

T•H•E D•I•R•T

Newsletter of Master Gardener Volunteers of CCE Schoharie and Otsego Counties

Gardening • Environment • Community • Sustainability • Education



Planting Bulbs Now for a Colorful Spring

As the crisp autumn air settles over the hills of Otsego and Schoharie counties, local gardeners know that the true work for a spectacular spring begins right now. Fall is the absolute prime window for planting spring-flowering perennial bulbs like daffodils, tulips, crocuses, and alliums. Investing a little time in the dirt before the ground freezes guarantees a triumphant burst of early-season color to shake off

Continued on page 2

Grow with us! Subscribe for gardening tips, pollinator-friendly ideas, and local wisdom for Otsego & Schoharie counties in Central New York.

Your Leaves Are Free Garden Gold: 5 Ways to Use Them

Every fall, we rake up piles of leaves, stuff them into bags and haul them away. Meanwhile, gardeners spend money buying mulch, compost and other materials to improve their soil.

See the problem here?

Those leaves covering your lawn are one of the best free resources you have for your garden. Instead of sending them away this fall, put them to work.

Continued on page 6



Mourning Cloak Butterfly (*Nymphalis antiopa*)

Pollinator Watch

By October even the most ardent sun lovers can no longer deny that we are firmly in the grips of autumn. Days are shorter and cooler, and the midday sun is lower in the sky. Our native pollinators have noticed also. Most hummingbirds have already left for Central America. The Monarch (*Danaus plexippus*) and Painted Lady (*Vanessa cardui*) butterflies are migrating from upstate New York to central Mexico. But how do our native bees, wasps, flies, moths, and other butterflies prepare for winter? Where have they gone?

Unlike mammals and birds, butterflies and moths rely mainly on external heat sources like the sun to warm their bodies so that they can be active. If they do not migrate to a warmer climate, in winter they enter a dormant phase. This can be as an egg, larva, pupa, or adult, depending on the species. Most butterflies and moths overwinter in the larval stage. Eggs, larvae, and pupae are hidden away, sometimes in leaf litter or attached to the branches of a food plant.

The Mourning Cloak (*Nymphalis antiopa*) is one of the butterflies that overwinters

Continued on page 4

Planting Bulbs continued from page 1

the Upstate New York winter blues. Follow this quick guide from your local CCE Master Gardeners to ensure success in our unique USDA winter hardiness zones.

1. Timing is Everything

The ideal timeframe for planting fall bulbs in our region runs from late September through October. You want to wait until soil temperatures drop to around 55°F. Planting too early in warm soil can trick the bulbs into sending up green foliage prematurely, which will get damaged by the winter freeze. However, as long as you can still get a shovel into the ground before a hard freeze, you can safely plant.

2. Site Selection and Soil Prep

- **Sunlight:** Choose a spot that receives at least 6 to 8 hours of sunlight. Keep in mind that early spring bloomers often finish flowering before deciduous trees fully leaf out, meaning you can plant them under trees that are shaded in summer but open in early spring.
- **Drainage:** Most bulbs absolutely hate soggy conditions and will rot in standing water. Loosen your soil and integrate organic compost to build nutrients, or mix in a bit of coarse sand to improve drainage in clay-heavy spots.

3. Depth and Direction

A standard rule of thumb is to plant bulbs at a depth equal to two or three times their maximum height.

- **Large Bulbs (Tulips, Daffodils):** Plant roughly 6 to 8 inches deep, spaced 4 to 6 inches apart.
- **Small Bulbs (Crocus, Snowdrops):** Plant 3 to 5 inches deep, spaced 3 to 4 inches apart.

Continued on page 3

Planting Bulbs continued from page 2

Gardening Tip: Always position the bulb with its pointed end facing up (the roots or flat base should face down). If you can't tell which end is which, plant it on its side; nature will inherently guide the shoot upward.

4. Water and Mulch

Once the soil is filled back in, water the area thoroughly. Fall bulbs need moisture to stimulate crucial root development before they go dormant for winter. Top the bed with a layer of mulch to help maintain soil moisture, keep temperatures consistent, and protect the bulbs from the harsh freeze-and-thaw cycles of a New York winter.

Designing for Impact

For the most breathtaking visual impact come April and May, avoid planting bulbs in single, straight lines. Instead, tuck smaller botanicals into natural-looking clusters or drifts of 25 to 50. Layering your spring bulbs among your existing perennials ensures that as the bulb foliage naturally dies back in the late spring, emerging hostas and daylilies will perfectly mask the fading leaves. ■



Native Asters: The Fall Bloomers Your Garden Needs

There should always be room for a plant that decides its time to shine is when everything else is winding down. Native asters do exactly that, bursting into bloom in late summer and fall with masses of purple, blue and pink flowers. Even better, they're providing an important late-season food source for bees, butterflies and other pollinators when there aren't nearly as many flowers left to choose from.

