

November Gardening Tips for Los Angeles County Residents

by Yvonne Savio

Even with warm days sandwiched between chilly evenings and mornings, the garden tells us that it's closing up shop for the garden. Many plants, no longer stressed by summer's heat, are revitalized in the cool, humid weather. Our attention shifts to starting and nurturing overwintering crops.

Vegetables and Fruits

Sow or transplant fava beans, beets, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, chard, coriander (cilantro), garlic, kale, kohlrabi, leeks, lettuce (especially romaine types and small-heading bibb and butter-crunch types, which thrive with only minimal damage from light frosts), mustards, green and bulb onions, parsley (the flat-leaf type is harder than the curly one), peas, radishes, shallots and spinaches, especially the curly-leafed savoy types. While these plants won't grow much till early spring, they'll have well established root systems ready for the great growth spurt with the first warmth.

You'll get larger onion bulbs that won't bolt in early spring if you sow seed or transplant seedlings now. Store-bought sets--little baby bulblets about half an inch wide--are often left on display indoors where temperatures are too warm for too long, and they frequently bolt during the first spring warmth. If you do purchase onion sets, plant the ones that are smaller than a dime for next year's bulbs, and plant the larger ones to use for green onions through the winter, since these will bolt and set seed instead of bulbing in spring.

Plant garlic, shallots, and bulb onions where they won't get water next May and June, so they'll dry out before harvest in late June and July.

Sow winter cover crops--including fava beans, clovers, peas, annual rye, and vetch to be turned under in the spring as "green manure." When winter's gloom has settled in, it's nice to see something green besides weeds growing, especially when it'll also fertilize the garden in the spring. and, you don't have to have a large garden to grow a cover crop--just consider it a lawn that doesn't need mowing.

Transplant strawberries now so they'll develop sturdy root systems over the winter, ready to burst into lush foliage and heavy fruit set in the spring. Dig in lots of manure and compost first, to feed roots over the winter and through the summer.

Wait to cut asparagus ferns until they've turned completely brown, generally after the first hard frost. By then, they've reabsorbed all their energy back into the crowns for next year's edible shoots. Cutting them sooner means throwing away this recycled nutrition. Trim the fronds at soil level rather than yanking them from the crown to avoid injuring the crowns.

For the greatest yields of broccoli, pinch out the main shoot a month after transplanting. This will force several large side shoots. Waiting to cut the main head after it's full-size will result in more but smaller side shoots. Or, seed "sprouting" broccoli varieties for many small shoots.

Give one last deep watering to grapevines and deciduous trees but discontinue feeding. This will begin hardening them off for cold weather. You want to discourage new growth that will be tender and susceptible to frost damage.



Bright red pomegranates decorate outdoor greenery or indoor arrangements for long-lasting, Fall- through-Spring color.
Photo by Yvonne Savio,
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Cole crops (broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, kohlrabi) and Jerusalem artichokes (sunchokes) will taste sweeter when harvested after the first hard frost, when the chill turns some of the vegetable starch into sugar.

Provide protection for deciduous tree trunks, as the trees can be damaged more by first frosts than by later ones. Sunscald is also a problem during the winter, especially on the south- and west-facing surfaces of young trees with thin barks.

Support coverings away from foliage with stakes to prevent conducting the cold directly to the leaves and freezing them.

Anchor stakes and ties to young trees and shrubs to stabilize them against winter winds--but not so tightly that the tree can't sway in the breeze. This movement helps the roots grow into strong anchors that firmly establish the tree.

Remove mulch from under trees back to the drip line. The bare soil can then more easily absorb the day's heat and release it to the trees at night. This also discourages overwintering of disease-carrying bacteria and in-sects.

Knock down water basins around trees and plants to lessen the chance of sitting water and the resulting root rot. Loosen the soil within the basins so water can penetrate more easily.

Slightly prune top-heavy trees to reduce wind resistance by cutting out whole branches so you can look through the tree--this means wind can blow through, too. But, hold off on heavy pruning until the trees are completely dor-mant, in January.

Protect tender subtropicals such as avocados, young citrus, guavas, and loquats from frost damage by watering them well before winter rains arrive in full force, but do not feed them again until late January. Leave citrus fruit on the trees until they're needed--many varieties become sweeter the longer they're left on the tree. When all the fruit is picked, spray the tree with a dormant oil spray.

