

Fall Cleaning For Spring Greening

Every spring, the leaves turn green; every autumn, they fall to the ground and create a powerful fertilizer for next year's growth.

The same idea can make a strong and healthy lawn and garden next spring. It just takes a little preparation and a whole bunch of garbage.

A Heap of Good Advice

You can think of compost in two ways:

- A heap of rotting garbage
- Your ticket to a beautiful garden

Veteran gardeners will swear by the second definition. Compost starts out as household waste but, when ready, becomes a great addition to gardens that help transplants along and keep soil healthy.

You can toss in all kinds of materials, ranging from grass clippings to dead leaves to kitchen scraps such as rotten vegetables and nitrogen-rich eggshells. This waste ferments into useful garden fertilizer.

To speed the fermenting process along, try to use only small pieces and add manure or cottonseed meal, both of which accelerate decomposition. If the bin starts giving off heat, your compost pile's a winner. Aerate the pile regularly with a pitchfork to keep the microorganisms working at full efficiency.

Building a Compost Bin

But, just because it is a mound of trash, a compost heap doesn't have to look like one...just follow these plans for an environmentally friendly, aesthetically pleasing bin.

Here's What You Need:

- Wood for the bin's frame
- Wire mesh or wood for the bin's walls
- Drill, screwdriver and screws to build frame
- Metal clippers for the mesh (if used)
- Metal hinges or latches for the removable wall
- Manure
- Fertilizer
- Pitchfork or shovel

Step 1

Choose a site that's level and shady, has good drainage and allows easy access to wheelbarrows, garden paths and hose hookups.

Step 2

Compost bins have three permanent walls and one that's removable, allowing you to "turn," or mix, the materials within the bin. Whether you use wire mesh or wooden slats for the walls, you must have aeration to speed the decomposition process, so don't build anything airtight. And wherever in the bin you use wood, buy cedar or cypress, which will better resist the decaying effect from the bin's contents.

Step 3

Commonly, gardeners will build two bins with a shared middle wall: one bin to store already composted materials; the other for material that's still composting. Bins tend to be three feet wide by three feet long, and three to four feet high.

There's no need for a top; moisture's a good thing because it speeds decomposition.

Step 4

Once you've built the bin, start by laying a foot or so of material. You want a mix of fresh green stuff (lawn clippings, weeds, sod) and inert stuff (bone meal, sawdust, shredded paper). Next, put in a layer of manure or fertilizer, followed by an inch of topsoil. Repeat these layers until the bin is filled.

Step 5

After about three weeks have passed, take that removable wall down and use a shovel or pitchfork to mix the material. Throw on some fertilizer. About two weeks later repeat the process. Forget to turn it? No problem, it will just take longer to decompose. If it seems too dry, just hose it down. Once it turns a uniform brown, crumbles to the touch and is nearly odorless, it's all set for spreading.

Garden Clean-Up

A little work and cleanup now will make your life a lot easier next spring.

Do you hate raking? (OK, silly question.) Then fire up your old shop vacuum to clean away unwanted bits in your yard. This is an effective way to get a thorough cleanup in the yard—sucking up unwanted seeds and leaves and even crab apples. And all of this waste can be added to the compost bin.

One bit of garden waste you DO NOT want to compost are any diseased plants from your garden. Of course, you don't want to leave them in your garden, either, since they can cause bacterial problems for next spring's crop. Find the diseased plants and throw them in the trash. Next year's crop will thank you. Composting them will only spread the disease in the spring.

Fall is also the time to remove struggling plants from your vegetable and flower garden. Only toss the healthier ones onto the compost.

Lawn Ranger

As most home owners know, it's not enough to fertilize lawns just in the spring. The farther north of the Mason-Dixon line you live, the more important it is to fertilize right now. Why? Because fertilizing helps the grass establish healthy roots that actually keep growing during all but the coldest periods. (Remember, the healthier the root system, the healthier the lawn and the less chance weeds have to pop up.)

In the fall, you need a different fertilizer than in springtime, so make sure to hit your lawn with a mix that has one part nitrogen to two parts each of phosphorus and potassium. In September, do a major fertilizing. Then, follow it up with a "booster shot" of the same mix shortly before the real cold weather hits your area.

Don't Put Away Your Gardening Tools Just Yet...

Summer may be over, but there's still plenty of planting to do. Your hard work this fall will pay off before you know it. Now is a good time for small, shallow-rooted vegetables like lettuce, radishes, carrots, spinach, garlic and lettuce.

For flowers, think small-statured annuals like pansy, dwarf marigold and viola planted in containers as small as two gallons. For your garden, you can also consider callendula, snapdragon, stock and ornamental kale for October planting.