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Gardening in the fall: There's still lots to do

For many of us, gardening in the fall means cleaning up, cutting down, raking leaves and generally tidying up before the frost and snow hit.

While it's great to make things neat and tidy, taking some extra measures as you clean up now can make a big difference next spring. Keep the following things in mind when getting your garden ready for winter.

Shrub planting

Fall is a great time to plant trees and shrubs because soil temperatures are still warm compared to the air. Conditions are ideal for root development.

Tulip bulbs

Everyone knows that tulip bulbs bloom in the spring— but if you don't plant them in fall, there will be few to see. Don't rely on the bulbs left dormant in your garden over the summer. Buy lots of tulip bulbs and get digging. All you need is reasonably good soil, some bulb food and, of course, the tulip bulbs.

Check for disease

When cutting back perennials, check for diseases and pests. These are things you don't want to come back to your garden.

As you remove diseased materials, including the leaves from your roses afflicted with black spot, don't throw them in the compost bin. This may only help spread the problem around your garden next year. Be diligent— even pruners used on infected materials should be cleaned with a household disinfectant.

Composting

There's nothing better for your garden than rich, homemade compost. And fall is full of the best ingredient— leaves. Leaves and other garden waste are natural, nutrient rich and plentiful at this time of year. You can make the compost in something as simple as a wire cage. The recipe is simple too:

- Mix leaves, other garden wastes, some kitchen scraps (no grease or animal fats) together. Keep moist at all times, but not sopping wet. Turn every couple of weeks; wait about six months (you can accelerate the process by adding a source of nitrogen, such as commercial fertilizer, manure or green grass clippings.)

Bring in the house plants

Many house plants can be placed outside in summer. But, as temperatures cool in fall, it's time to bring them inside. Some garden annuals such as geraniums and begonias can be placed in pots and brought indoors for the winter, as well. Before bringing any plants into your home, take a few precautions:

While still outside, remove any dead or yellow foliage. Examine the plants carefully for pests that might infest your other house plants. Wash the plants down— soapy water and a good rinse will knock dust along with spiders and other insects. Provide indoor conditions similar to what the plants were enjoying outdoors— fluorescent lamps can provide a consistent source of light and a dish of gravel mixed with water placed under the potted plant can provide moisture.

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