Plan your dormant fruit tree spraying schedule to coin-cide approximately with cool-weather holidays--Thanksgiving, New Year's Day, and Valen-tine's Day. Specific cues are the fall of the last leaf (Thanksgiving), the height of dormancy (New Year's Day), and bud swell (Valentine's Day). Spraying at the precise period of bud swell is especially important--before the buds swell is too early, and after the blossoms open is too late.

Oil sprays smother the eggs of scale insects, aphids, and mites. Lime sulfur and powdered or liquid copper sprays discourage the growth of fungus (peach leaf curl) and virus. Choose a copper spray that contains at least 50 percent copper. On apricot trees, use only copper sprays (sulfur will damage them).

If the rains haven't thoroughly moistened the soil of trees to be sprayed, deep water them a few days before spraying. The oil spray may damage the trees if their roots are too dry. The foliage can't tolerate the concentrated mixture, since the foliage and roots "burn" because there's not enough moisture to help them absorb the nutrients.

Spray on a cool, dry, sunny, day during a windless period to minimize evaporation and drift. Make sure that all leaf, branch, and trunk surfaces are thoroughly covered with the spray solu-tion. Drenching the soil from the trunk to just beyond the drip line is also helpful. Reapply if rain falls within 48 hours of the application.



Armenian cucumbers take much longer to mature than other cukes, are ribbed, and don't need to be peeled. Best harvested before they get too broad, indicating too-mature seeds inside. Photo by Yvonne Savio, © UC Regents 2000.

Ornamentals

Sow or transplant alyssum, Japanese anemone, baby's breath, bachelor's button (cornflower), bleeding heart, calendula, campanula (canterbury bell, bellflower), candytuft, columbine, coral bell, coreopsis, cyclamen, gazania, English and Shasta daisies, delphinium, dianthus (carnation, pinks, sweet William), forget-me-not, foxglove, gaillardia, hollyhock, larkspur, linaria, lunaria (honesty, money plant, silver dollar plant), lupine, penstemon, phlox, California and Iceland and Shirley poppies, primroses, rudbeckias (coneflower, gloriosa daisy, black-eyed-susan), snapdragon, stock, sweet peas, violas (Johnny-jump-up, pansy, violet), and regionally adapted wild-flowers.



Chinese Lantern provides bits of Fall color to cooler days and darker evenings. Photo by Yvonne Savio, © UC Regents 2000.

Plant colorful ornamental cabbage and kale for vibrantly rich reds, blues, and purples to accentuate other garden colors all winter long.

After chrysanthemums finish blooming, cut their stems to about three inches from the soil. Trim fuchsias only to shape them, but wait to thoroughly prune them until late spring, after the plants have leafed out. Root the hardwood portions of these and geranium cuttings in a protected outdoor area for more plants.

Discontinue watering and feeding roses, and mulch roses with manure and compost. Prune them lightly to remove the long, bloomed-out canes, but save hard pruning until January, when plants are fully dormant. Severe pruning now will encourage new growth which will freeze with the first frosts, wasting all that plant energy.

Plant azaleas, camellias, forsythias, dogwoods, and oriental magnolias so they'll settle in nicely. Renew acid mulches under azaleas, camellias, and rhododendrons. Water them well to make sure they don't dry out from winter sun and winds. Twist off small buds on camellias for fewer but larger blooms.

Plant the spring-blooming bulbs you've been chilling in the refrigerator for six to eight weeks--primarily crocuses, hyacinths and tulips. Other spring bloomers--including anemones, daffodils, freesias, narcissus, grape hyacinth, ranunculus, sparaxis--don't need this prechilling. For a single spectacular bloom period, plant the same type bulbs at the same depth. For longer lasting color, plant them at several depths over several weeks' time. The shallower ones will bloom first, and the deeper ones later.

Plant winter-color annuals above your spring- and summer-blooming bulbs for instant and long-lasting color. Some best bets include calendulas, pansies, Iceland poppies, primroses, and violas. Cyclamen are especially good in fast-draining containers in filtered dappled light. Knee-high sweet peas are wonderful, especially the fragrant ones; but keep blooms picked to encourage continuous bloom.

