

Putting the Garden to Bed

by Lisa Page

With the arrival of autumn, as the leaves begin to change color and fall, acorns drop, temperatures cool and the daylight hours wane. As the summer harvest draws to a close, with the first frosts not too far away, it can be very tempting to forget all about the garden until next spring. But if you are willing to spend some time cleaning up the garden debris and protecting your plants and soil, it will be well worth the effort. When next spring arrives, you will be ready to plant sooner, your soil will be healthier, and your pest and disease problems will be minimal.

Cleaning up the Garden:

To remove insect eggs or disease pathogens from garden tools, rinse materials in a 10 percent bleach solution (1 part household bleach to 9 parts water). Dry tools completely before storing. Remove finished and diseased plants. Inspect all parts of the plants, (leaves, stems, and roots) for any signs of disease or insect pests and eggs. Chop up all other plant material into smaller pieces and add them to your compost pile. Be sure to add “brown” (chopped, fallen leaves) to your compost pile, and cover. Cleaning up weeds is equally important. Pests like to overwinter there too. If you have fruit trees, make sure to clean up all dead and rotting fruit. Don’t forget your perennials; pull away and compost dead leaves and blossoms.

Getting the soil in shape:

Cultivating, digging, or tilling your soil in the fall, improves aeration and drainage, which allows roots to spread more evenly. It also can destroy pests that overwinter in the soil or expose them to birds and other predators. To avoid overworking your soil (which can destroy its structure and deplete organic matter), add organic matter and amendments.

Incorporating organic matter helps set in motion the natural cycles that enrich the soil. Earthworms and microorganisms break down organic matter into forms that plants can use. As it is broken down, humus is created. Examples of organic matter: straw, grass clippings, shredded leaves, compost, any remaining summer mulch, and composted manures.

Composted manures serve as an amendment as well. To be effective, large amounts of organic matter are necessary, about one-third by volume of soil is often desirable; less than 20 percent is often ineffective. Work a two to four-inch layer of materials into the top one foot of soil. DO NOT cultivate when the soil is too wet or it can seriously damage the soil structure (compaction). The soil should be dry enough to crumble easily in your hand. If the soil is hard and dry, water it deeply. Wait two to three days and check the moisture level again before turning.

Amendments:

Organic amendments are made from natural plant or animal materials or of powdered minerals or rocks. They release their nutrients slowly as they are broken down by microorganisms. They feed both the plants and the soil.

Mulching:

Applying organic mulches helps protect and improve your soil. Mulching stops soil compaction from heavy rains. The mulch will help to absorb the impact of the raindrops, which can destroy soil structure, especially with fine-textured soils. Mulching also stops erosion from heavy rain and wind. The force of the raindrops packs the soil by moving the particles closer together, a surface forms that is virtually sealed. So, instead of absorbing the water, the rain is forced to run off the top of the soil, carrying with it particles of soil. Most people don't realize how much soil is lost until it is too late.

Now that you have put your garden to bed, sit back, relax, pick up a few seed catalogs and enjoy the winter!

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UCCE Master Gardeners of Tuolumne and Calaveras Counties can answer home gardening questions. Call 209-533-5912 or go to: <http://ucanr.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=7269> to fill out our easy-to-use problem questionnaire. Check out our website at: http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardeners/ You can also find us on Facebook.

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