Not All Asters Are the Same

If you've seen those colorful little "asters" sold alongside mums in the fall, there's an important distinction to make. Annual asters (*Callistephus chinensis*), sometimes called China asters, aren't native to North America. They're beautiful and come in tons of colors, but they're annuals. Plant them, enjoy the show and expect to start over next year.

Our native perennial asters come back year after year. Two common choices in the Northeast are New
Continued on page 5

Pollinator continued from page 2

as an adult by sheltering in tree holes, leaf litter, or under rocks or logs. It also reduces the water content of its body and creates glycerol, which acts as an antifreeze. On late winter days when the temperature is mild, these butterflies may emerge to sun themselves and feed on tree sap. Throw some banana or cantaloupe on top of your garden compost pile on such days to provide them a late winter snack.

Most native bee species spend the winter underground as eggs or larva in the nests their mothers built and provisioned for them. They live as solitary bees rather than as part of a colony. Other solitary native bees are cavity nesters, settling into hollow or pithy stems, wood, or other small cavities. All these bees, underground and in cavities, represent the next generation of pollinators.

Almost all bumble bee species (*Bombas*) live in colonies during the summer. The queen bumble bee emerges in spring and creates a nest. She builds her colony by laying eggs for worker bees. In late summer she starts producing virgin queens and males instead of just workers. The new queens and male bees mate with bees from other colonies. After mating, a new queen finds a place to spend the winter, typically a tiny nest from two to six inches below ground under leaf litter. As temperatures drop, her body produces glycerol to keep her from freezing. The rest of the colony dies by the beginning of winter. In spring the new queens emerge to start the cycle anew.

Most wasp species are similar to bumble bees in that they live in colonies that die in winter due to cold temperatures and a lack of food. Only the new wasp queens produced in late summer survive the winter by sheltering in protected areas like hollow trees or buildings.

Most syrphid fly species overwinter as larvae in the soil and in leaf litter.

By now, you have realized that fallen leaves are not really “litter.” They are a true gift to your yard, essential for the survival of countless species of pollinators. Gently raking leaves into the corners of the yard, into your garden beds, or under shrubs and trees, keep these helpful creatures safe and thriving throughout the changing season.

Another good practice is to provide bare soil (no mulch) in at least a few areas for ground-nesting bees. Many species do not travel far in their lifetimes, so they need access to loose, bare soil not far from the flowers that they pollinate. Keeping these specific spots undisturbed by tilling or digging helps ensure their underground homes stay secure for nesting.

In winter, a few pollinators become active on sunny, mild winter days. Some species of bees and flies are the most active, as well as a limited number of moth species. You can support them by providing a source of fresh water. Species that bloom in winter or very early spring, such as witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana* and hybrid varieties), pussy willows, snow drops, crocus, winter aconite (*Eranthis hyemalis*), Siberian squill (*Scilla siberica*), and hellebores are wonderful pollinator friendly species to plant around your home.

Understanding where our pollinators are sheltering in winter helps us to take actions to support them, so that they can contribute to our gardens again next year. ■

"Messy" is Best for Wildlife

As fall settles into Upstate New York, resist the urge to clean up every last leaf and dead plant in your yard. Leaving things a little messy can be one of the best things you do for pollinators, birds and other wildlife heading into winter.

Leave some perennial stems and seed heads standing as the hollow stems can give insects a place to overwinter, while seeds from coneflowers, sunflowers and other plants provide food for birds. And as the front page article mentions, don't be too quick to bag up those leaves! Rake them into garden beds or around trees, where they can provide insulation and shelter for bumblebees, butterflies, moths and other beneficial insects.

You can also leave fallen branches in a small brush pile and skip unnecessary fall tilling or digging that could disturb ground-nesting bees. The goal isn't to let your yard look completely abandoned, but sometimes doing less really is better for the garden. ■

Native Asters continued from page 3

England aster (*Symphyotrichum novae-angliae*) and New York aster (*Symphyotrichum novibelgii*). Both produce masses of daisy-like flowers, usually in shades of purple, blue and pink with bright yellow centers. And when they're blooming they can be absolutely covered in pollinators.

Why Native Asters Are Worth Making Room For

Asters bloom at exactly the right time. As summer flowers disappear, native asters provide nectar and pollen for pollinators preparing for winter and migrating butterflies fueling up before heading south.



New England Aster



New York Aster

They're relatively easy to grow, too. Depending on the species, asters can handle a range of soil conditions, and established plants generally don't require much fuss. Some can get pretty tall and a little wild-looking but if you prefer a tidier plant, pinch them back earlier in summer to encourage a shorter, bushier shape.

