



## Winterizing the Garden: Preparing for Renewal

In Ventura County, “winterizing” the garden is not about shutting things down – it is about **strategic preparation**. Our mild winters offer an ideal window to renew your soil, maintain your tools, protect vulnerable plants, start seeds, and plan for an even better spring season. In Ventura, winter is an opportunity, not a pause.

### **Reflection and Planning – Garden Journaling**

The most important quality of a skilled gardener is accurate observation – but observations are only useful if they are recorded. A garden journal is one of the highest-return habits you can build. Key things to record in your journal:

- **Weather** – temperature ranges, frost events, rainfall amounts
- **Plants** – what worked and what didn’t; successes and challenges by variety
- **Plant Care** – pest and disease incidents, fertilization schedule, watering notes
- **Soil** – amendments added, mulch applied, pH test results
- **Maintenance** – pruning, staking, trellising
- **Design** – current bed layout; ideas for improvements; new varieties to try
- **Planting Dates** – seed start dates, transplant dates, germination times, harvest dates

Winter is the perfect time to review last season’s journal and sketch next season’s layout. Consider crop rotation – moving plant families to different beds each year disrupts pest and disease cycles and replenishes nutrients.

### **Tool Maintenance and Care**

Well-maintained tools last decades and are safer and more effective to use. Winter downtime is the ideal moment to go through your entire tool collection.

Cleaning:

- **Step 1** – remove soil, plant residue, and any rust with a stiff brush (wire brush if needed). Good habit: clean tools after every use.
- **Step 2** – wash tools with warm, soapy water. Some tools can be taken apart for thorough cleaning.
- **Step 3** – dry tools thoroughly – moisture causes rust.
- **Step 4** – sanitize blades with rubbing alcohol to prevent transmission of disease between plants.
- **Step 5** – lubricate all blades and moving parts with household oil.
- **Step 6** – condition wooden handles with linseed oil to prevent cracking and splintering.

Maintenance and Storage:

- **Sharpen** – sharpen dull blades with an appropriate sharpening tool. Sharp tools require less effort and cause less plant damage.



- **Store** – hang tools where possible to prevent damage to both tools and people. Keep in a dry location to prevent rust.
- **Inventory** – assess your current tool collection. Inspect for damage or loose parts. Identify replacements needed and budget accordingly for spring.

### **Soil Renewal and Care**

Winter is the best time to build soil because amendments have months to integrate before you plant. Healthy soil is the foundation of everything.

- **Remove Weeds and Debris** – clear out old crop material to prevent it from harboring pests, disease, and competing for nutrients. Compost healthy material; discard the rest.
- **Amend with Organic Matter** – incorporate compost 6–12 inches deep to enrich nutrients and feed beneficial microbes. This is the single most important thing you can do for next year's garden.
- **Cover New Areas** – if you are converting a new area to a garden bed, cover it now with moistened cardboard overlaid with 3–4 inches of mulch. By spring, the cardboard will have smothered the weeds and the layers will have begun decomposing into the soil (sheet composting/lasagna method).
- **Inspect Irrigation** – correct any drainage problems now before planting. Check drip lines and emitters for clogs or damage. Reduce irrigation frequency during wet seasons.
- **Fertilize Just Before Planting** – apply a balanced fertilizer (10-10-10) just before planting. Fertilizing bare soil in winter leads to nutrient leaching from winter rains.

### **Plant Protection and Maintenance**

Ventura County rarely experiences hard freezes, but occasional frost warnings do occur – particularly in inland and valley areas. Knowing what to do in advance prevents last-minute plant losses.

Temporary frost protection:

- **Water your plants 2–3 days before a frost** – moist soil holds heat better than dry soil and radiates warmth overnight.
- **Remove mulch or leaves near trees before a frost night** – bare soil radiates stored heat more effectively.
- **Cover frost-sensitive plants overnight** – use burlap, old bedsheets, frost cloth, or even buckets. Remove coverings during the day.
- **Young trees** – insulate trunks with blankets, cardboard, or pipe insulation.
- **Potted plants** – move to a protected area (garage, under eaves, or against a warm wall) or cover as above.

