

Overwintering

Plants are sometimes said to *overwinter*. At such times, growth becomes minimal or ceases completely. For plants, the winter often means restricted water supplies and reduced light exposure.

Sowing certain vegetable seeds in the fall can expand your harvest season by springing to life before your spring-planted vegetables are even in the ground. Experiment with your own favorite spring crops, including the following:

- Peas
- Spinach
- Asian greens
- Herbs (parsley)
- Carrots
- Beets
- Radishes

And don't forget the time-tested and wonderfully productive fall-planted crop, **garlic**! Plant garlic cloves now, mulch them well, and harvest tasty garlic scapes in early June and spicy full bulbs in August of next year.

In your decorative garden, or interspersed with your veggies, sow the following varieties of flowers:

- Annual poppies
- Larkspur
- Sweet alyssum
- Love-in-a-mist (Nigella)
- Cosmos
- Nasturtium
- Spider flower (Cleome)
- Nicotiana

Mulch all of these crops well, with a thick layer of straw or dry shredded leaves to protect them against winter thaws and soil upheaval and to retain soil moisture. When the temperature begins to rise, slowly remove the mulch little by little, allowing the soil to warm thoroughly before mulching it again once spring has thoroughly arrived.

Other tips: Sow seeds more closely, generously, and more deeply than the seed packet states, to protect against freezing and in case some don't sprout. Consider using a floating row cover (usually made of a fabric called Remay) over your vegetable crops, which will keep the soil a bit warmer and protect them against frost.

Your success rate will vary depending on the weather, but you'll usually get some extra-early flowers and harvests from these fall-sown seeds.

Fall Soil Enrichment

Autumn is the perfect season to repay your soil for everything it's given you this season.

Think of it this way: All summer, the garden is extracting nutrients (specifically Nitrogen, Phosphorus, and Potassium). When you consume the things you've grown, those nutrients supply you with energy and strength (*to do more gardening!*) but are lost forever from the soil that supplied them.

Here are some helpful steps to successful soil building:

1. Clear away any diseased plant matter. Many of us struggled with powdery mildew on our squash plants, or bacterial wilt on our cucumbers. Take those vines out of the garden! Bag them and throw them in the trash, or burn them with yard waste. If they stay in the garden, there is a good chance that they'll return to haunt you next season.
2. Take a survey of your soil: Check its texture (sand, loam, or clay?) and compaction. Think about whether it absorbed water well, or whether rivulets and channels formed. Consider your plants: What did well and what lagged behind? Did plants have strong roots, or were they easily toppled over? And don't forget moving organisms: Did you have many earthworms, ladybugs, bees and other beneficial insects, and/or were you plagued by pests? Write all of this down, and research your problems (send me an email at educator@cdcg.org!) to be proactive about improving your soil fertility.
3. Do a pH test! Finding out how acidic or alkaline your soil is will explain some of its behavior. A simple pH test can be purchased at a garden center for a couple bucks. Plants love soil that ranges from neutral to slightly acidic. If you need to change the pH of your soil, autumn is the right time to do it. It takes 2-3 months for soil to react to any amendments you might add.
4. Build upward: Cover your garden beds with 4 sheets of newspaper, then pile on some leaves or straw, and layer food waste or grass clippings on top of that. Wet each layer down as you add it. Continue to layer leaves/straw and food/grass for as long as you wish, and then throw some compost or good topsoil on top of the pile. When you return in the spring, you'll find that the stacked layers have shrunk down and composted in place, forming a new layer of rich, dark topsoil. Plant seedlings right into the broken-down pile. This method is often called No-till Gardening, and will increase organic matter, biological life, and will "fluff" your soil in place. No need for digging or roto-tilling!