Let Fall Have Its Moment

There's a lot of talk about spring and summer flowers, but fall bloomers deserve more love. Native asters give us another few weeks of beautiful color while giving pollinators some of their last food before winter. That's a pretty good reason to make room for one more bloomer. ■

Leaves continued from page 1

1. Use Them as Mulch

If you really want them off your lawn, spread them around garden beds, trees and shrubs to use as mulch.

As they break down, they'll add organic matter to the soil while helping suppress weeds, conserve moisture and protect the soil from temperature swings.

2. Add Them to Your Compost

Fall leaves are a great source of "brown" material for your compost pile. Mix them with nitrogen-rich "green" materials like grass clippings, garden debris and kitchen scraps.

Have more leaves than you need right now? Keep a pile or bin of dry leaves nearby. You'll have a ready supply of browns to add to your compost throughout the year.

3. Make Leaf Mold

Leaf mold is simply leaves that have been allowed to break down on their own. Pile leaves in a wire bin, compost enclosure or even a designated corner of the yard. Keep them slightly moist and let time do the work.

Eventually, you'll end up with a dark, crumbly material that's excellent for improving soil structure and moisture retention.

4. Protect Your Perennials

After the ground begins to cool, leaves can provide an insulating layer around perennial plants. A loose layer helps moderate soil temperatures and protects roots through our cold Central New York winters.

Just avoid piling leaves directly against plant crowns, tree trunks or shrub stems where excess moisture can create problems.



5. Cover Bare Garden Soil

Finished harvesting a vegetable bed? Don't leave that soil naked all winter.

A layer of leaves protects the soil from erosion, reduces compaction from rain and snow, suppresses weeds and gradually adds organic matter as it decomposes. Come spring, you can rake back anything that hasn't broken down or work partially decomposed material into your garden plan.

So before you bag up this year's leaves, remember: your trees just dropped a whole pile of free garden material in your yard. You might as well use it. ■

Garden Chore Checklist

October is all about wrapping up the growing season, getting cold-hardy crops through a few more weeks and setting your garden up for winter.

Vegetable Garden

- Harvest tender crops like tomatoes, peppers, beans & summer squash before a killing frost.
- Continue harvesting cold-tolerant crops such as kale, spinach, carrots, turnips and other fall vegetables.
- Harvest mature winter squash and pumpkins and move them somewhere protected for curing and storage.
- Plant garlic for next summer's harvest.
- Remove spent vegetable plants, especially anything showing signs of disease.
- Use row covers or other frost protection to extend the season for crops that can handle cooler temperatures.

- Continue watering newly planted trees, shrubs and perennials during dry stretches until the ground freezes.
- Rake leaves off lawns as desired, putting them to work in garden beds & compost piles.
- Empty, clean and store garden tools and supplies as you finish using them.

Pest & Disease Watch

- Remove diseased plants and infected foliage.
- Pick up fallen or rotting fruits and vegetables that could harbor pests or disease.
- Check trees and shrubs for damaged or diseased branches.
- Avoid excessive fall cleanup in perennial beds
- Make note of pest or disease problems you had this year to plan changes for next season.

Soil & Garden Care

- Add compost to empty vegetable beds to start improving the soil for next year.
- Cover bare soil with leaves or organic mulch to reduce erosion & protect soil

Find more gardening guidance at [Cornell Garden Based Learning](https://gardening.cals.cornell.edu/garden-guidance/)

<https://gardening.cals.cornell.edu/garden-guidance/>. ■



Ask a Master Gardener Volunteer

QUESTION: Should I fertilize my garden in the fall?

ANSWER: Usually, no. Fertilizing in fall can encourage new growth that won't have time to harden off before winter. Instead, add compost to empty vegetable beds to improve the soil for next year. For lawns, trees, shrubs, and perennials, fertilizer needs vary, so a soil test is the best way to know what, if anything, your soil actually needs.

To ask a Master Gardener a question, visit: <https://cceschoharie-otsego.org/master-gardener-program/ask-a-master-gardener-volunteer>

The October Harvest: What Can Take a Frost and What Needs to Come Inside

October in Otsego and Schoharie counties is a beautiful but unpredictable time for vegetable gardeners. With the threat of the first hard freeze looming, knowing exactly when to harvest your remaining crops is essential. While a surprise autumn frost will completely ruin a tender tomato plant, it can actually make a patch of kale taste sweet.

To help protect your hard work, our local CCE Master Gardeners have broken down the autumn harvest into what needs immediate shelter and what can safely brave the cold.

