



Batten Down the Hatches

The time of year has finally come to shut it all down. Follow this CSA gardener's advice for preparing your garden beds for their long winter nap.

Plant cool-weather crops for fall harvests. Cold-hardy vegetables include spinach, cole crops, Asian greens, and beet and salad greens. What hardworking gardener or farmer doesn't relish the idea of time off? For us, winter is our vacation: a chance to relax, rest our bodies and minds, read, knit, sit by a warm fire, and plan for days to come. Or not: maybe don't think, don't plan; let your brain and body be still for a change. I look forward to winter like a schoolgirl anticipating the summer holidays: long hours with no physical labor, just lounging and daydreaming. There are ways to facilitate this peace of mind by putting your garden to bed in a manner that keeps it productive during the cold months. I can rest even easier knowing that, although I'm not outside working, millions of garden helpers in the soil are, because I've taken care to protect and feed them over the winter.

Start Early

A good way to assist in winter preparation is to have next year's planting plan in place by the end of the summer. Crop rotation is important for crops that can harbor disease or attract pests if kept in the same place year after year. In late summer, I begin to chart my garden layout for the following year, making sure I rotate the solanaceae (eggplants and tomatoes), curcubits (cucumbers and squash) and especially brassica (cabbage and broccoli) families. I try to place nitrogen-hungry plants, like corn, where a nitrogen-fixing legume, like peas, grew the year before.

Late-autumn

Garden Checklist Plan spring croppings. Check seed supply and order any that are needed. Plant quick-growing cover crops. Plant cool-weather crops for fall harvests. Plant overwintering crops for early spring yields. Dispose of spent crop residues either in place or elsewhere. (See next item!) Build a compost pile to sit until next summer. Spread organic soil amendments so nutrients will be available in spring. Mulch bare beds. Clean off, sharpen and store tools. (Make sure you haven't left any in the garden!) Replenish the wood pile, making sure the cover is sound and waterproof. Stock up on reading material and cozy socks. Rest and relax—nature is doing the work for you. I sometimes plant a poorly drained bed with a deep-rooting cover crop or one that I know will add significant organic matter when it breaks down. Beds that have grown heavy-yielding crops get some time off with a thick topping of compost and amendments to replenish the soil. Regardless of your rotation, it helps to know where you want to plant spring crops when it's time to get the seeds in the ground.

In the Pacific Northwest, autumn is called our "second spring." This refers to the chance to plant cool-weather crops and reap another harvest before the days of winter set in. The daylight hours mirror those of April and March; soil and air temperatures are more conducive to rapid germination and growth, although it's a challenge to keep the soil sufficiently moist during the August and September heat. It's important to pay special attention to the watering and shade requirements of these cool-weather plants.

Before the first tree leaves even start to turn, you can plant cold-hardy crops such as spinach, cole crops (broccoli, kale, cabbage, brussel sprouts and kohlrabi), Asian greens (bok choy, pak choy, tatsoi), and beet and salad greens that, when started at summer's peak, grow and thrive in the cooling days, rewarding you with some late harvests near winter's onset. There are also crops that will hold through winter and start yielding in the earliest days of spring, such as overwintering cabbages, broccoli, onions, carrots, peas and fava beans. These are always welcomed when the cold and snow have been around far too long and I'm yearning to eat something not from the grocery-store produce section. You'll pat yourself on the back for having planted these crops well in advance.

Feed the Soil

If you can spare room during the height of the summer season, plant cover crops on your soil. You don't have to devote growing space exclusively to cover crops: You can underplant many cash crops with soil-nurturing plants and let them fill in and take over when the harvest is done. Many cover crops attract beneficial insects, helping pollination of the main crop and thwarting pests. Even the crops grown for harvest will benefit the winter soil in their own ways: Cut them off at ground level when they're done growing, and leave the roots to decompose in the ground. They aerate the soil and create a beneficial habitat for all the organisms that populate it.



All this planting can be a lot of work, plus there's also plenty of bed preparation that should be done before winter. Treat your soil as you treat your plants: Don't forget that it's a living thing. It doesn't grow in the same way that plants or people do (although dirt seems to multiply exponentially inside my house), but it is as alive as any other being. How you prepare it for the winter will help it continue to live and thrive.

Build a compost pile with crop residues to sit until next summer. What to Do with Crop Residues

One way to help the soil is to properly dispose of your crops when they're finished. You can decide which crop residues you need to clean up and which ones can be left in the field to rot, becoming mulch. Many of the crops killed by frosts are fine to leave in the beds. Squash plants rot in place, and their big leaves cover a lot of ground. Tomato plants do the same, but if you leave them, the fruits that went unpicked can produce thousands of volunteer tomato plants (which count as weeds to me) the following summer. I usually try to remove the tomato vines before they get mushy and put them in the compost pile. Lettuce, spent peas, cucumbers, eggplants and basil can be left. Raspberry canes are supposed to be pruned and burned to prevent disease spread. I cut them down and put them in my goat pen, where they get trampled and nibbled. Notoriously invasive, any canes that might sprout in the spring will be quickly consumed by the bramble-loving ruminants.

Asparagus stalks should be cut and removed from their beds. Sometimes I leave them in place until spring and then cut them down—they are lovely in a winter snowscape—but I have also cut them before the killing frosts, when they're brown, for use on other beds as an extra aerating mulch. They do a good job protecting the soil and breaking down by springtime.

Bean and pea vines are easy to pull down, and goats love them, too. Be sure to cut them off at soil level, since the nitrogen-bearing root nodules will dissolve into the surrounding soil for the benefit of the next planting.

Grain crops can be harvested and the stalks cut down to create an instant straw mulch. Some annual grains die down without being cut, and you can plant directly through the remains. Annual rye does this, as well as releasing root exudates that are allelopathic to many kinds of weed and weed seeds. I grew winter wheat last year, and because it was too far along by the time frost hit, it was killed instead of holding until spring. However, it turned out that the residue it left on that bed created a haven for soil biota. When I raked it aside in the spring, the soil underneath was soft, black, and incredibly friable—it had a crumbly texture that looked almost like straight worm castings. Pulling back decomposed residues in the spring is exciting: It's a good indicator of how well the soil was served and how close to planting you might be. You can leave these residues on top or till them when preparing for planting to help with the tilth of the soil.