-free place before storing. Store in a dry place that remains above freezing (optimally about 35° to 40°F) in paper bags, a leg of an old stocking, or in a single layer in an airy container. Check stored tubers occasionally to make sure they do not shrivel. If needed, sprinkle very lightly with water to rehydrate the plants and allow the surfaces to dry again before returning to storage.

Fruits and Vegetables: Continue harvesting fall crops. Warm season vegetables such as beans, peppers, tomatoes, and vine crops can be damaged when temperatures dip below about 50 to 55°. If an early frost is predicted, you may cover plants with a sheet just before sundown. Remove the sheet in the morning when temperatures start to rise. Consider removing plants where there is little left to harvest. You can add healthy spent plants to the compost pile.

Trees and Shrubs: Pruning woody plants that have not fully hardened off may result in slow-healing wounds that can become diseased. Most woody plants are best pruned in early spring or right after their flowers fade, which is best for those that have already set next year's flower buds this season. An exception is oak. If you need to prune, do this during the dormant season to reduce the risk of oak wilt disease.

Lawns: Don't let leaves remain on the lawn over the winter because they'll smother the grass. A thin coating of light, dry leaves that disappear into the lawn may be moved into the grass. If you don't have a mulching mower, this can be achieved by mowing over the leaves a few times to break them into smaller pieces. Rake leaves that are too wet or dense to mow, then compost them or use them as mulch in a perennial garden where they can provide winter protection for beneficials if voles are not a problem in your location. If voles are present, mulch the garden after the ground has frozen.

Houseplants: Unlike most other potted plants, Christmas cactus and potted azaleas may remain outdoors until night temperatures drop to about 40° F. This can foster abundant blooming. Gardenias set flowers when night temperatures drop to about 62. If possible, find a cool, sunny spot indoors during the winter.

General: Inspect the yard for empty pots or other items that might not withstand winter, clean them and store them in a frost-free place until next year. Remove or empty containers that may collect water that harbors mosquitoes (some may be active in temperatures as low as 50°F). Cold temperatures can also reduce potency of many fertilizers and pesticides: make sure to read the labels and store these products appropriately.

Invasive spotted lanternfly (SLF) adults are laying eggs. The insects are especially attracted to tree of heaven and grape vines, but their eggs can be deposited on many surfaces in addition to trees. If you live in, plan to travel, or have recently returned from a place where SLF is established, be sure to check your vehicle and any items kept outdoors for hitchhiking lanternflies or their eggs, and remove all before traveling (a flashlight and mirror may be helpful in hard to see spaces). For more information on how to report spotted lanternfly if it is new to your location, and how to deal with this invasive pest, see

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Oct. 21 – Oct. 27

Perennials: Continue planting spring flowering bulbs. Wait until the ground freezes to mulch perennials you planted this fall. This will help to keep the soil from heaving during a winter thaw and exposing the roots to

drying out in the cold air. Leaving the ground open until it freezes may also discourage voles from burrowing in loose soil under the mulch.

Flowers: Remove tender annuals as they die back. Many of our annuals are perennials in warmer garden zones. Cuttings should be taken while the weather is still warm. If you didn't get to this, you may pot up pest-free scented and zonal geraniums, plectranthus and others that have stood up to a bit of cold weather if you can gradually acclimate them to indoor conditions.

Fruits and Vegetables: Harvest winter squash before the first hard freeze. Brussels sprouts, collards and kale taste sweeter after a few frosts. Some root crops, including carrots, leeks, parsnips and onions may be left in the ground and dug up as needed, even after temperatures dip. Cover with enough mulch to keep the ground from freezing, and they'll be ready for you as needed.

Trees and Shrubs: Hardy plant roots continue to grow until the soil temperature drops below 40°F. In the warmer sections of the lower Hudson Valley, this could be as late as mid-December. You may still plant deciduous shrubs while there's another six to eight weeks for the roots to begin to become established, even if this is done after they've dropped their leaves.

Lawns: Keep up with fallen leaves. If you don't have a mulching mower, rake and remove leaves from the lawn so they don't smother the grass. If you have a mulching mower, try to mow before leaves really accumulate or get wet and mat down. If leaves don't disappear into the lawn, rake and add them to a compost pile. Shredding leaves first will help them to break down more quickly.

Houseplants: If you saved last year's poinsettia to try to get it to rebloom, it will need at least 14 hours of total darkness at night for roughly 8 weeks at this time of year to initiate flowering. If the plant is in a well-lit room until late at night, cover it each evening with a black contractor bag or other bag that excludes all light. Remove it from the bag in the morning and keep the plant in bright light during the day. Once the bracts color, keep the plant cool until flower buds appear. These plants do best in a cool room of 55° to 60° F. Water when the top inch or so of the planting mix feels dry.

General: Consider leaving some plants standing this fall to help shelter butterflies that overwinter in our region. If fallen leaves are not visible or unsightly, allow some to remain as protection for caterpillars nearby.

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Oct. 28 – Nov. 3

Perennials: When you walk the garden in late fall, do you see structural plants that provide interest in winter? In addition to black-eyed Susan, coneflower, other daisy family plants and sedum, consider natives such as cinnamon and ostrich ferns, false lupine (*Thermopsis*), Joe Pye weed, wild blue indigo (*Baptisia*), and even a few shrubs such as winterberry holly and red twig dogwood.

Flowers: Remove annuals as they die back. Continue to plant spring-flowering bulbs. Remember that deer adore tulips, so if they graze in this garden, plant less attractive bulbs such as daffodils instead.

Fruits and Vegetables: Harvest cabbage family veggies such as broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, collards, kale and radishes after the first frosts. Frost improves the taste. Very hardy varieties in this family of vegetables may overwinter in warmer areas of Westchester Co. with protection. These biennials can provide an early harvest before they produce seed. Remove any tree fruit remaining on branches that is past its prime or has fallen to the ground.

Trees and Shrubs: Hold the fertilizer. Most established trees and shrubs can access soil and nutrients do not need supplements unless there is a demonstrated need. Contact your local Cooperative Extension for advice.

Lawns: Continue to keep up with fallen leaves. If you have a mulching mower, mow so the leaves disappear into the canopy of the turf before can accumulate heavily or get wet and mat down. If there are too many leaves or you don't have a mulching mower, rake and remove leaves from the lawn so they don't smother the grass and add them to a compost pile.

Houseplants: Move houseplants away from heaters, drafty windows and doors. Most houseplants will not normally require fertilization over the cold fall and winter months.

General: Keep gutters clean. Backed-up, overflowing gutters can damage the home and garden once winter arrives. Spotted lanternflies lay eggs on many vertical surfaces, woody plants and inanimate objects alike, often in a protected spot. Check downspouts, other outdoor items, trees, etc. for egg masses. If you live in, plan to travel, or have recently returned from a place where SLF is established, be sure to check your vehicle and any items kept outdoors for hitchhiking lanternflies or their eggs, and remove all before traveling (a flashlight and mirror may be helpful in hard to see spaces). For more information on how to report spotted lanternfly if it is new to your location, and how to deal with this invasive pest, see

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