### **Pruning – Principles and Fruit Tree Guide**

Pruning correctly requires knowing the plant. The wrong cut at the wrong time can reduce fruit production by a full year or cause irreversible damage. Always use clean, sharp tools.



Universal pruning principles:

- **The 3 D's** – Dead, Diseased, Damaged wood can be removed any time of year without concern.
- **The 3 C's** – Competing, Crossing, and Crowded branches are best removed during the dormant season.
- **The 3 S's** – Safety, Sight Lines, and Shape are goals based on the plant's location in the landscape.
- **The 1/3 Rule** – never remove more than one-third of a shrub or tree in a single pruning session.

Fruit and ornamental tree pruning guide:

- **Citrus** – little pruning needed. Remove suckers from below the graft. Older trees benefit from light thinning on top to improve light penetration. Best done early spring.
- **Avocado** – grows irregularly and does better with minimal pruning. Prune cautiously to control height or correct poor growth. Avoid pruning in fall.
- **Apple** – remove 15–20% of last year's growth in January to let light into the canopy.
- **Apricot** – remove 20% of last year's growth in September/October, before winter rains.
- **Fig** – prune in January; remove entire branches to reduce undesirable density rather than heading back.
- **Peach and Nectarine** – heavy pruning needed; remove 50% of last year's growth in January. These trees fruit on new wood.
- **Persimmon** – remove 30% of branches in December or January.
- **Plum** – remove 20% of last year's growth in January.
- **Pomegranate** – light annual pruning of established trees encourages fruit production. Heavy pruning reduces the crop significantly. Prune in winter before spring blooms.

### **Seed Starting and Crop Rotation**

Winter is the ideal time to start seeds indoors for spring transplanting – and to plan your crop rotation before the new season begins.

Seed starting basics:

- **Timing** – start seeds 6–8 weeks before your target outdoor planting date.
- **Soil** – use a seedling mix for most crops. Use potting soil for large seeds (squash, cucumber, melons).
- **Container** – any container with drainage holes works. Fill 2/3 full with soil mix.
- **Planting depth** – general rule: plant 2–4 times the diameter of the seed. Follow seed packet guidance.
- **Light and temperature** – most seeds germinate best with bottom heat (65–70°F). Once germinated, provide as much light as possible.

Crop rotation:



- Why rotate crops? – interrupts pest and disease cycles; replenishes soil nutrients; encourages healthy root systems; increases productivity.
- Rotate plant families, not just individual crops. The four main rotation groups are Brassicaceae, Solanaceae (tomatoes/peppers), Cucurbitaceae (squash/cucumbers), and Alliums/Legumes.
- Do not plant the same family in the same bed for at least 2–3 seasons.

### **Continuous Learning – Making the Most of Shorter Days**

Shorter days mean more time for learning, planning, and exploring ideas. Some things to do this winter:

- Attend local gardening workshops and Master Gardener classes.
- Research using UC ANR Master Gardener resources ([ucanr.edu](http://ucanr.edu)).
- Explore new gardening techniques – square foot gardening, no-dig beds, edible landscaping.
- Ramp up composting skills or learn about water-smart irrigation practices.
- Sketch next season’s garden layout and order seeds early for the best selection.

### **Winter Garden Checklist for Ventura County**

- Review last season’s journal (or start one).
- Clean, sharpen, sanitize, and oil all garden tools.
- Take inventory of tools and supplies; make a shopping list.
- Clear beds of old crop material; compost healthy debris.
- Amend soil beds with compost (2–4 inches, worked in).
- Sheet-compost any new areas you want to convert.
- Inspect and repair irrigation systems.
- Prune dormant fruit trees according to the guide above.
- Identify frost-sensitive plants and have covers ready.
- Plant cool-season vegetables (peas, favas, greens, roots).
- Start seeds indoors 6–8 weeks before spring planting dates.
- Plan crop rotation for spring beds.
- Sketch next season’s garden layout.
- Order seeds early – popular varieties sell out.

**Learn more about the Ventura County Master Gardener using this QR to visit the website.**

