

Fall Gardening Check List

With fall rains arriving, now is the time to tackle garden bed clean up, mulching, cover cropping, and other chores that will “button down” your garden for the winter. It’s also the time to start planting bulbs and other crops that will bring rewards next spring. Christof Bernau, who manages the handworked gardens at the UCSC Farm, offers some ideas for tasks to attend to in the coming weeks –

Clear beds and build compost piles –

If you haven’t yet done so, remove spent plants from your garden beds and use them, along with manure, stable bedding, leaves, and other organic matter sources, to fuel your compost pile. Cleaning up the beds will help minimize the spread of disease organisms that can make a home in decaying vegetation over the winter.

If you’ve never built a compost pile there are lots of good resources available for learning this valuable skill. In the Santa Cruz area, Ecology Action offers classes and instructional material (www.compostsantacruzcounty.org, 831.423-4327). *The Rodale Book of Composting: Easy Methods for Every Gardener*, edited by Deborah L. Martin and Grace Gershuny, covers the basics of the composting process and compost use. This easy-to-use guide discusses the benefits of composting, biology of the composting process, the relationship of compost to soil and plant health, materials combining, composting techniques, troubleshooting, using compost, and large-scale composting.

Plant cover crops –

Cover crops will help protect your garden beds from erosion while generating a source of organic matter that can be used in spring compost piles or tilled directly into the soil before spring planting. “In the handworked garden beds at the UCSC Farm & Garden, we use a mix of 70–80% bell beans and vetch, and 20–30% oats,” says Bernau. Oats’ fibrous root system promotes soil aggregation, especially in sandy soils. Bell beans and vetch will boost nitrogen levels if you inoculate the seed with *Rhizobium* bacteria (available as a powdered mix of peat moss and live bacteria) that fix nitrogen. “You can also plant edible fava beans—they’ll protect the soil, put down a deep tap root, and generate lots of organic matter, although you’ll give up some nitrogen fixation by letting the beans grow to the edible stage,” says Bernau.

A light straw mulch sprinkled over the beds will deter birds from eating your cover crop seeds. If the weather is dry you may need to irrigate to get the plants germinated and growing. Locally, San Lorenzo Garden Center, and General Feed and Seed sell cover crop mixes and inoculants; you can also order them from Peaceful Valley Farm & Garden Supply (www.groworganic.com, 888.784-1722).

If you’re not going to plant cover crops, cover beds with a layer of coarse horse manure and an optional layer of wood chips. And, says Bernau, “Although weeds come

with their own set of problems, it’s better to let weeds grow over the fall and winter than to leave the beds unprotected—anything growing is better than bare soil.”

Tidy up the greenhouse and potting area –

Remove weeds, moss, and fungal growth from greenhouses and potting areas where you do your seed starting and transplanting. Clean six packs and other containers (they may need a light rinse of diluted bleach before using them next spring). If you make your own potting mixes, stockpile soil and screened compost in a dry place so that it will be ready for winter and spring seed starting.

Mulch and treat perennials and fruit trees –

Renew the mulch layer around your perennial plants and fruit trees with wood chips or other high carbon material to protect the soil. Don’t add fertilizer, as this can encourage new growth that will get “leggy” as daylight hours grow short, and in colder areas could be susceptible to frost damage. By mulching under fruit trees after leaf drop, you also bury a source of fungal spores that might otherwise splash up into the tree during rainfall.

Following leaf drop from peaches, you can help head off peach leaf curl by applying a spray of either copper or lime sulfur. Removing any “mummies” (old fruit still on the tree) will also discourage pests and diseases.

You can also give your lavenders, santolinas, and similar species, a light shearing to remove spent blossoms. “Those blossoms will absorb water and splay the plant, creating holes in the canopy,” says Bernau. Harder pruning of perennials should wait until late winter.

Take care of tools –

Give any tool parts that might rust a good cleaning and oiling. Wooden handles should receive a treatment of linseed or Danish oil to protect them during damp weather.

Plant bulbs and other crops –

Now is the time to plant bulbs that will bring colors to the springtime garden, including tulips, narcissus, and daffodils. Notes Bernau, “In our mild climate, some bulbs such as tulips may need up to 8 weeks of cold storage to simulate winter conditions and generate strong stems and vibrant color.” Garlic and strawberries can also be planted in November.

Prep holes for fruit trees and roses –

Do you plan on putting in bare root fruit trees, cane fruits, or roses this winter? You can get a jump on the process by preparing planting holes now, then covering the prepared area with mulch. “That way you have a wider window of opportunity to get a rose or tree in the ground during the winter without having to work wet soil too much,” says Bernau. “You won’t have to wait until the soil completely dries down to do your planting.”

–Martha Brown