1. Bring Inside Immediately (Zero Frost Tolerance)

These warm-season crops have absolutely no defense against freezing temperatures. A single light frost (32°F) will damage the fruit, ruin the flavor, and cause the plants to mush and rot.

Harvest these before the first frost advisory:

- **Tomatoes and Peppers:** Pick all mature fruit. Green tomatoes can be brought indoors to ripen on a windowsill or wrapped individually in newspaper in a cool, dark room.
- **Summer Squash and Eggplants:** These will quickly degrade if exposed to freezing air.
- **Basil:** This herb is incredibly sensitive to cold. Snip the remaining leaves to make pesto or freeze them before temperatures drop below 40°F.

2. Harvest Before a Hard Freeze (Light Frost Tolerant)

These plants can handle a light nip of frost (around 30°F to 32°F), but a prolonged, hard winter freeze (below 28°F) will damage their tissue or split their outer skins. Gather these during mid-October:

- **Winter Squash and Pumpkins:** While the vines will die back with the first frost, the thick skins protect the squash. However, you must harvest them before a hard freeze to prevent the flesh inside from spoiling. Always cut them with a stem stub left attached to ensure they store well.
- **Potatoes and Sweet Potatoes:** The underground tubers are protected from light frosts, but you must dig them up before the top layer of soil freezes solid.
- **Apples:** Late-season varieties can take a light frost, but if a hard freeze is predicted, finish picking to avoid soft, bruised fruit.

3. Leave Out in the Garden (Heavy Frost Enhancing)

Many cool-season crops not only survive a hard frost, but they actively thrive in it. When exposed to freezing temperatures, these plants convert their stored starches into natural sugars to act as an internal antifreeze. This chemical shift dramatically improves their flavor, stripping away bitterness. Leave these in the ground well into late autumn:

- **Brassicas (Kale, Brussels Sprouts, Cabbage, and Broccoli):** Brussels sprouts and kale taste exceptionally sweet after being frosted a few times.
- **Root Crops (Carrots, Parsnips, Beets, and Radishes):** The cold soil keeps these roots crisp and sweet. You can keep harvesting them until the ground becomes too frozen to drive a shovel into. Gardening Tip: Layer a thick insulation of straw mulch over root beds to keep the ground workable longer into November.

Knowing the limits of your garden allows you to stretch the Upstate New York growing season to its absolute limit, ensuring none of your harvest goes to waste. ■

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Cornell Cooperative Extension Schoharie & Otsego Counties

AT OUR FREE

Annual Meeting

Wednesday, October 21, 2026 6-8 PM

Craven Lounge Morris Conference Center
SUNY Oneonta

CCESO's brief Annual Business Meeting
(You may attend the business meeting via Zoom)

Enjoy Hors D'oeuvres

Learn about our innovative
education & outreach activities

Win door prizes

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scan the QR code, email neh57@cornell.edu, or call (518) 234-4303 ext. 119



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Community Events

October 21, 2026
Cut Flower Webinar
(Zoom)

October 21, 2026
CCESO Annual Meeting
Craven Lounge
Morris Conference Center
SUNY Oneonta

See the full list of upcoming community events: <https://cceschoharie-otsego.org/events>



Weather Watch

October brings frosty nights, shorter days, and the end of the growing season in Upstate New York. Watch for freezes, finish harvesting tender crops, and take advantage of mild days to get those last garden chores done. Visit the NRCC : <https://www.nrcc.cornell.edu/index.html>

Dates	Weather Conditions
Oct 1-8	Sunny, cool
Oct 9-16	Scattered showers; cool, then turning warm
Oct 17-21	Periods of rain; cool, then turning warm
Oct 22-28	Sunny; cool, then milder
Oct 29-31	Showers, mild
October	Temp 56° (-1 avg) Precip 3" (-1 avg)



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<https://www.facebook.com/CCEOtsegoMG>



Master Gardeners Volunteer- Schoharie
<https://www.facebook.com/CCESchoharieMG>

Our Mission

We prepare volunteers to be peer educators who build relationships with community audiences to integrate local experience and research-based knowledge in planning for and initiating steps to manage gardens, lawns, and landscapes with an emphasis on food security and environmental stewardship.

Learn more about the CCE Master Gardener Volunteer programs of Otsego & Schoharie counties here: <https://cceschoharie-otsego.org/master-gardener-program>

CCESO Master Gardeners Volunteers are trained to share research-based gardening knowledge with the community. We answer questions through the "Ask a Master Gardener Volunteer" service, teach classes, and maintain demonstration gardens in Cooperstown and Cobleskill. You'll find us at farmers markets, fairs, and local events offering practical tips, and we also grow plants for fundraisers, lead beginner gardener programs, and offer soil testing to help neighbors grow with confidence.

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