Unless you have especially well-drained soil, dig dahlia rhizomes, begonia tubers, caladiums, and gladiolus corms after their foliage has completely died down. Trim off remaining dahlia leaves and stalks, but don't cut the stems shorter than five inches from the swollen root. Gently brush off the soil (but don't wash them), and store them in a cool, dry place until spring. Handle them carefully, as bruising and puncture damage will encourage decay. Cannas can stay in the soil through the winter, but cut the old flower stalks to the soil level.

For the last time, water cacti and succulents that will go dormant during the winter. If they are in containers, place them under house eaves or other cover so they'll still receive bright light but winter rains won't drown or rot them. Normal humidity will be sufficient moisture for the winter.

Move container plants next to but not touching a south- or west-facing wall so plants absorb reflected daytime heat but are shielded from winds.

Prune to shape evergreens like arborvitae, juniper, magnolia, pines, pittosporum, and spruce. This is a great way to get trimmings for holiday decorations while manicuring the plants. But, don't let your zeal for snipping spread to pruning spring-blooming shrubs, or you'll cut off the blooms (they form on new wood); instead, prune after blooming is done.

Prune trees with dense, leafy crowns so you can see through the tree. This will also allow wind to escape through the tree and not blow it down. Loosely tie young trees with flexible ties, so the tree can sway in the breeze (this helps strengthen the trunk and roots).

Avoid planting wind-damage-prone trees such as acacia, ash, cypress, elm, eucalyptus, liquidamber, California pepper, and pine.

Fertilize lawns with slow-release nitrogen for gradual, consistent feeding all winter long. Continue to mow the lawn as long as it still grows to encourage branching of individual grass plants for a thicker, healthier lawn that chokes out weeds. Rake leaves off the lawn to allow air, light, and fertilizer to reach the soil surface.

Coat the underside of your lawn mower with used oil to inhibit rust and help keep grass clippings from sticking, thus enabling easier cleanup.

General

Before the soil absorbs too much rain, dig in manure and compost. These will break down over the winter, and nutrients will be available for immediate use when seeds are sown and transplants begin to grow vigorously in the spring. Another approach is to lay manure down now but wait until spring to dig it into the soil; until then, the rains will percolate through the manure and provide "manure tea" to enrich the soil underneath.

The best frost protection for plants is to have sufficient water in the soil. Irrigate fall-planted trees and bushes deeply once or twice this month to settle them in well and ensure good root formation prior to dormancy. But, be careful to not waterlog soil that doesn't drain well. This goes for container plants, as well.

Dig holes in preparation for January or February planting of dormant bareroot fruit trees, grape vines, berry bushes, and roses. Cover both the holes and the excavated dirt with a tarp to keep off the rains. Digging in wet soil during cold weather can make the project more difficult, and the soil will compact, making it difficult for plant roots to grow.

Clean, sharpen, and oil garden tools. Take care of any rough spots on wood handles before storing them--sand and rub them with linseed oil.

Clean up the garden area. Plant debris, stacks of pots, lumber, and garden furniture can become nesting places for earwigs, snails, slugs, and other pests.

Cultivate the soil around plants and trees to bring underground overwintering pests and weeds seeds to the surface--for the birds to eat!

Prune dead or damaged tree limbs, or mark them with paint so you won't miss them later when you do your other winter dormant pruning in January.

Compost or discard dead foliage and "mummies" still left on the tree. Destroy them rather than composting them to avoid spreading any diseases they may carry.

Rearrange indoor plants if necessary for winter conditions. Keep them away from cold drafts by windows and away from drying heat of fireplaces or vents. Move them closer to windows to get what winter sunlight they can. Many houseplants also go dormant at this time of year, so they need less water and fertilizer.

Decorate candles with flowers and foliage that you've grown and pressed yourself. Place small flowers, leaves, and vines between paper towels, and weigh down with a heavy book overnight. Pieces should be limp but not moist or crispy. Use a glue stick to tack them into place on candles. Mix and match colors, or use white candles to highlight the colors of the flowers and leaves. In an empty coffee can tall enough to hold the candle, melt six cakes of paraffin by setting it in a pan of boiling water. Dip the candle, with its tacked-on flowers and leaves, into the liquid paraffin, and hold it or set it upright until it's cool. Dip again if a thicker coating is desired.

