



The presence of frost usually means that your vegetable garden is either limping toward the finish line or has completed production for the year. Fall is the perfect time to clean up the vegetable garden and its tools to prepare them for next year.

There are a few more tasks to complete before you put your gardening tools away for the winter. Before you perform the actual clean-up of the garden, make notes about the year. Record the garden layout, cultivars that worked (or didn't), and pests or diseases you encountered this past year. This will help you next spring when it is time to plan the garden and help you to remember what vegetables were in which location for your crop rotation schedule. A crop rotation plan is where vegetables from the same plant family are rotated around different locations within the garden. The objective is to avoid placing those plant families in one particular location for 3 years to avoid disease and insect problems. Two of the most common plant families in the garden include the Solanaceous crops and Cucurbit crops. Tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, and Irish potatoes are all in the Solanaceae family. Cucurbitaceae family crops include squash, pumpkins, zucchini, melons, and cucumbers. Try to avoid putting those crops in the same plant family in a specific location in the garden for at least 3 years if possible.

The actual clean-up of the garden is the next step. Elimination of garden debris, like dead plant material, fruit 'mummies,' weeds, and rotting vegetables, can help to reduce disease, weed, and insect problems next year. Remove and discard disease or insect infested plant material, but do not compost. Compost piles do not reach high enough temperatures to kill all pathogens, like fungal spores and bacteria. Discarding or burning the infected plant material will remove the pathogens that could potentially infect next years' crops. Removal of weeds with mature seed heads will not only improve the appearance of the garden, but also help remove the seed source for potential weeds in next years' garden.

Adding organic matter can help improve soil composition. Incorporating residues from healthy plants can act as a great source of organic matter, which can improve the texture of the soil. These healthy plants can either be turned or tilled into the soil or tossed into the compost pile. Organic mulches that were used in the garden, like straw, grass clippings, or even newspaper, can also be tilled into the soil. Tree leaves are another great source of organic matter for the garden. Leaves that are picked up with the lawn mower will break down faster once they are worked into the soil because they are chopped into smaller pieces.

Cages and trellises also need some clean up in the fall. Support structures, like tomato cages or trellises, should be pulled out of the ground, cleaned up, and placed in storage for winter. If you have had disease issues in the past, like blight in tomatoes, now is also an excellent time to disinfect the cages or trellises to keep them from infecting new plants next year. A 10% bleach solution, alcohol wipes, rubbing alcohol, or even ready-to-use bleach wipes can be used to disinfect the cages prior to winter storage.

Now is also the perfect time for some end-of-the-year tool maintenance. Digging tools, like shovels, hoes, pitchforks, and garden rakes, should have excess soil removed from them. Any rust that is present can be removed using a wire brush and a little bit of elbow grease or an electric drill with a wire brush or sanding attachment. After rust is removed, renew or sharpen the edges and points with a mill file or grinding wheel. For winter storage, apply a light coating of oil. Tools can even be stored in a 5 gallon bucket filled with sand and oil. Inspect the handles of your tools at the end of the season for cracks or splinters. Replace the handles if necessary. If the wooden handles are in good condition, they can be sanded and oiled at least once a year. Use a fine grade sand paper to smooth the surface. Remove any dust and rub linseed oil into the handle and allow it to soak in. Keep applying until the oil doesn't absorb any more. Wait a half hour, and dry off any oil remaining on the surface.

With a little effort and maintenance now, the vegetable garden and tools will be in tip top shape for next years' gardening season.

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