

Yard and Garden – 10-26-2013- Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

Frost has a way of bringing the gardening season to a screeching halt. What was once a lush vegetable garden full of beautiful plants brimming with produce is now nothing more than a war-like zone strewn with withered, drooping dead plant material. Don't delay. Time spent now removing garden debris and fall tilling will help to reduce problems for next year.

Before cleaning the garden, I offer one quick suggestion. Now is an opportune time to compile a few notes on this year's garden layout: what cultivars were grown and what particular plants grew well — noting also those that didn't. Take a moment to write about insect or disease problems the garden may have experienced. Such data will serve as a reminder about what to plant (and perhaps what not to plant) next season. Record keeping will certainly make planning next season's plant placement and rotation easier.

The first step in garden cleanup is to remove all hardscape including tomato cages, stakes, trellises, soaker hoses and other irrigation apparatus. These materials should be thoroughly cleaned before placing them in storage for the winter.

Complete removal of plant debris is the next step. Residues from healthy plants such as roots, leaves and stems are a valuable source of organic matter and can certainly be composted. Although one might be tempted to place all the dead plant material onto a compost pile, avoid using any remains that were plagued with disease or insect problems. When in doubt, I encourage removing and discarding all plant debris from the vegetable garden. Usually compost piles do not reach high enough temperatures to kill all pathogens and insect-pest eggs. Recycling diseased or insect infested plant material will more than likely reintroduce similar problems for next season.

Once all vegetable plant debris has been removed, it is time to till the garden. Spading or tilling the soil in the fall before winter arrives allows freezing and thawing to break down the soil naturally into smaller particles. All too often, the soil is too wet for good tillage in the spring. When tilled, wet soil frequently forms clods and destroys some of the physical properties of the soil. Wet soil, tilled in the fall, will still break apart over the winter leaving a quality soil texture for planting.

Before tilling, take advantage of autumn's falling tree leaves. Leaves are an excellent source of organic matter for the vegetable garden. Use a mower to remove the leaves from

the lawn. Mowing chops the leaves into smaller pieces making them decompose more quickly. A two-to-four inch layer of shredded leaves tilled into the soil will naturally decompose over the winter. Before tilling, it's always a good idea to add nitrogen fertilizer to hasten the decomposition process. Till in the shredded leaves as deeply as possible; six inches or more is best. Decomposed leaves supply needed organic matter to the soil which is often missing in urban landscape soils. A healthy amount of organic matter in the soil provides good aeration, retains moisture and breaks apart more easily. Most vegetable plants thrive in a highly organic soil.

Now that vegetable gardening has come to a screeching halt thanks to the onset of frost, cleaning and tilling the garden is all that remains before the snow flies once again. Don't delay. Time marches on.



Cleaning the Garden in Autumn